

2010 Northern Tablelands Electorate Survey – ‘The shape of the future’



A. Background

In April, 34,987 surveys were circulated to businesses and residential addresses within the eight local government areas of the Northern Tablelands electorate. 2860 surveys were returned and processed by the cut-off date of the 31st of May, 2010. A further 165 surveys were received after the cut-off date.

Overall there was an 8.18% electorate return rate. With 52% of respondents providing written responses to their election priorities and concerns. On average, respondents commented on more than two issues for each completed survey (2.36 written responses per completed survey). Uralla (85.17%) provided the most written responses per local government area, while Walcha had the lowest number of written responses (38.41%).

The highest return rate was from the Uralla local government area (9.56%), with the lowest return rate from the Tenterfield local government area (6.75%). 110 respondents failed to identify their local government area on their survey.

Table 1: Survey Returns by Local Government Area (LGA)

LGA	Total distribution	Total of Survey returns	% of Survey returns	% of written responses
ADC	12,349	891	7.22	56.34
Glen Innes	4811	369	7.67	49.05
Guyra	1900	173	9.11	48.56
Gwydir	2083	140	6.72	40.71
Inverell	7824	691	8.83	48.92
Tenterfield	2458	166	6.75	58.43
Uralla	1904	182	9.56	85.17
Walcha	1658	138	8.32	38.41
No LGA	-	110	-	20.0

B. Priority Areas Ranked According to Survey Results

Table 2: 2011 Election Survey - Northern Tablelands Electorate - Overall ranking of electorate priorities across LGA's

Priority Area	Rank 1	Rank 2	Rank 3	Rank 4	Rank 5	Rank 6	Rank 7	Rank 8	Rank 9	Rank 10	Rank 11	Total	Score	Rank
Education	2431	4250	3690	3016	2205	1896	1235	688	195	94	8	19708	1791.64	5
Energy	4213	4210	3384	2896	2303	1734	1315	664	225	46	3	20993	1908.45	2
Environment	2156	1070	1278	1088	1309	1194	1250	1044	1398	954	55	12796	1163.27	9
Health	16324	5830	2619	1352	728	378	100	48	39	6	0	27424	2493.09	1
Housing	627	970	1251	1520	1722	1602	1845	1996	1089	422	30	13074	1188.55	8
Law & Order	3278	4150	3960	2960	2037	1410	990	728	339	158	9	20019	1819.91	4
Primary Industries	1793	1680	1872	2192	2240	2190	1690	1324	774	198	8	15961	1451.00	6
Regional Arts & Events	99	170	234	352	427	546	620	1020	1839	2150	103	7560	687.27	10
Regional Development	1496	1360	1530	1808	2296	2172	2055	1524	867	188	7	15303	1391.18	7
Roads & Transport	2475	3460	4041	3600	2863	1770	1090	596	228	100	0	20223	1838.45	3

Rank 1 – Health – (1109 written responses)

Overwhelmingly Health was identified as the electorate's major issue with 51.89% of survey respondents ranking it the number one priority. The main written response highlighted the need to provide “increased resources to regional hospitals in order to provide upgraded/improved health care for rural and regional communities” - (150). The need to attract and retain doctors in regional communities (78) was the second-highest written comment followed by concerns in relation to the high cost (both monetary and emotional caused by dislocation from families) and personal discomfort for patients (often elderly) forced to travel for treatment to Tamworth, Armidale, Newcastle Sydney and Brisbane (68 written responses). Other major health issues identified included:-

- the need for more visiting specialists/surgeons in regional towns (59);
- the lack of dental services and long waiting lists to see dentists (62);
- the need to upgrade and provide aged care services (65) including better support for aged care nurses and carers (22);
- concern over waiting times for surgery and delays in getting an appointment to see a local GP (58).

There was also strong support for returning hospitals to local control (57) and the feeling that there are too many bureaucrats/administrative staff and not enough doctors and nurses (54) to provide adequate patient care in our hospitals.

39 respondents also indicated there is a greater need for people to take responsibility for their own health with the need to focus on healthy lifestyles and preventative actions to reduce the high incidence of obesity and its health-related consequences.

Rank 2 – Energy – (956 written responses)

Energy was ranked as the electorate's second highest priority. Concern over increasing electricity prices as recommended by IPART was the single issue receiving the most number of written responses within the electorate survey (533). Most people in the electorate are concerned at the alarming increase in electricity prices and the impact this will have on increasing prices for food and consumer goods. There is genuine concern amongst the electorate that those on fixed incomes (pensioners/retirees and welfare recipients) and low income earners, will be unable to afford increases well above CPI. It was also noted that government rebates will be insufficient to offset the astronomical rises in the price of energy. There was a feeling that rebates should be higher in cold climate areas.

The second largest written response in this category (167) related to the promotion of alternative/renewable power sources such as solar, wind, hydro-electricity, geothermal and tidal power. The survey indicated that residents in the Northern Tablelands electorate are very receptive to alternative energy sources but are concerned at the relatively high ‘up-front’ cost to convert to alternative power for business and domestic residents. There was also strong

concern that both the Federal and State governments are reducing energy rebates making it even less attractive to convert to renewable energy sources.

