



Speech by

## Hon. Andrew Fraser

MEMBER FOR MOUNT COOT-THA

Hansard Wednesday, 5 September 2007

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### MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

#### Local Government Reform

**Hon. AP FRASER** (Mount Coot-tha—ALP) (Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport) (9.55 am): Senate Hansard released last night reveals the Australian Electoral Commission commendably resisting the pressure from John Howard to compromise its independence in his desperate re-election campaign. The Deputy Electoral Commissioner, Mr Paul Dacey, gave evidence to the federal Senate inquiry that is examining proposed Commonwealth legislation to provide for taxpayer-funded plebiscites on amalgamation. This inquiry, and the bill itself, are set up as cheap political stunts, destined to be nothing more than a pitiful waste of taxpayers' money.

The Prime Minister's bill does not mention local government once and it does not offer to change one boundary. He is peddling false hope. It is a cruel hoax and vintage gonzo election-year politics from John Howard. It is exposed as being about his vote, not about the vote of any Queensland shire. In that light, I applaud the Australian Electoral Commission and Mr Dacey for resisting John Howard's transparent attempt to take the issue of local government reform and blatantly turn it into a political, point-scoring issue to muddy the conduct of the federal election.

Mr Dacey told the inquiry that the AEC would resist the attempts of the Local Government Association of Queensland to hold plebiscites on 20 October. He said, 'It is out of the question.' Rather, Mr Dacey said that the AEC was quite rightly focused on the job it was established to do, that is, organise and run the upcoming federal election. In evidence to the inquiry Mr Dacey said, 'We do not want to put that at risk in any way.'

Working on the basis that these referenda would take the form of a postal ballot, the AEC would be stretched, possibly needing five to six weeks from the date of mailing ballots to rural and remote Queensland and receiving responses. Mr Dacey stated—

Because of the uncertainty of the date of the federal election, we would be very reluctant to tie up considerable AEC resources in the next few weeks given that it is quite possible that the Prime Minister may call the election after APEC.

He further stated the AEC is not even considering the possibility of having an attendance ballot in conjunction with the federal election. He said in evidence—

Other than the issue of section 394 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act, there are all sorts of other issues of confusion—boundary differences, voting differences, different ballot papers, high informality possibilities—that we are not even contemplating that as an option at this stage.

Of course, section 394 of the Commonwealth act guards against any attempts to muddy federal elections with outside issues and the AEC is to be commended for its rebuff of John Howard's outrageous solicitations.

The desperation of the federal government to jump into this issue was exposed in further evidence when the AEC was unable to advise the inquiry of the total cost of running such polls or, indeed, where the

money would come from. Mr Dacey further said, 'We would of course need someone to pay for it for us.' He said, 'It would be an unusual circumstance where we would not charge a fee for our service.'

In further evidence from the Finance and Administration Department, an officer revealed this issue was being driven by the Prime Minister's department when he told the inquiry he had no knowledge of involvement by the federal local government minister. Last week the LGAQ told everyone that the federal local government minister would announce a date for polls, but nothing happened. Apparently no-one told Jim Lloyd, just as no-one told him about the Prime Minister's plans to challenge the independence of the AEC. This week the LGAQ told everyone they were off to Canberra yesterday to sort out the arrangements. Once again, nothing happened.

What the evidence to the Senate inquiry reveals is this: the Australian Electoral Commission is quite properly resisting and standing up to the Prime Minister's desperate intervention. They know their charter is to run federal elections on federal issues. It is now three years and seven days since John Howard called the last election. The Prime Minister is out of time and out of luck. He should have the courage of a real leader, call the election and front up to the Australian people for his day of judgement on interest rate rises and WorkChoices. Today, all Australians should be grateful for the fierce independence of the Australian Electoral Commission. It is time for a federal election on federal issues. I table the evidence from the Senate inquiry, along with the letter to Special Minister of State, Gary Nairn.

*Tabled paper:* Bundle of documents regarding the Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration inquiry into the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Democratic Plebiscites) Bill 2007.