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## Local Democracy and Structural Reform in Australian Local Government.

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*Abstract:* Since the early 1990s, as a consequence of almost invariably forced amalgamations of local government in all Australian state and territory jurisdictions, there has been a substantial reduction in the number of elected representatives. Fewer councillors now serve typically substantially enlarged local government areas and populations, which has created the capacity for adverse impacts on local democracy and democratic practice. This paper considers conceptual perspectives on local democracy; outlines representative, participatory, deliberative, direct and electronic democracy as modes of local democracy; addresses local government amalgamation and its effects on local democracy; and suggests options for retention and augmentation of local democratic practice.

*Keywords:* Amalgamation, local democracy, local government

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## Introduction

Proclamation of new local government entities in Australia through amalgamation of former councils has almost invariably had the consequence of a substantial reduction in numbers of elected councillors to represent the new local government areas, compared to representative numbers prior to amalgamation.

In NSW, for example, since 1999, because of the reduction in the number of councils from 177 to 152 as a result of voluntary and forced council amalgamations (New South Wales Department of Local Government 2004, p.73-80), the number of elected representatives has fallen from 1,696 to 1,455; a reduction of 21.48% (Division of Local Government, 2010, p.14). Council amalgamations have therefore resulted in increased citizen to elected representative ratios (Local Government Boundaries Commission, 2004, p.38-9). Councillor workload had also increased, given there were fewer councillors serving typically substantially enlarged local government areas and population.

This situation created the capacity for adverse impacts on local democracy and democratic practice, requiring effective mechanisms to be established to address changed circumstances. Scholars have referred to this dilemma as a 'democratic deficit' in local communities (Bishop & Davis, 2002, p.15) (Stewart, 2009, p.11). Establishing mechanisms and processes to adequately address and remedy these 'deficits' was vital to effective local government.

Chandler (2010, p.15) argued that the rationale and justification for local government derives from its democratic legitimacy, its capacity to determine and implement policies that did not infringe the interests of those outside their local government area, and to represent the views of its area. To attain optimal effectiveness as a tier of government, local government required effective local democracy and democratic practice.

To establish the context and justification for local democracy, democracy and its manifestation is explored in this paper. A distinction is drawn between representative (or liberal) democracy, participatory (or citizen) democracy, deliberative, direct and electronic modes of democracy, given their utility to reinforce local democracy and democratic processes.

The paper is divided into five parts. Part one considers conceptual perspectives on local democracy. Part two outlines representative, participatory, deliberative, direct and electronic democracy as modes of local democracy. Part three addresses local government amalgamation and its effects on local democracy. Part four suggests options for retention and augmentation of local democratic practice and part five contains brief concluding remarks.

## **2 Conceptual Perspectives on Local Democracy**

Assessing the impacts on local level democracy and democratic processes as a consequence of council amalgamations, together with mechanisms to offset such impacts, is an important matter for Australian local government. The Declaration of the Role of Australian Local Governments, delivered at the 1997 National General Assembly of Australian Local Government (Australian Local Government Association, 1997, p.1-2) (Kiss, 2002, p.2), defined twelve primary roles and responsibilities for the sector and expressed fundamental principles that

[L]ocal governments are elected to represent their communities; to be a responsible and accountable sphere of democratic governance; to be a focus for community identity and civic spirit; to provide appropriate services to meet community needs in an efficient and effective manner; and to facilitate and coordinate local efforts and resources in pursuit of community goals.

The 2004 National General Assembly endorsed a National Local Government Agenda, which expressed fourteen principles of local democracy, the first of

which stated that “local government is the expression of Australia’s commitment to community democracy” (Australian Local Government Association, 2004, p.1). The Agenda included key principles that local government would continue to promote the broadest possible participation by all sectors of the community in democratic process and council activities, and that “tolerant” and “just” communities were fundamental to the pursuit of democratic values (Australian Local Government Association, 2004, p.2).

Some scholars have suggested that the concept of local democracy has yet to be satisfactorily elaborated in the relevant literature (Dollery, 2010, p.122). Others have argued that local authorities of different sizes differed only marginally, if at all, in respect of functional effectiveness and democracy and that the population should have the form of government with which it was most comfortable (Newton, 1980, p.205-6).

Aulich (1999, p.19) has described the local democracy model as ‘putting democratic and locality values above efficiency values’. This model “values local differences and system diversity because a council has both the capacity for local choice and local voice”. Aulich (1999) argued that the model promoted diversity among local governments, and the common underlying democratic principles of responsiveness, representativeness, access and accountability were emphasised.

In Australia, Kiss (2002, p.6) acknowledged that

[f]ormal constitutional provisions regarding citizens’ rights to democracy or to democratic local government are lacking. It would have been possible for the states to legislate in ways which would have buttressed the democratic legitimacy of local government and might have contributed to a mutually reinforcing association between democratic citizenship and the practice of local democracy through local government.

There was little evidence in Australia that local government represented either local democracy or local autonomy (Kiss, 2001, p.18) because, in the Australian political system, constitutional and legislative power conceived local government as a subordinate body. Kiss (2001, p.21) argued further that:

[t]he communitarian concepts that came with the interventions in the 1990s have not been beneficial for local governments. Rather they have continued to weaken the democratic legitimacy of local governments and left them in a position where they cannot properly represent the people of their local areas. Local government in Australia is not a sphere of democratic government nor is it likely, unless Australians assert their right to local representative democracy, that local governments will gain the respect of other spheres of government.

Bonney (2004, p.50) has suggested that New Labour initiatives in the late 1990s designed to reform local government in Britain, had the unintended effect of undermining the strength of representative local democracy by exaggerating the weaknesses of the former system and the virtues of the proposed reforms. He argued that, in the British context, local democracy and representative local democracy were synonymous terms. Bonney (2004) employed the term representative local democracy to discuss the need for strengthening British representative local democracy and argued that attempts to renew local democracy was an aspect of the struggle of various democratic institutions to achieve representativeness and legitimacy (Bonney, 2004, p.43).

The representative model of local democracy, according to Leigh (2000, p.69, 90-91), depended crucially on public access to information about local government and on participation in local affairs. An important aspect of local democratic practice was consultation with the public as a routine feature of local government decision-making. Leigh (2000, p.98-9) has argued that control over the flow of information was the key to democratic accountability, while matters

of accessibility, transparency and responsiveness of councils were of fundamental importance to local democracy.

