## REFORMING GOVERNMENT IN AUSTRALIA

## (essay)

A striking feature of Paul Sheehan's best selling book, Amongst the Barbarians, is that it is almost totally negative. It contains attacks on many groups, races and categories of people, but there are no positive proposals at all to address perceived problems, except the entirely abstract and rhetorical proposition that Australia should become an "ecological superpower", whatever that means.

Much the same applies to the Pauline Hanson political movement. All its proposals are entirely negative — such things as increasing penalties for certain crimes, keeping out migrants and cutting expenditures on everybody from unwed mothers to Aboriginals.

Yet Australians are crying out for practical answers to a multitude of problems. One area in which there is an obvious crisis is the machinery of Australian government. Over the past couple of years we have seen an inconclusive Constitutional Convention discussing whether we should remain legally and constitutionally a British colony or become a republic, this was followed by the recent referendum in which the flawed model produced by the Constitutional Convention was defeated narrowly on the basis of very effective demagogic rhetoric by the monarchist side about the need for direct election of a president.

We have seen the Australian Capital Territory given an awkward kind of limited self government, and many thousands of electors in the territory voting for a No-Self-Government Party.

We have seen the parliament in Tasmania dramatically change the electoral system. We have seen the Kennett Government in Victoria close down local government, amalgamate many municipalities and then restore local government in much bigger areas, but with the undemocratic first-past-the-post electoral system.

We have now just seen the Howard government, in a piece of hopeful electoral opportunism, float an ill-thought-out proposition for immediate statehood for the Northern Territory without resolving the problem of federal and state division over Aboriginal land rights, or of the very small population base of the new state (much less than half of the population of Tasmania, and half the population of the ACT), or the problem of the number of Senate seats for the new state.

In a rather surprising, but heartening turn-up, the Northern Territory electorate threw out this undemocratic proposal in a referendum coinciding with the federal elections, and coincidentally threw out the Liberal member for the Northern Territory and replaced him with a Labor member.

#### Positive proposals needed

These things highlight the need for a serious investigation of the problems of Australian government and realistic proposals for how they might be resolved. If it's worth writing about the problems of Australian society, politics and government, as Paul Sheehan, Bob Gould and others do, it's for such would-be public intellectuals should put forward concrete proposals to resolve some of these problems.

In this spirit, therefore, after the better part of a lifetime in political activity, I advance for public discussion a set of proposals to resolve some of the problems of Australian government, in the current millenarian atmosphere.

A good place to start this discussion is with a little polemical book of 109 pages published recently by Rodney Hall, a prominent Australian poet who was, for three years, chairman of the Australia Council.

Hall's book is called Abolish the States and is a vigorously presented argument for the abolition of both state governments and local municipal councils, replacing both with just one system of regional government. Hall claims this rearrangement would save many millions of dollars.

Just recently, prominent left-wing Labor federal front bencher Lindsay Tanner has also promoted the abolition of the states in his new book, Open Australia. It's worth pointing out about Tanner that he is sketching out a proposed new Labor policy in which he jettisons most of the traditional socialist propositions in favour of a number of rhetorical, general propositions that are hard to pin down to concrete government actions.

In my view, Tanner throws in the abolition of the states lightly, as a kind of left face to soften the impact of his general shift to the right. He is anything but stupid, and he must therefore realise that the abolition of the states is a proposition that's unlikely to be taken up by any Labor leadership as immediate practical politics. Therefore, I believe, this proposal is really left talk, thrown in rather cynically without any serious intention that it will ever become reality.

When I commenced my activity in the labour movement in the 1950s, support for abolishing the states was common in the labour movement and, without thinking about it much, I shared it myself. I've come around to the view that it's a mistaken solution to obvious problems, and I now have a different approach.

I would now oppose abolishing the States and local government and replacing three tiers of government by two, for the following reasons.

#### Objections to centralisation

**Reason One:** The Commonwealth government is extremely remote. It's very hard to get at. It has many useful functions, but it's actually the arm of government most insulated from popular pressure. State and local governments are much less far away. If you look at Australian history since Federation, a big part of the real political life of the community continues to be expressed in the state parliaments and in local government. It's easier to get at politicians the closer you are to them, and the more directly the political structure relies on your vote. The idea of only having regional governments of a million or so population, combined with one big national bureaucracy in Canberra, terrifies me. How would you ever get close enough to your representatives to influence them at all in a political system like that?

