



Premier of Queensland

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I am writing to outline views expressed to me by Torres Strait leaders and residents during my Government's Community Cabinet on Thursday Island on 28 August 2011.

As you would know, the aspiration of Torres Strait residents for greater political autonomy has a long history, and was a driving force in the establishment of the Commonwealth's Torres Strait Regional Authority (TSRA) and the development of the TSRA's 2001 Bamaga Accord, which proposed a new regional governance framework for the Torres Strait.

On several occasions, including most recently at the Community Cabinet, Torres Strait residents and their political representatives on the TSRA, the Torres Strait Island Regional Council and the Torres Shire Council, advised me of the enduring desire in the Torres Strait for establishment of a self-governing territory that falls solely under Commonwealth jurisdiction, and greater autonomy with regard to their affairs.

I understand this desire and have offered my Government's support for the decision of the Torres Strait in pursuit of this outcome. As I understand that responsibility for consideration or implementation of any regional autonomy governance models rests with the Commonwealth, I therefore wanted to bring this matter to your attention as soon as possible. I also wanted to suggest that, should the Commonwealth be interested in considering territory status for the Torres Strait, that a mechanism like a referendum be considered prior to any legislative action as a means of confirming residents' views.

The leaders of the local government authorities within the Torres Strait previously formed the Torres Strait Territory Coalition to explore options for secession, and have initiated consultative work to narrow down the preferred models. This work has been proceeding throughout 2010 and 2011, and the outcome was presented to me at the Community Cabinet meeting.



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As my Government has outlined previously, and as I reiterated at the Community Cabinet meeting, it is Queensland's view that secession of the Torres Strait would mean an end to Queensland Government funding and support for health, transport, infrastructure, education and other service delivery priorities, with the funding gap needing to be met locally or by the Commonwealth. The potential implications of such changes for governments and communities are, therefore, very significant.

The model put to me by the Territory Coalition involves the Torres Strait seceding from Queensland to form a separate territory with its own parliament. The Queensland Government is open to considering this model, but I believe there is also merit in exploring variants on this. For example, a hybrid of the Norfolk Island and Christmas Island models may be appropriate — for instance, whereby the Torres Strait Islands could be constituted as a self-governing territory, but with the Queensland and the Australian Governments continuing to provide services to the territory under a formal arrangement.

During my recent meeting with relevant mayors, they proposed that further analysis of models which have been the subject of their community consultation should now occur in a tripartite manner between local, state and federal governments. The mayors and TSRA have proposed the formation of a senior working party, and asked that I seek your support in the first instance for Federal Government support and participation. I would welcome further engagement on this matter and would be prepared to meet with you and a delegation of Torres Strait mayors and the TSRA.

The Queensland Government contact is Mr Michael Tennant, Executive Director, Intergovernmental Relations/Performance and Delivery Office, who can be contacted by email at Michael.Tennant@premiers.qld.gov.au or on telephone (07) 3227 8367.

Yours sincerely



ANNA BLIGH MP
PREMIER OF QUEENSLAND