The relationship between local government and local democracy was highly complex, according to Smith (1996, p.175), who proposed that local government could strengthen and increase the stability of local democracy by two methods. First, its own internal organisation and procedures can be specified so as to satisfy the requirements of democratic recruitment into political office, democratic decision-making and extensive popular participation. Second, local policies can be planned and implemented in the knowledge that they will have an impact on the local economy, local inequality, the local political culture and local civil society, all facets of society relevant to sustainable democracy.

Walsh (1996, p.86-88) argued that the dominant factor in designing a local government system was to achieve economic efficiency which in turn required local democracy. He maintained that the main arguments for freedom of local government were those of loss of control, the costs of bureaucracy, and the dominance of uniform central preference. Walsh (1996, p.86-87) observed that:

[a]n efficient democratic system is likely to be differentiated, with a mixture of participative and representative approaches operating at a number of levels. Allocative efficiency is enhanced by participation in clarifying the differentiation of views and preferences. Decision aggregation requires some level of representative democracy. Allocatively efficient decisions are also likely to require the operation of democracy at various levels and in different forms. It might be argued, for example, that direct, participative democracy is appropriate at the neighbourhood level, but that it is difficult to operate such a system at the level of the city or locality.

Normative political theory held a special place for local democracy (Pratchett, 2004, p.359). Pratchett argued that the institutional embodiment of local democracy was local government, that local democracy provided greater opportunities for political participation, and was an instrument for social inclusion. The local institutions of representative democracy, rather than centrally organized institutions, provided greater opportunity for development of political skills among a broader range of citizens (Pratchett, 2004, p.360). Stoker (1996, p.16) suggested that local democracy had a role of facilitating and encouraging political participation as part of a broader democratic polity.

Some scholars, including Kiss (2002, p.1) and Stoker (1996, p.20-24), expressed the view that local government had a fundamental role in providing basic training in citizenship; widening opportunity for political participation; and familiarizing citizens with the processes and institutions of the political system. However, Newman (1998, p.377) argued that local participative democracy needed to be reconciled with the principles of equity and social justice in society. Pratchett (2004, p.360) promoted a view that there was connection between opportunity for local political participation and effective democracy at higher levels. To enhance prospects of higher-level democratic effectiveness, multiple channels of engagement and opportunities were required for democratic participation. Pratchett (2004, p.361) maintained that:

[L]ocal democracy builds and reinforces notions of participatory citizenship, because it is the primary venue in which most people practice politics. Without some form of local democracy, the opportunities for developing democratic values and skills that can be used at broader institutional levels would be severely limited. Local democracy provides the foundation for strong national democratic institutions and practices. Local democracy is a cornerstone of a democratic society. Local democracy in both its representative and participatory forms is also an essential feature of a broader democratic polity and a fundamental component of a broader participatory democracy.

Pratchett (2004) also argued that local autonomy was synonymous with local democracy, because without a degree of local freedom to exercise discretion, communities were unlikely to cultivate democratic practices. Local democracy was an issue of sovereignty, at least over certain spheres of activity; it was about local self-government and the primary rationale for local government as an institution of local democracy. Local government could resolve conflict over competing values and preferences. Therefore local democratic institutions required local autonomy to enable adequate authority and power to act (Pratchett, 2004,p.362).

Local autonomy has been defined and analysed in terms of freedom from higher authorities; freedom to achieve particular outcomes; and the reflection of local identity (Pratchett, 2004, p.363). Local autonomy was not solely about the discretion of elected local government, but was also concerned with wider social and political relations that occurred within communities. Pratchett (2004) observed that widespread political representation was crucial to the notion of local identity and local autonomy was primarily about empowering local communities to define their own sense of place. Democratic institutions were central to justification and enhancement of local autonomy. It was Pratchett's view (2004, p.372) that:

[i]f democracy is to thrive within localities; it requires autonomy not only as freedom from higher authorities, but also as freedom to undertake particular initiatives and for communities to be able to reflect or express their own political identity. Local autonomy requires the acceptance of difference between areas in both democratic processes and political outcomes.

Sisk (2001, p.12-13) contended that local democracy should take account of cultural influences on the way people think about democracy, and at the local level strongly held cultural practices should be integrated into democratic governance. Four key concepts of local democracy were identified by Sisk

(2001, p.13). The first – “citizenship and community” underlined that local community participation was central to modern notions of citizenship, because its institutions and decision-making procedures enabled a more direct form of democracy and access to ordinary individuals. A second concept was “deliberation”, which meant that as well as electoral participation, dialogue, debate and discussion were required to resolve community issues. A genuine deliberative democracy occurred where there was real dialogue among community stakeholders about the key decisions and actions they jointly confronted (Sisk, 2001, p.13).

A third concept of local democracy was that it facilitated “political education”, because citizen participation enabled people to gain knowledge about community affairs that would otherwise remain with elected officials and professional staff. As a consequence, citizens became more informed and able to more effectively participate in decision-making (Sisk, 2001, p.13). The fourth concept of local democracy was that of “good government and social welfare”, whereby local level participatory democracy facilitated the unlocking of the virtue and intelligence of citizens, which enhanced good government, promoted social well-being, and enabled improved relations among citizens to build more self-reliant and public-spirited communities (Sisk, 2001, p.13). These concepts underline an essential aspect of local democracy that genuine deliberative engagement by citizens and communities in democratic governance processes bring about a more informed citizenry, and as a consequence, greater acceptance of decisions, better respected government and improved citizen well-being.

Other perspectives on the concept of local democracy are possible through examination of scholarly views about the quality of local democracy. In Europe and Britain, concerns about the state of local democracy related to local government not responding adequately to constituent requirements (Blair, 1991, p.41-57). For example, in Britain some service functions were removed from control of local authorities and dispersed among public, private and voluntary agencies (Blair, 1991, p.41-57). Blair recognised that these changes were not

so much about restricting the scope of local government as improving the functioning of local democracy. Batley (1991, p.217) has argued that in Britain local democracy reforms were concerned with depoliticizing control of services and increasing roles of managers, users and the private sector.

In 1999, England had the lowest level of turnout in local government elections in the European Union. This disengagement from local democracy was blamed on a perceived decline in local government efficiency and caused talk of a crisis in local democracy (Curtice, 1999, p.4). However, for Curtice (1999, p.6) local elections were not the only key to successful local democracy, but that:

[r]egular and continuous consultation with pressure groups and with individual citizens also has a vital role to play. Yet for the most part these other forms of democratic participation remain the preserve of a minority about whose representativeness doubts may be expressed. Moreover, on occasion it is argued that the democratic state cannot function successfully if it is faced with an overly participative or demanding citizenry.