**Reason Two:** The states arose in Australia from the original colonies for real geographical reasons. Distances between major regions in Australia are enormous. Anyone who has read the seminal works by Lewis Mumford and Jane Jacobs about the development of cities and the interaction between cities and their hinterlands in the evolution of civilisation, will appreciate the problems of government structure in a thinly settled country such as Australia. The Australian the colonies, and then the states, evolved around major port cities and their hinterlands, and the scope for real regions separated from major port cities in Australia is extremely limited. All Australian history underlines this. All the existing states evolved from central cities and their hinterlands and a real examination of Australian geography fairly quickly throws up real limiting factors on regional development, other than regional development focused on major ports.

If regional development is considered concretely, within the above framework, a critical and careful appraisal of the haphazard path of the development of states and regions, over the past 100 years, throws up the possibility of major improvements to the regional structure of the existing states, and the creation of several real new states, which is about the total of real regionalisation that is possible in Australia without vastly increasing the cost of government, or, on the other hand, creating such a centralised bureaucracy that ordinary people will never have any chance of influencing its decisions, let alone removing the people in power.

Specific proposals for regionalising the states

This proposal starts with a careful reorganisation of existing state boundaries, combined with the creation of four new states, including two new states incorporating New Zealand, to take into account real geographical, climatic and population realities, a number of which have, in fact, only become obvious since Federation.

**Capricornia.** The first of the 10 states would be a new state called Capricornia, the name taken from Xavier Herbert's wonderful book about life in northern Australia. The state boundary would start at the bottom of the Eighty Mile Beach in Western Austalia, go across the top, so to speak, between Barrow Creek and Tennant Creek, then from a spot near Hatchers Creek, go down the Hay River to a point near the existing corner between South Australia and Queensland, then up to a line just north of Longreach, Aramac and Blair Athol, to the coast south of Mackay, and then out to sea, taking in the bottom of the end of the Barrier Reef and Cato Island.

The population of this area would be approximately 800,000, which is a good figure for a state to be viable. State capital functions could be divided between Darwin and Townsville, with perhaps the legislature in Darwin. This new state would satisfy the long-standing desire of the population of the Kimberleys, the northern part of the Territory and north Queensland, for their own state.

This kind of proposal was first made by Jock Nelson Jnr, at that time, the Labor member of Federal Parliament for the Northern Territory, at a conference of the the Australian Institute of Political Science on Northern Australia in the 1950s.

At this conference, Nelson pointed out that the attachment of Central Australia to the Northern Territory was a historical accident, and was not originally meant to be permanent, and that the real ties of the Centre were with South Australia, a circumstance that still prevails now.

Nelson actually proposed two states in the northern region I've outlined, but I would propose one for reasons of cost and population viability, with the possibility of further subdivision in the future, when the population grows. This state would have initially a lot of pastoralism, a lot of mining, a fair amount of agriculture, some industry in Townsville, and a lot of tourism. Aborigines would be about a quarter of the population, and would therefore have sufficient political weight to defend their interests, probably in alliance with the labour movement in the urban areas of North Queensland.

**Westralia.** Western Australia would also give up to South Australia a chunk of desert territory running more or less straight up from a point a bit to the west of Eyre on the Great Australian Bight, to the Capricornia border. But it would retain the rest of Western Australia, including the Pilbara, the Hamersley Ranges and the Kalgoorlie-Boulder area. Westralia would be still a very large state and an economically diverse and balanced one, with Perth as the natural regional capital and focus.

**Centralia.** South Australia would be renamed Centralia, and take in the desert area detached from Western Australia, the Centre from the Northern Territory, and a tiny bit of south-west Queensland. The reason for the transfer of the bit of Western Australia is that the whole of the Blackstone and Musgrave Ranges should be under one government for sensible land management reasons. There are few obvious mineral resources there and a small population. But it's crazy having a natural ecological region divided between two states.