Local government was local democracy in action (Local Government New Zealand, 1999, p.1-6), and the best mechanism to provide community governance. Local democracy existed when citizens had genuine input and could participate in how their local community functioned and progressed. The key principle for local democracy was that decision-making power should reside as closely as possible with the communities that those decisions affected.

Power, Wettenhall and Halligan (1981, p.103) noted that local democracy was a neglected area of research on Australian local government. They suggested that the conditions under which local democracy was best realised were regular elections, contested by candidates who clearly articulated policy choices, and were supported by a substantial proportion of citizens eligible to vote. Until the 1980s, the focus of local democracy in Australian local government was

primarily on electoral considerations and was not concerned with other forms of citizen consultation or inclusion in decision-making processes.

In historical terms, the local government model that operated in Australia prior to 1990s amalgamations was an 'elitist', purely representative form of democracy with a limited range of services provided to property and the 'public' primarily viewed as comprising only property owners, who had few opportunities for direct input into the decision-making of elected representatives (Zwart, 2006, p.12). Kiss (2004, p.1-5) believed that citizens, on the whole:

[r]egard local government as responsible only for residual services to property, which they expect to be carried out outside or beyond partisan politics. They do not earnestly believe in the necessity of local democracy. This means that, at best, they will tolerate an elective component in local government, as long as those elected operate in a voluntary capacity, costing as little as possible. The local electorate has neither sympathy nor empathy with the people it elects. They do not think that local government can or should be the bedrock of a properly democratic system, which can improve their lives and their world.

However, Zwart (2006) has argued that the more recent provision of a wider range of services and the extension of the democratic franchise had given greater incentive for citizens to become involved, which had strengthened the system of local representative democracy.

### **3 Principal Modes of Democracy available to Local Government**

#### **3.1. Representative Democracy**

Representative (or liberal) democracy was traditionally the most used form of democracy and the primary democratic mode in Australian local government. It was characterized by the citizens' choice of a few of their number to make decisions for them, and be accountable to them for those decisions (Catt, 1999,

p.77) and it was a form of indirect rule by the majority of the electorate, whereby political decision-making was the responsibility of a small number of people elected by the whole electorate (Robertson, 2002).

Vital components of representative democracy were identified by Weir and Beetham (1999, p.10) as being the electoral process; free and fair elections as the popular authorization and control of government; continuous and open accountability of government institutions and public officials to the electorate; guaranteed civil and political rights and freedoms; and those elements in people's lives, habits and culture which in combination comprised a democratic society. Central to the concept of representative democracy was the notion that people had power because they chose representatives who in turn were regularly accountable to the voters for their decisions as representatives. The representative role was to make decisions for the electorate, either as delegates with instructions or as trustees who were relied on to listen to the alternate viewpoints and to make best decisions (Catt, 1999, p.95).

"Delegate", "trustee" and "politico" were representative styles identified by Rao (1998, p.30). He suggested that the "delegate" role assumed that representatives not use their independent judgment or conviction in decision-making. The "trustee" style allowed representatives to act as free agents to pursue what was considered "just" or "right" and to use individual judgment based on assessment of the facts and of an understanding of the particular issue. The "politico" representational style combined the delegate and trustee models and allowed the representative to be more sensitive, responsive and adaptive to conflicting situations and more flexible in adopting a style more suited to the decision-maker (Rao, 1998, p.30-31). These representative styles have use in Australian local government with the most common being that of trustee.

Hindess (2002, p.33) observed that commitment to democracy was to a system of government by representatives and unelected public servants; and a form of popular rule that kept the people at a distance from the operations of government. He suggested that the institutions of representative government,

such as elections, political parties, representative assemblies and public service systems, whilst viewed as embodying the principle of popular rule, also substantially excluded citizens from the practical functioning of government. Overcoming this perceived exclusion, particularly after formation of large local government units through amalgamation, was an important matter to be addressed by those councils.

Burdess and O'Toole (2004, p.66-8) provided three interpretations of representation: "interest" representation, which was the predominant concept for much of the enlightenment period and where local constituents perceived elected representatives as their personal advocates; "corporate" representation, where the representative body sought to protect and enforce the collective interest with a role resembling that of a board of directors; and "mirror" representation, when specific groups in society were represented according to their ratio in the community under the voting system of proportional representation. Each model has relevance and some application to local government.

Hirst (1990, p.22) promoted representative democracy as the dominant idiom of democracy, but criticised its lack of capacity to conduct the proper role of supervising, restraining and controlling big government. He argued that representative democracy had a limited capacity to enable periodic personnel changes, or threats of changes, through the election process and supported the need for more effective and widespread political competition and debate in the interests of a more democratic society (Hirst, 1990, p.34).

Rao (1998, p.34-5) argued that local elected councillors played a multiple role given they were engaged in management of resource allocation for service provision, representation of local views and interests, and policy development and review. Hearfield and Dollery (2009, p.73) suggested that representative democracy had been enhanced by the trend away from a property-based franchise and plural voting in Australian local government, whilst the shift towards proportional representation voting had allowed greater representation

of differing community views. They considered that the marked decline in numbers of councils and councillors through structural reform and boundary adjustments had resulted in increased representative to population ratios and may have decreased the representative, democratic capacity of local governing bodies (Hearfield & Dollery, 2009, p.73).

### **3.2 Participatory Democracy**

Participatory democracy theory was articulated by Pateman (1970, p.42) as:

[b]uilt round the central assertion [that] those individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from one another. The existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy.

Participation was a central characteristic of democracy where human beings were rational moral agents, able to influence their social and moral environment rather than just react to it, able to conceive their own plans and purposes and pursue them as competent judges of their own interests, and that:

[w]e should ... be able to have input into the decisions that shape the environment within which we seek to execute our life plans and pursue our interests. Our capacity for rationality and competency in relation to judging where our interests lie is one reason for the strong association between democracy and participation (Percy-Smith, 1996, p.44).

Gross (1996, p.203) argued that a central component of democratic political systems was participation, which was a mechanism through which popular interests were translated into policy, individuals were able to develop civic awareness, and community solidarity was promoted. Participation became part of popular political vocabulary in the late 1960s (Pateman, 1970, p.1). Citizen participation had since become a core aspect of effective representative democracy. Ridings (2001, p.2) focused on the desire of citizens to secure greater engagement and influence in local decision-making has gained momentum and a new political model of participatory (or citizen) democracy has emerged at the local level. Participatory democracy represented a shift in

concern about the actions of government and public officials in governance, and encompassed collective methods by which private citizens, the public and private sectors, and non-profit groups interacted to solve problems (Ridings, 2001, p.2). Citizen desire for greater engagement in local government was a manifestation of that attitudinal shift.

Catt (1999, p.40) argued that central to effective participatory democracy was achievement of a high level of participation, through full involvement of citizens in all stages of the decision-making process. Use of face-to-face meetings with unrestricted discussion would enable consensus. Kersten (2003, p.127-8) agreed that participatory democracy required that citizens be involved in all phases of decision-making. Citizens needed to learn about the particular problem; possible solutions; the implications of solution options; participant interests and constraints; and how to identify and resolve conflicts. However, in a genuine participatory democracy, Kersten recognised the lack of feasibility of citizens being able to engage in all decision processes. The Kersten view is relevant in regard to the extent to which community engagement ought to be sought in local government, especially after creation of larger amalgamated local government units.

Putnam (1993, p.86-88) argued that interest in public issues and devotion to public causes was a key sign of "civic virtue". Putnam argued that citizenship was bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation and not by vertical relations of authority and dependency, which emphasised the important connection between democracy and citizen participation. For Putnam (1994, p.31-34), revitalization of democracy entailed rebuilding social capital in communities by renewing civic connections. This was a difficult, but important, task for amalgamated local government councils.

According to Catt (1999, p.39), participatory democracy was not used as part of a national government process, but rather its methods were engaged by a wide range of smaller groups which had in common the desire to be inclusive, to discuss all aspects of decisions, and to stress equality for all participants.

Because equality and a desire for consensus decisions were primary motivations in participatory democracy, involvement of all group members was vital at all steps of the decision-making process, even though participants may not possess political experience (Catt, 1999, p.40). Securing higher levels of community involvement has long been a challenge for local government.

Distrust of citizen participation initiatives in the Australian context was referred to by Bishop and Davis (2002, p.15) as a 'democratic deficit', which signified that liberal democracies struggled to connect with and satisfy the aspirations of citizens. For at least some local governments, participation had become an attractive strategy for policy improvement and for enticing disaffected citizens back to the political mainstream, and there was a community expectation for more and better participation in policy-making.

Kluvers and Pillay (2009, p.229) suggested that, with the advent of New Public Management in Australian local government, there had been encouragement to contract out services provision and a view that local government had become less concerned with improvement of political accountability. This trend had underpinned the 'retreat of government' which in turn had promoted community desire for increased participation, which usually had been restricted to consultation and access to information. Dollery and Grant (2008, p.30) argued that effective participatory democracy required adequate resources and was associated with the concepts of devolution and decentralisation.

Stewart (1995, p.31) held that representative democracy based on an active process of representation required participatory democracy, not to replace it, but to provide strengthening and better decision-making. Stewart maintained that participatory democracy did not diminish the position of elected representatives to the status of delegate, because rarely did citizens speak with one voice, but had different interests and values, which elected representatives needed to balance. Citizens usually spoke more of their particular problems than about solutions. Elected representatives had the responsibility of securing

solutions and delivering political judgment on citizen representations (Stewart, 1995, p.31).

The primary value of participatory democracy was that it assisted individuals to develop into better citizens. It was thus a worthy social objective (Catt, 1999, p.55). Weale (1999, p.97) acknowledged that citizens who enjoyed a greater say in conduct of local civic matters through wider engagement in participatory mechanisms, would provide a more engaged local-level democratic society. However, he argued that most community members were unwilling to sacrifice other preferred interests to achieve greater participation. This view is supported in respect of attempts at securing greater participatory engagement of communities in Australian local government.

In the Australian context, Dollery and Dallinger (2008, p.8) have argued that citizen participation was the principal means of granting and withdrawing consent as well as holding accountable for their actions those who governed. People were able to access local governments and hold elected members accountable for their actions by participating in a variety of passive or active ways. Passive participation included exercising their franchise, soliciting information and usually at most, discussing and proselytising.

### **3.3 Deliberative Democracy**

Deliberative democracy was defined by Cohen (2002, p.87) as an association, the affairs of which were governed by public deliberation of its members, where there was public argument and reasoning among equal citizens and the deliberation focused debate on the common good. Miller (2002, p.290) proposed that the deliberative ideal commenced with the premise that political preferences conflicted and that the purpose of democratic institutions was to resolve conflict through open, voluntary discussion, with the objective of arriving at an agreed judgment.

Elster (1998, p.8,19) defined deliberative democracy as decision-making by discussion among free and equal citizens, through collective consultation with all participants or their representatives who would be affected by the decision, and consideration of competing perspectives by participants who were committed to the values of rationality and impartiality. Shelly (2001, p.36-7) suggested that deliberative democracy was a form of democratic governance in which decisions affecting citizens were made by them, on the basis of rational deliberation on the nature of the problem and how it should be addressed. Deliberative democracy was democratic because it regarded the people as being sovereign because:

[i]t presupposes that the people can only be authors of the law that bind them if they can all freely agree among themselves about the restrictions and reinforcing sanctions that each reciprocally wishes to impose on others (Shelly, 2001, p.37).

The 1774 Bristol speech by Edmund Burke has been cited by Ester (1998, p.263-4) as the definitive statement of the case for deliberative democracy when Burke stated to his electors that he would not be bound by authoritative instructions and that:

Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole: where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole.

Deliberative institutions have included citizen's forums and provided deliberative 'space' in which interest groups were held socially accountable for their perspectives on matters (Hendriks, 2002, p.72). However, Hendriks (2002, p.72) suggested that citizen's forums posed threats to other political actors and interest groups, because in politically charged policy formulation settings, those groups could 'de-legitimise' the forums by voluntarily exiting the process. Deliberative democracy has been criticised by Cooke (2000, p.967-8) in respect of its largely unsubstantiated educative power, its community-generating capacity, the fairness of the procedure of public deliberation, and the quality of outcomes.

The claim by proponents of deliberative democracy that it provided a fair, efficient and creative method of collective decision-making was criticised by Thompson and Hoggett (2001, p.351), who argued that citizen groups were characterized by emotional dynamics that threatened to undermine and distort the process of deliberation and provide less than optimal outcomes. Group expressive culture could create unequal opportunity for effective communication, whereby a group under the sway of a particular basic assumption would listen to some speakers and communicate more readily than it would to others, creating potential for group destruction (Thompson & Hoggett, 2001, p.356).