The further border of South Australia should go on a line from near the present SA-NSW-Queensland corner, down just to the west of Tibooburra, across the Darling just to the west of the Menindie Lakes and go down to the Murray to the east of Wentworth and Mildura; and then should go on a line from there across to the sea at a point between Kingston and the end of the Coorong. The effect of this would be to transfer Broken Hill, the Menindie Lakes and the Wentworth and Mildura irrigation areas into South Australia, from NSW and Victoria, and to transfer the Mount Gambier area to Victoria.

All of these are entirely rational and democratic geographical and population transfers. Broken Hill, Wentworth and Mildura are all tied to South Australia by many more practical ties than to the states into which they are currently exiled and, conversely, the Mount Gambier area is really an extension, geographically, of the Western District of Victoria, with exactly the same social and agricultural set up as the Western District.

A number of sociological studies of the Mount Gambier area have shown that in things like where people in Mount Gambier make phone calls to, and where they travel outside their home district, they have much stronger ties with Victoria than they do with Adelaide. The new, expanded South Australia — Centralia — would be a natural geographical area with a great deal of industry, and with the administrative tasks and problems of agriculture and land management having a unifying focus around the problems of arid-land pastoralism, low-rainfall agriculture and irrigation agriculture, with Adelaide as the natural centre.

**Tasmania** would remain untouched, for the obvious reason that it is an island.

**Mannix.** In addition to the incorporation of the Mount Gambier area from South Australia, and the transfer of Mildura to South Australia, the Victoria-NSW border would be redrawn from a line just south of Hay across to a point just south of Holbrook, and from there to the existing border, and from there to the sea, thus transferring the southern Riverina to Victoria, a completely rational geographical and political arrangement, which the local population in that area has agitated for, off and on, in the periods when they weren't pushing for a new state. A new state of the Riverina would not be viable for population and geographical city/hinterland reasons, and I believe that the population of the southern Riverina would be happy with the alternative of a transfer to Victoria, which has been floated many times in the area.

The name of Victoria might be more appropriately changed to Mannix, to give the enormous Irish contribution to Victorian and Australian life proper recognition in the name of the most illustrious and revered Irish Australian, Archbishop Daniel Mannix. The state of Mannix would have about 4.75 million population and would be a compact and viable economic region centred on Melbourne.

**Macquarie.** The second new state should cover the only other area in Australia that lends itself easily to a viable state with a sufficiently large hinterland and population based on a major port, that is the New England-North Coast area of NSW, with Newcastle as the capital. There is a longstanding demand for a new state in that region and it is entirely reasonable.

The boundary should be from just south of Lake Macquarie, up the Dividing Range between the Hunter Valley and the south, a bit to the north of Mudgee, Dubbo, Narromine and Gilgandra, and a little to the west of Coonamble and Walgett, over the Darling River, and then back to the sea north of the Darling, a little to the north of Moree and Warialda, a little to the south of Tenterfield and to the sea north of Maclean and south of Ballina and Lismore.

The new state would have about a million inhabitants and would be a viable economic area with a varied agricultural base, a lot of industry, a lot of mining and a lot of tourism, with a natural capital and focus in Newcastle.

Taking on the role of the state capital would provide a major economic boost to Newcastle in the face of recent industrial decline, and could even reverse the industrial decline. This is the only other region in Australia that lends itself easily to a new state if the criteria for a state are a combination of a viable hinterland with a major city as the focus. Macquarie seems a sensible name since it is that of the most progressive early governor of NSW, who happened to be in charge when the region was first developed.

**Pemulwuy.** The borders of a somewhat smaller NSW flow from all the other arrangements, with the addition that a further border should be drawn a bit to the north of the Darling River, transferring the area around Tibooburra and the Paroo into Queensland. The smaller NSW would still include Bourke, Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, the Central Coast area, which looks to Sydney, Goulburn, Wagga, the Murrumbidge Irrigation Area, Wollongong and the Illawarra area, and the Snowy Mountains.

The ACT should also to be transferred back to NSW. It is really just a large administrative city, and there's no principle of government that says the national capital can't be part of a state. All of the areas in the smaller NSW are interlocked and to some extent focus around Sydney, even the bigger cities such as Canberra and Wollongong, and further subdivision of a natural economic area would be entirely undesirable.