Miller (2002, p.304) underlined significant organizational problems in citizens being directly involved in local-level deliberation. However, recent technological developments had facilitated bringing large numbers of people together to engage in common debate and create effective linkages between deliberative and electronic democracy mechanisms. A concern for Miller (2002, p.304) in determining whether the deliberative ideal might be realised in a large community, was whether citizens would be sufficiently motivated to participate in debating assemblies.

While attempts have been made by some local governments to engage with communities through deliberative mechanisms, there has only been comparatively minor use of deliberative democracy practice for collective decision-making.

Advances in internet technology have provided increased opportunity for wider, collective community engagement in decision-making. However, it should be recognised that a substantial proportion of citizens do not use or do not have reliable internet access. Furthermore, that local government elected representatives have generally not been enthusiastic about using deliberative democracy, not wishing to be bound in all circumstances to a collective view on matters.

Greater public deliberation may have potential as a participatory mechanism for citizens and to reinforce democratic processes in local government communities. A place for deliberative practice in local government decision-making was achievable through effective community engagement, participation, consultation and communication processes. Local government decision-making would continue to be conducted by elected representatives in the formal process of council meetings. However, it will be increasingly possible for council decisions to emanate from prior deliberative engagement.

### **3.4 Direct Democracy**

Direct democracy was a community participation mechanism which offered enhancement and refinement of local democratic practice. This mode of democracy theory contrasted with representative democracy in that all concerned citizens directly participated in making decisions and passing laws without delegation to others who had been chosen as representatives (Robertson, 2002). Budge (1996, p.35-7) defined direct democracy as a regime where all adult citizens debated and voted on the most important political questions and where their aggregate vote determined the action to be taken or policy to be adopted. In an operational context, in contemporary democracies direct democracy practice required that the body of citizens discussed and voted authoritatively on most of the matters on which, in representative systems, legislatures voted (Budge, 1996, p.132). Budge described direct democracy as “unmediated rule” by the people, and also as mediated party democracy, whereby political parties mediated between community and government (Budge, 1996, p.50-51).

Budge (1996, p.56) argued that the difference between direct and representative democracy was ambiguous and blurred; the central role of political parties in contemporary democracies should be to extend to viable forms of direct democracy. Budge acknowledged criticisms of direct democracy, which related to speculation about how direct democratic practice would

operate, and concerns that elected representatives might oppose direct democracy mechanisms that could reduce their authority and power (Budge, 1996, p.57).

Brennan (1997, p.32-34) suggested an argument for direct democracy was that it had capacity to produce alternate and better decisions than those made under representative democracy. However, no individual had responsibility for an outcome, nor did one person bring about that outcome under direct democracy decision-making.

Budge (1996, p.107-8) argued that opponents of direct democracy evaded the fact that democracy required participation, and they also unduly emphasised the impracticality of arriving at decisions through popular debate, and assumed that such debate was unstructured and uninformed by experts, parties or procedures. Local referenda were the most widely recognized instrument of local direct democracy. Referenda were usually limited to a small number of issues of primary importance to the local population and were either binding or consultative. Referenda results typically enjoyed legitimacy, were difficult to challenge and compelled local government to comply and implement majority outcomes (Bucek & Smith, 2000, p.6).

Bucek and Smith (2000, p.5) argued that strong direct democracy provided citizen power and was capable of compelling more responsible and accountable local institutions of representative democracy. However, a shift to dominance of direct local democracy was unlikely and had limited scope for broad application in modern society because of broadly accepted and entrenched representative democracy, including at the local government level.

### **3.5 Electronic Democracy**

With rapid global technology improvements, electronic democracy had strengthened as an important tool to enhance local democratic practice. The digitisation of governance activities by local governments has become a vital

source of improved performance capacity and resource efficiency for councils and their communities. There has been a rapidly escalating relevance and use of electronic democracy capacity to facilitate citizen participation and improve governance processes in local government. E-democracy was used in several contexts and referred broadly to the application of computer and communications technology to formal political processes, including voting, deliberation and decision-making; to regulated processes, such as election campaigns; to informal political processes; and to political participation by community groups, associations and collectives (Victorian Government, 2004, p.1).

Use of e-democracy in local government included electronic research, such as email surveys, which had been successful and cost-effective innovations (Enticott, 2003, p.64-5). Barlow, Chen, Chimonyo, Lyon and O'Loughlin (2003, p.26) concluded that:

[e]-Governance development in Australian local government will be driven or inhibited by information about the concept and its value. At present there appears to be a dearth of information that is seen to have elements of importance to a resource starved sector ... A leadership issue exists in relation to e-governance and a lack of centralized governance functions within local government organizations

Kersten (2003, p.127) regarded e-democracy as participative democracy and maintained that the design of electronic participating systems ought take account of the needs of potential users. Electronic models of decision-making and conflict resolution, which were readily accessible and useable by lay people, should be constructed. E-democracy was allied with, and had the capacity to facilitate, direct democracy, but had also created challenges to the conventional notion of representation (Kersten, 2003). E-democracy had the capacity to create an improved democratic environment provided that matters of reliability, security and privacy were appropriately addressed and that the public had trust, understanding and confidence in the technology (Alexander, 2003, p.210). Alexander (2003, p.209) argued that the challenge was not so

much what technology could do for democracy, but in using the technology what mode or modes of democracy were preferable.

Accessibility and use of computer technology had rapidly increased, with reduced entry costs and rapid improvements to internet capability (Mercurio, 2002, p.23). In 2002, 61 per cent of Australian households had access to a home computer, 46 per cent of households had internet access, 58 per cent of all Australian adults accessed the internet, but only 21 percent of adults accessed government services using the internet (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004, p.1-2). Computer and internet access and usage has since significantly increased. In 2008-09, with the population at 21.784 million persons (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010a, p.1), 72 per cent of Australian households had home internet access, of which 86 per cent was broadband, and 78 per cent of households had access to a computer (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010b, p.1). At 30<sup>th</sup> June 2009, there were 8.4 million active internet subscribers and a continuing trend towards higher download speeds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010c, p.1-3).