The population of the smaller NSW would still be the largest in the country — about five and a quarter million — and the smaller area would be a natural economic unit with a varied agricultural regime, a lot of industry and a natural focus around the business of government. Sydney is already far and away the commercial capital of Australia, with the national headquarters of most firms, and associating Sydney and Canberra in the one state is really a practical recognition of this reality.

The possible objection from Victoria to this geographically realistic merger of the ACT and NSW should have been eliminated by the sensible trade-off of transferring Mount Gambier and the Southern Riverina to Victoria. An appropriate name for the new state of NSW would be Pemulwuy, commemorating the courageous Aboriginal general who resisted British conquest.

**Queensland.** Finally, the boundaries of Queensland should be north of the Darling River and north of Maclean and south of Lismore. The Lismore-Murwillumbah area should be transferred to Queensland in recognition of an already existing geographical reality, as should be the Paroo-Tibooburra area in the west. The new, more compact Queensland would still be a very large, diverse and economically viable state, with about three million population after shedding North Queensland and gaining the Lismore-Murwillumbah region. The name Queensland would be preserved.

#### Embrace New Zealand

At the time of federation, Western Australia almost didn't join, and New Zealand almost did. In fact, the Australian Constitution, adopted at Federation, still allows for New Zealand to join at any time. Two small sovereign states in the South Pacific, Australia and New Zealand, with very similar ethnic and cultural characteristics, and totally interlocking, similar economies, is a bit of an absurdity. While it's obvious that, with the passing of time, it has become harder to envision a merger between Australia and New Zealand, a moment of major constitutional change in Australia would not be a bad time to test whether a merger between the two countries could be a real possibility.

There are some obvious major advantages in such a merger. Some of these are: a larger more rationally integrated domestic market, standardised immigration procedures, broader cultural interchange and a unified currency. Under the arrangements outlined above, it would be administratively feasible for New Zealand to become two states of the Commonwealth, say, Northland and Southland. Northland would have a population of three million and Southland about 800,000, both sensible sizes for states under the new arrangements. The new Australasian Commonwealth of 10 states would have a population of about 23 million by the year 2000, have a large and diverse domestic market, and be a significant power in world affairs.

#### Renaming the states

I have made some proposals for renaming some of the states, in the spirit of the aphorism often used by Karl Marx, "history is whole cloth". Taken as a whole, the names of the states should represent both geographical elements and historical elements covering the whole history of the country.

The name Queensland is preserved and Macquarie introduced to recognise the imperial British element that is a real part of Australasian history. On the other hand Pemulway and Mannix are introduced to recognise major and decisive elements in our history previously unrepresented in state names. Tasmania is appropriate as Abel Tasman was Dutch, and can be taken to represent the non-British migrant contribution to Australasia. I believe that my spectrum of state names is a nice mix, representing the real Australasia as it now is.

#### Democratic considerations

The democratic benefits of these realistic geographical rearrangements are considerable. All the areas transferred from one state or another, or to new states, are remote from the centre of government in their states under the present arrangements, and always would be so, and in every case their real geographical ties are much greater with the state that they are coming into under the new arrangements.

This circumstance will give the parliamentarians they elect much greater influence and clout in looking after the interests of the constituents in the area they represent. This is obvious for the two new states, but its also obvious for the areas transferred. The Broken Hill area, for instance, would have far more clout in a parliament in Adelaide than it currently has in a parliament in Sydney. The Albury area would have far more clout in a parliament in Melbourne than one in Sydney. The Lismore area would have greater clout in Brisbane than Sydney, etc, etc. The people in all these areas would get more effective political representation than under the present arrangements.

#### Land management, planning, financial and geographical considerations

A number of these flow from the democratic considerations mentioned above, but a number stand on their own feet. For instance, Centralia, being composed of areas with similar climatic and agricultural regimes, predominantly a bit arid, will be able to concentrate on research and land management directed at one kind of problem. Whereas Capricornia, being the tropical north, would be able to concentrate its resources on another set of problems.

One important consideration is to attempt, as far as possible consistent with other necessities, to bring important catchment areas of major river systems into one state. This is particularly the case in the central Murray region, where having opposite sides of the Murray in different states has become a real problem in organising effective measures to tackle the salinity problem.

In addition to this, the focus in this set of proposals around existing geographical realities provides for realistic development perspectives without the financial blowout that would come from unrealistic further subdivision into major regions. The kind of scheme I advance here is, in fact, the only realistic framework for further regionalisation in Australia.

#### Canberra

On first consideration, a proposal to merge Canberra with NSW may seem like a bit of a long shot. However, it has a lot to recommend itself, both to Canberra residents and other Australians. If Canberra was a large city municipal area in a smaller NSW, there would be at least five or six Canberra MLAs in a state parliament, which would give them considerable clout on matters suchas allocation of funds.

Presently the Commonwealth doles out funds to Canberra in a very arbitrary way, sometimes too much, and sometimes too little, and Canberra suffers from that kind of arbitrary remote federal planning. Presently, with Commonwealth funding cuts, Canberra is in a dramatic slump, with high unemployment, sluggish business activity, empty shops and houses and very depressed housing prices.

In Canberra the Commonwealth government is still subdividing land and planning suburbs for the distant future, which contributes to a chronic oversupply of housing, thereby depressing housing prices for present inhabitants. Being just a normal part of the state of NSW, and thereby freed from the worst aspects of mad Commonwealth forward "planning", Canberra residents would benefit.

People such as state public servants and teachers would benefit from the possibility of normal transfer rights to other parts of NSW etc, etc. Canberra would become a normal place of federal public service activity, like Sydney or Melbourne, without the incongruous and unsatisfactory special status that irritates people in other areas, and works against the interests of the people who live and work in Canberra.

Being a viable and real part of a lively, diverse and forward-looking state as the new smaller NSW would be, is likely to be much more attractive to Canberra people than being part of an artificial independent statelet a bit like the Hutt River Province in Western Australia.

Democratic electoral improvements in the states, the commonwealth and local government. Bring on the republic, fast!

The ridiculous republican stalemate should be resolved fast with this simple but feasible reform. First of all, the Governor General and all state governors should be immediately abolished. They should be replaced by a Commonwealth president and two vice-presidents, all elected by the people in one panel for eight years.

This presidential council should have the powers of head of state in the Commonwealth and the states. The council's limited powers should be totally ceremonial, except for severely limited reserve powers to resolve governmental crises in the Commonwealth or the states, which should be exercised by majority vote of the presidential council.

The useful ceremonial functions could be divided between the three, which would dramatically reduce the cost of the largely ceremonial but still useful presidential role without abolishing it entirely. A president and two vice-presidents, between them, could quite effectively make all the necessary public appearances nationwide in that role. A presidential council of three would also allow for some diversity in sex and ethnicity.

#### Merge the two houses of each parliament

Merging the two houses would substantially reduce the cost of government, and remove obstacles and gridlock in government.

Government in Australia has become more chaotic and less decisive because of the incongruities of the two-chamber system. While this has had some more or less accidental benefits, such as the blocking of the sale of Telstra, it is becoming increasingly anachronistic.

The upper houses, in the states and the commonwealth, were originally bastions of reaction. But, due to democratic reforms, largely the introduction of elected members and in some states proportional representation, some of them have, paradoxically, become arenas in which previously excluded minorities get some representation.

This has a certain desirability as a useful control and modification on an essentially two-party system, but the existence of two separate houses makes the process of government erratic and problematic and often results in gridlock.

A desirable and sensible resolution of all these problems would be to merge the two houses of parliament in the states and the Commonwealth. In the states the electoral principle should be two-thirds of the members elected by the preferential system in individual electorates and one third by the proportional representation system that prevails in the NSW upper house.

When this change is made, the number of politicians in each state could be trimmed back a bit for cost reasons. A combination of individual electorates, with a third elected under PR would tend to preserve the major Labor/Conservative division, while giving smaller groups reasonable representation.

All the negotiations for coalitions etc would have to take place in the one house of parliament, providing greater governmental stability. The same method of election should prevail for a one-chamber Commonwealth parliament, also reducing the numbers a bit, with the difference that a PR component should be elected state by state, as the Senate is now elected.

The elimination of the bureaucracy for two chambers in each parliament, and a modest reduction in representatives, would enable lower costs of government. It is quite important to present the above position as a merger of the two houses of parliament, rather than the abolition of the upper house. The merger of the two houses is much more likely to be accepted by the electorate than the abolition of upper houses.