However, these statistics revealed that a 'digital divide' continued between those who used and those who were unable to access computer technology (Hargittai, 2004, p.137). Goldfinch, Gauld and Herbison (2009) established evidence of a 'participation divide', where those participating in politics did so using a range of means, including electronic access. Those with higher levels of education and income and of European ethnicity were more likely to participate. They also found that lower levels of trust in government were associated with higher levels of some types of participation, including e-government. Accordingly, a weakness remained in the capacity of governments and agencies to use e-democracy to reach the total population. However, technology had been become an effective tool for reconciling pressing demands on constituents times and their preferred activities (Alexander, 2003, p.209).

Public desire for better and faster information technology has rapidly expanded. Pressures for internet voting, information, communication and electronic

participatory processes would increase with the passing of older generations. As technology enhancements increased, e-democracy would represent a primary method of improving local democracy processes for local government (Bishop, Kane, & Patapan, 2002, p.65). Tat-Kei Ho (2002, p.434) argued that the internet provided a powerful tool for reinventing local governments by encouraging transformation from the traditional bureaucratic paradigm to a new 'e-government' context which emphasised coordinated network building, external collaboration and customer service.

Dollery (2003, p.90) argued that the Allan (2001) model of virtual local government represented a substantial advance in the Australian debate on the question of local government restructuring and amalgamation, given its apparent ability to capture the representational strengths of 'small' councils whilst simultaneously securing advantages from 'large' municipalities, especially in terms of economies of scale and scope. However, Dollery (2003, p.90) argued that advocates of virtual local government, as a mechanism for enhancing democratic efficiency and information flows between elected representatives and their constituents, needed to provide convincing evidence for the purported nexus between council size and the ability to formulate and implement appropriate and effective policies.

#### **4 Local Government Amalgamation and Effects on Local Democracy**

Dollery and Grant (2008, p.28-30) stressed that the tensions in Australian local government between efficiency and democracy had been:

... played out by the offering of various participatory and representative mechanisms in the face of radically declining numbers of municipalities and councillors due to structural reform. This tension has been resolved increasingly in favour of an argument for efficiency based on local council size.

Local government has regularly been referred to as the closest sphere of government to the people and as the level which citizens relied on to address

their immediate social problems and service needs. It was the level of democracy at which citizens had the most effective opportunity to actively and directly participate in decisions (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2001, p.4).

Local government is not included in the Australian Constitution, and consequently may be argued to lack genuine legal legitimacy in the Australian political system (Longman, 1997). State government legislation governed the existence and operations of local councils. It was often stated that local government was a 'creature of state government'. Councils could be dismissed or forcibly amalgamated by the states without right of recourse or redress. Because it provided for substantial local participation, local government wielded significant political influence. Given that councils were usually elected by local residents, they had democratic legitimacy and political authority. Through the almost universality of local government it had considerable value for the modern state (Blackwell, 1991).

Representative democracy was mandated for decision making in NSW local government through the provisions of the *Local Government Act 1993* (NSW Government, 1993, SS 266-286). Levels of elected representation through amalgamations had resulted in fewer councillors usually representing larger populations (Local Government Boundaries Commission, 2004, p.38-9).

A key aspect of representative democracy was the conversation between electors and representatives. Consultation processes have been enhanced in local government and local consultative policies have become mechanisms to gauge public opinion and guide decision-making by elected representatives. Effective citizen participation and improved community consultation processes were vital aspects of representative democracy, whilst augmentation of participatory practice represented methods of strengthening local democracy (Bishop, 1999, p.12-16).

Participatory mechanisms employable in local government, other than consultation, included partnerships that involved citizens and interest groups in aspects of decision making; third party involvement in review processes; consumer choice which facilitated customer preferences in tailoring services, through choices of products and providers; and handing control of some issues to the electorate (Bishop & Davis, 2002, p.26).

Frazer (1996, p.103) contended that the existence of local interests and local people's identification with, and commitment to, their area was the focus of local government and the basis for its legitimacy. "Localism" was the essence of local government and it was the term employed to describe a political culture that was favourably disposed to local citizens, local interests, local politics and local government. It was a concept with a close alignment to local democracy (Blackwell, 1991). Reddel (2002, p.50) contended that the ideas and values of localism, community, and citizen participation were increasingly prominent notions in academic and policy discourse. He noted that modern descriptions of the configuration of the state, the market and civil society were found in terms including social capital, community engagement, community regeneration and renewal, community capacity building, social partnerships, social entrepreneurship, and place management and planning. Policies and programs were increasingly focused on addressing community needs and outcomes directly relevant to a particular geographic place (Reddel, 2002, p.50-51).

Stoker (2001, p.29-34), suggested that the 'local' in democratic local government was a temporal location where there was the capacity for significant numbers of people to be actively involved in politics. Local politics and the need for local democracy was justified because it was only local institutions that had the capacity, interest and knowledge to oversee services and make decisions as required by local conditions. Stoker argued that local democracy helped ensure effective accountability and enabled management of difference between localities.

For most citizens, their deepest attachment was to local; a particular part of a country, town or city (Gaita, 2004, p.3), and unusual circumstances were often required for them to realize that their identity-forming attachments were more broad, to the state or the nation. Localism and local issues where one lived were what mattered most to citizens, primarily because of potential for impacts on their sense of place, lifestyle and well-being.

Localism and local attachment has been referred to as 'community of interest', particularly since the commencement of Australian local government structural reform in the 1990s. Fulcher (1989, p.35-6) argued that community of interest was an important aspect of local democracy and has been defined as applying to a group of people in a residential locality and having one or more of the following dimensions:

- Perceptual: a sense of belonging to an area or locality which can be clearly defined;
- Functional: the ability to meet with reasonable economy the community's requirements for comprehensive physical and human services and;
- Political: the ability of the elected body to represent the interests and reconcile the conflicts of all its members.

The more clearly these attributes apply in a locality, the more confidently the people in it can be said to have a community of interest. For a local government unit to accept any boundary change, communities must be involved in and identify with the change.

## **5 Options for Retention and Augmentation of Local Democratic Practice**

Local government and local democracy in Australia has a long, stable history. Decision-making in local government has been entrusted for the most part to elected representatives, with citizens often disengaged from democratic processes between elections, which presented significant impediments to maintenance and enhancement of local democratic practice.