**Local government**

#### Local government is perhaps the most important sphere of government because it is closest to the people. Nevertheless, it's perceived to be in a deep-rooted state of crisis.

The Kennett government in Victoria tried to resolve this crisis in an essentially undemocratic way by amalgamations of municipalities into very large bodies, but introducing a first-past-the-post voting system, which allows no checks and balances.

Another approach is required, and I'll make that concrete by advancing a proposal for the reorganisation of local government in the County of Cumberland area, the Sydney basin. The broad principles in this proposal could be used in all the major Australian state capitals.

The first issue is the rough size of municipalities. Sydney now has a weird patchwork of municipalities in terms of population. A number, such as the City of Sydney, Concord and Hunters Hill, have tiny resident voting populations, around 10,000 people, while other municipalities such as Fairfield, Holroyd, Liverpool and the Sutherland Shire have between 100,000 and 200,000 voters, with, however, roughly the same number of aldermen as the municipalities with 10,000.

This has come about because municipal reorganisation has not kept pace with the growth of the population of the city region, and has been overly influenced by episodic interventions by state governments for short-term political advantage, the worst example of which is the periodic redrawing of the boundaries of the City of Sydney on a completely ad hoc basis to keep one or another political party in or out of power.

The present City of Sydney, South Sydney and Botany, plus part of Leichhardt, Marrickville and Woolahra municipalities, should be amalgamated to produce a major City of Sydney, which would administer the CBD, inner-city residential areas, the South Sydney industrial area, Mascot Airport and the port of Botany Bay, as well as Centennial Park and the new film complex around the former showgrounds.

It would have a population of about 200,000 with five wards, each represented by four councillors elected under proportional representation.

The area I've outlined has natural geographic boundaries for the central core of the region.

The rest of the Sydney Basin should be reorganised in municipalities with between 80,000 and 120,000 people, which is the population figure considered by most urban economists to allow for sufficient economies of scale to make local government reasonably economic.

The commissioners undertaking the redistribution of municipal boundaries should attempt to design municipal areas that have unifying geographical and regional features. This major reorganisation obviously involves the merger of smaller councils and the division of the overgrown larger councils on the rural/urban fringe.

Councils of 100,000 population should generally be divided into four wards of four. The ward principle is worth preserving in local government because it gives people in smaller areas a reasonable chance of knowing who their representatives are and exerting pressure on them, because in the sphere of local government the lives of local people are affected very directly by decisions made by their representatives.

Wards of four with PR is a pretty important principle because it ensures that significant groups in any area get representation, as the quota is only 20 per cent. In practice, it will usually mean that Labor and Liberal get major representation, but that as well you get significant representation from environmentally minded independents, Democrats, Greens or others, whose presence can keep the major groups honest, so to speak.

In local government, a certain tension between Labor, Liberal and environmentally minded independents, is a very healthy thing and leads to proper scrutiny of measures affecting people's day-to-day lives. The broad principle of wards of four with proportional representation would enshrine a basically democratic environment at the core of local government, and this would be very healthy.

Reorganisations of local government in the other major state capitals should take place on similar broad principles to the ones I have outlined for the Sydney region, but would obviously be significantly different because of the special features prevailing in each city.

#### Local government in provincial cities and the country

Obviously local government reorganisation presents different problems outside the major capitals. Some things are common. The PR principle, with wards, and essentially wards of four, applies everywhere.

Some major provincial cities such as the Illawarra would be more appropriately one large city government, with maybe even five or six wards because of the larger population.

In general, in more thinly populated country areas, amalgamation of town councils and shires is a desirable reform, but even with such amalgamations in some areas the population for a viable regional municipal area still has to be far fewer than the population for a viable area in the major cities, and these things have to be worked out very concretely, with the full participation of the electorate. Nevertheless, the desirable principle is viable areas economically for the better provision of services, combined with wards and PR to ensure democratic representation.

The reorganisation of local government to more effectively represent the interests of people on their own home ground should be commenced and completed in a sensible time frame, but because it's so important to peoples lives it should be done carefully, with full public consultation so proper public discussion of alternatives can take place.

I am advancing my set of proposals here as an initial contribution to the necessary discussion, based on a long study of the history of municipal affairs in Australia, and some participation in them at rank and file level.