From the 1990s, and specifically since 2003, council amalgamations in Australia have brought a reduction in elected representation as demonstrated in Table 9.1:

<b>State/Territory</b>	<b>Local government councillor numbers by State September 2003</b>	<b>Local government councillor numbers by State June 2010</b>	<b>Year of latest elections or assessment of councillor numbers</b>
Victoria	623	631	2008
Tasmania	274	150	2009
South Australia	751	728	2006
New South Wales	1760	1455	2008
Queensland	1160	553	Post March 2008 elections
Northern Territory	708	153	Post October 2008 elections. (Excludes Belyuen Council)
Western Australia	1360	1297	2010
Total	6636	4970	

*Sources:* (Australian Government Department of Transport and Regional Services, 2003, p.9) (Victorian Electoral Commission, 2009, p.118) (Tasmanian Electoral Commission, 2009, p.3) (Division of Local Government, 2010, p.14) (Department of Infrastructure Transport Regional Development and Local Government, 2006-07, p.9) (Department of Housing Local Government and Regional Services Northern Territory Government, 2010, p.1-2) (Government of Western Australia Department of Local Government, 2010, p.1) (Wagstaff, 2006, p.4) (McColgan, 2010, p.1)

With amalgamations there emerged legislative reforms and demands from local citizens for a more open and inclusive system of local government (Zwart, 2006, p.9). The sector had come to recognise the value and importance of community consultation, which had increased opportunity for citizens to become more directly involved in local government policy and program development and review (Zwart, 2006, p.12). There was a growing experimentation with new methods of engaging communities with mechanisms that acknowledged differing community characteristics. Australian local authorities were moving towards a more participatory form of democracy to fulfil its potential as the level of government closest to the people. Stoker (2001, p.29-34) has suggested there were growing indications that mainstream instruments of representative democracy were in decline in respect of their capacity to engage the public and

secure trust in government decisions, and has promoted the importance of renewal of representative democracy through more local participatory mechanisms.

In the Australian setting, Cuthill (2003, p.386) observed that the concept of citizen participation in local governance had increasingly become a topic of debate within development and democracy discourse. While Australia had a strong system of representative democracy, it was unclear whether the system, particularly at the local level, was able to cope with increasingly complex and inter-related social, environmental and economic issues that involved consideration of both local and global factors. The development of local government policy and programs, which supported a more participatory approach to local governance, was a key contributor to building community well-being. Citizen participation was an appropriate ethical, policy and operational approach to help resolve complex local issues.

Catt and Murphy (2003, p.418) proposed that community consultation was based on an assumption that:

[t]he incorporation of citizen input into the deliberations of elected decision makers will lead to better decisions and increased legitimacy for policy outcomes. This assumption is based on the recognition of a variety of factors, including the specificity of group perspectives arising from the different life circumstances of its members; the articulated interests of those with detailed experience, skills or knowledge; as well as the common sense and experience of the general public and ... recognition that deliberation, the exchange of ideas and testing of arguments, is an important component of decision-making. The movement for greater public consultation is also part of a broader trend calling for greater decentralisation, devolution and subsidiarity to help offset public disillusionment with inflexible and unresponsive democratic institutions, and the transfer of governing authority to higher and less directly accountable levels of government ...now commonly known as the democratic deficit.

The value of consultative practices in a well-ordered democracy was not that the public had any direct involvement in, or control over, decision-making but rather that it provided information to decision-makers, added legitimacy to policy

outcomes and had a positive effect on civil society and development of a more informed and civil democratic culture (Catt & Murphy, 2003, p.420).

Cuthill (2001, p.201), argued that community participation was the key philosophical and methodological approach to achieve sustainable community outcomes that required both operational and cultural change in local government. Brackertz and Meredith (2009, p.163) argued that councils acknowledged that public participation was important for improved decision-making, service provision and planning. This was balanced by ideals of community engagement, empowerment and social capital that flowed from participatory practice. They argued that it had not been sufficiently established how participatory practice in Australian local government fed into decision-making or how it could be used to complement existing democratic practices. Furthermore the need to:

[i]nvolve multiple publics and reach out to those who are not usually inclined to participate is important to guarantee the representativeness of the process, which is essential to establish its legitimacy and make sure that all sections of the community have the opportunity to be heard (Brackertz & Meredyth, 2009, p.163-4).

Andrews and Turner (2003, p.12) argued that participatory empowerment strategies were likely to be a critical means for maximising effective community engagement with local political processes; that success of local authorities in driving consumer and community empowerment would impact on understanding local democracy; and that comprehending changes to the nature of local democracy remained an important indicator of how citizenship and politics were evolving. Gauci (2002, p.11) suggested that the critical feature of consultation was its contribution to developing and maintaining a democratic ethos in community, because engaging residents in the exercise of fundamental democratic activities strengthened their commitment and appreciation of Australia's democratic tradition and added depth to operation of local democracy.

Peel and Pearce (1999, p.32) maintained that there were some elements of community consultation which affected engagement including:

There is rarely unanimity of public opinion on civic issues;  
There are many communities of thought; and  
There will always be varying degrees to which people require consultation or information about council activities and community issues.

Neich (2008, p.7) suggested that engaged citizens had higher levels of trust in government which was reflected in stronger, more sustainable local communities. He argued that effective information provision kept community engaged; promoted local government's image; attracted inward investment; encouraged easy monitoring; and built confidence that local government was transparent (Neish, 2008, p.9). Effective, active participation encouraged participation in governance, enhanced community capacity, and built confidence in local government as being close and responsive to its constituency (Neish, 2008, p.26).

Simpson and Bretherton (2010, p.75) held that there needed to be a reconciliation between the opinion of local government technical experts and ordinary community residents in order secure enhanced local government commitment to democracy, increased level of support from community, and a higher level of trust in the machinery of government. Williamson (2002, p.4-36) argued that local government needed to genuinely commit to citizenship enhancement and community participation, which he termed passive democracy. Williamson (2002) has promoted innovative participatory projects and ideas including citizen juries, deliberative forums and citizen initiated referenda, which could facilitate a more vibrant, democratic process for citizens. Other participatory mechanisms Williamson (2002) nominated for use in local government included consensus conferences, community indicators of well-being, citizenship ceremonies, local 'listening spots' where citizens recorded their messages to local government by video or audio interview, as well as storytelling and other creative forms of self-expression, to encourage citizen

participation in a conducive environment. Williamson (2000, p.60-61) pointed out that:

[a] higher profile for active 'citizenship' must be adopted by local government and expressed articulately in planning documents, in particular, in corporate or council plans. Articulating a commitment to 'citizenship' raises its profile among managers, staff and citizens. The strategic use of language is widely understood as a powerful tool in legitimating and framing public policy. Local government must find innovative ways of significantly increasing the number of opportunities for citizens to collectively participate in local government and to exercise their political rights and obligations.

Gillen (2004, p.218) has suggested that greater opportunity was now available to local government to deliver future-oriented and place-focused strategies, given that social and economic forces were continuing to emphasise greater stakeholder input through new governance forms. In the Australian context, Mackay (2004, p.3-4) identified two 'pathways' that were leading towards community development and a much stronger sense of connectedness with local neighbourhoods and communities. One was what he termed the "cultural revolution" in Australia, which had made citizens feel that "things are just out of control" because everything was rapidly changing and society was in a state of flux, upheaval and dynamism. The restructure of the Australian economy had been revolutionary - the 'gender revolution', entrenched multiculturalism and national cultural diversity were aspects of the rapid changes which had acted to enhance local citizen connectivity.

Holdsworth and Hartman (2009, p.92-3) contended that community cohesion was enhanced by factors including neighbourliness, the provision of services, and a good physical environment, each of which were deeply interdependent. Neighbourliness was overwhelmingly the most important aspect of a strong community, a key component of which involved respect of each other's boundaries and diversity. Glaser, Parker and Payton (2001, p.100-101) demonstrated that neighbourhoods, because of their enduring nature, and being critical components of urban communities, were a viable policy option for building allegiance to community. Effective neighbourhood policy required

structural change that invited neighbourhoods into government while not replacing broader, more direct policy designed to build community, because of the risk of retreat into the self-interest of neighbourhoods. Glaser et al (2001, p.100-101) maintained that:

[L]ocal government in combination with citizens must build logical pathways from neighbourhoods to answer community concerns and demonstrate how neighbourhood actions translate into community benefits. Local government was only one of many institutions that must operate in concert to elevate community to the position in which citizens recognise that their personal well-being is tied to the well-being of others.

Scholars such as Stewart (2009, p.77-78) have identified “tensions” or “dilemmas” with civic engagement:

There are a number of tensions, or dilemmas, at the heart of engagement. There is a tension between the Realpolitik of power and the need to keep faith with communities. There is a tension between the need to maintain control and the need for flexibility. There is a tension between the precision of official language and custom and the need to talk to communities in ways that they understand. Worried about the risks involved, governments either consult blandly or consult in bad faith. They believe that conflict is to be avoided at all costs.

At the same time, if governments are doing their job properly, they will necessarily make decisions that offend sections of the community. If consultation is to be judged according to the extent to which it creates consensus, it is clearly doomed. Two-way information-flow, however, in whatever context it takes place, is the essence, the fundamental *raison d'être*, of all forms of engagement.

Rentschler (1997, p.150) maintained that there were factors which challenged the orientation of community and cultural participation in local government that had led to the reform of the local government system, including a rapidly changing economic and social system; a competitive global marketplace; a diverse populace; and fiscal constraints on infrastructure development and environmental management. It was the response to these challenges that had created tensions for community participation in local government.

However, Aulich (2009, p.57) has maintained that although many local governments had developed policies or protocols to facilitate higher levels of valued consultation, there were few examples where effective engagement had been established and accepted as a citizen's right. In few instances had engagement converted to a fundamental right of communities to enable them to assume a formal place in governance. Aulich (2009, p.57) argued that given the constraints on local government's autonomy and resources, in many cases effective moves towards participatory governance required external leadership and support.

Culver and Howe (2004, p.72) suggested the need to "scale back" expectations of public consultations where these were unrealistic, given that it may be excessive to expect that the views of citizens would carry more weight than the viewpoint of officials who would be intimately familiar with budgetary and other civic matters. However, Butler (2005, p.12) posited a role for local government to support communities wanting to take more control of their future and to facilitate the development of networks of service providers and funding agencies to link with community committees and support achievement of community priorities. Nevertheless, for community building initiatives to succeed and be sustainable, they needed to be developed and implemented by the community on a basis of trust and the willingness of communities and local government to work together towards outcomes of mutual benefit.

Stone and Hughes (2002, p.12) have suggested that in such a process the role of local government was to initiate and facilitate practices that encouraged cooperation and interaction within communities and between communities, service providers and all levels of government. Local government had a responsibility to nurture networks of social relations, characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity that led to mutually beneficial outcomes.

Considine (2004, p.17) argued that the key to strong communities lay in better use of conventional resources and assets as well as in new forms of connectedness. Cuthill and Fein (2005, p.76) underlined that "participation and

collaboration both implied a standard of equity between citizens and local government” and that:

[w]hile many local, state and commonwealth governments in Australia have, to some degree, indicated a commitment to sharing power in decision-making, the reality of implementing this rhetoric is still to be determined. Citizen participation in local governance operationalised through capacity building acts as a catalyst, in a self-reinforcing process, that strengthens democratic governance, helps rebuild social capital and provides a foundation for citizens and local government to work collaboratively towards a sustainable community.

Smith and Davies (2002, p.10) suggested that building community strength and capacity in the Australian setting comprised several key elements including community-driven local solutions to local problems, community ownership of services and service delivery, capacity building, informed local leadership and partnership approaches to community matters. For most citizens, despite considerable economic, social and cultural change in recent years, ideas about community remained grounded in local friendships, networks and facilities and a sense of place (Salvaris M & Wolcott, 2002, p.9).

Direct democracy mechanisms such as polls of electors, are available to New South Wales local government (NSW Government, 1993, SS 265), but had been infrequently used because of lack of awareness of the measure or through citizen apathy or disinterest. Long-term disinterest in local government matters may render direct democracy initiatives unworkable. However, use of citizen's polls and other local level consultative and participatory mechanisms should be available to assist best possible decision-making. Increasingly aware and informed citizens desire more scope for participation, greater accountability, transparency and competitiveness, a stronger rule of law, more freedom and equality and more responsive government (Diamond & Morlino, 2004, p.30-31).

## **6 Conclusion**

This paper has explored literature regarding theoretical understandings of democracy and perspectives on representative democracy, as well as other modes of democratic practice that could enhance the quality of local democracy for communities as a consequence of structural reform and loss of numbers of elected representatives. It has also addressed the theory of local democracy and impacts of amalgamation for local democratic practice. Options from the literature for renewal and augmentation of civic engagement, community consultation, sharing of information and social inclusion were also explored.

Where council amalgamations had occurred, the creation of trust between elected local government representatives and those they represented was essential to the future good governance of local government areas and to community satisfaction and well-being. It is also stressed that effective community engagement and participation was vital to local level representative democracy.

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