The survey indicated that there is clear resentment towards the State government in relation to the management of electricity with direct comparisons between the cost of electricity in New South Wales and Queensland. Many respondents expressing concern at the increase in electricity prices indicated that the State government should be investing more of the dividends that it receives from power generation into upgrading and maintaining power infrastructure rather than 'slugging' households to maintain infrastructure.

There were also a significant number of respondents (37) highlighting the need for education on ways to reduce energy consumption.

Rank 3 – Roads and Transport– (875 written responses)

Roads and Transport was ranked the 3rd highest priority in the electorate by survey respondents. The local government areas of Glen Innes, Gwydir, Tenterfield and Walcha ranked roads and transport as the second highest priority. The majority of written responses (297) identified the need to reopen and redeveloped rail lines for both passenger and freight within the region. This was the second-highest written response to any issue within the electorate survey.

240 respondents identified the need to provide adequate funding to maintain and upgrade regional roads in order to improve safety. Issues of safety with heavy vehicles on narrow country roads (32) and maintenance of gravel roads (42) contributed to the higher ranking in the four local government areas identified above.

Behind rail and road upgrades the third-largest response concerned the lack of regional air services (81) and the lack of competition leading to high ticket prices for return flights between Sydney and Armidale. There was a strong view amongst aviation respondents that governments should subsidise regional air services and that a service from Armidale to Brisbane should be re-established.

The lack of public transport in the electorate also received a significant number of written responses with 68 expressing their concerns in this regard.

Rank 4 – Law and Order– (736 written responses)

Law and Order was ranked the 4th highest priority by survey respondents. The Inverell local government area listed Law and Order as its second priority with Tenterfield ranking this issue third.

The major written response (115) highlighted the need for more officers to be on duty in regional areas particularly at night and on weekends (when there are most problems with antisocial behaviour). There was also a strong view that 'Courts are far too soft on offenders' (98) and that there is a need for stricter and standardised law enforcement in order to deter offenders (39).

There was a general feeling that Police should have more power to enforce the law (39) and they should be more proactive and freed up from administrative duties in order to be 'on the beat' and more visible to the community (47).

Concern over alcohol-related crime and antisocial behaviour (particularly amongst youth) saw a large response recommending that licensed premises close earlier (52).

Rank 5 – Education– (635 written responses)

Education was ranked 5th in priority by survey respondents. In the Armidale Dumaresq local government area education was listed as the 3rd highest priority, in Gwydir, Tenterfield and Walcha local government areas education was ranked 4th highest priority.

There were no standout issues identified, with survey respondents commenting on over 50 aspects of the education system with major issues itemised below:-

- "our region has good education facilities" - (58);
- "provide greater funding and support for public education" - (56);
- "Education is a priority to build our Nation" - (43);
- "improve the basics - 3R's as there are too many children leaving school without good reading and writing skills" - (48).

Discipline was also an issue of concern with 33 respondents "supporting teachers and principals having more authority to discipline unruly children".

Government funding and initiatives in school education provided over 90 written responses including:-

- "concern over wastage in construction of new school facilities – BER" (37);
- "support for a National Education Curriculum" or "the Federal government having responsibility for education "- (25);
- "opposition to the 'MySchool' website and publication of NAPLAN results" - (11);
- "support for the stimulus investment in school infrastructure" - (21);
- "support for MySchool" - (5).

Rank 6 – Primary Industries – (446 written responses)

Like education, there was no single major issue highlighted with the majority of responses spread over five key areas as itemised below:-

- 58 respondents indicated that “primary producers should have more rights to clear and manage their land as the majority are good land carers”;
- there was concern that "Australia lets in far too many imports (41)" and that these imports are usually of inferior quality. The majority of respondents who highlighted the import issue raised strong concerns over the Federal government's proposed deregulation of beef imports.
- There was support/empathy for farmers "doing it tough as a consequence of the prolonged drought, recent floods and bushfires, and a view that it is too hard under existing schemes to qualify for financial hardship assistance" - (38).
- 35 respondents indicated "overregulation and too much government red tape" as significant problems for primary producers.
- 25 respondents expressed concern over the government putting mining ahead of agriculture, particularly on prime agricultural land.

Rank 7 – Regional Development – (487 written responses)

21.6% of written responses highlighted the need for the government to provide incentives to encourage more businesses and people to relocate out of Metropolitan/Coastal areas to Inland regional communities (105). 40 respondents supported decentralising government departments. 67 respondents identified the need for the government to invest in regional infrastructure in order to support population growth in inland areas. 35 respondents were critical of the government spending too much money on Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong at the expense of regional areas of the State.

The need to generate employment opportunities in regional communities was a strong theme with 46 respondents identifying the need to attract manufacturing / value-adding industries to regional towns. 21 respondents highlighted the need to focus on job creation and training strategies, a further five respondents recommended funding and supporting local businesses as they look to expand/develop local employment opportunities.

Rank 8 – Housing – (318 written responses)

Responses to this topic were varied. Collectively, most comments related to public housing however the highest number of individual responses (35) related to concern that we are tending to build "large unaffordable houses that are costly to run and maintain". The recommendation was made that "local and state governments should be establishing requirements for new homes to be constructed using sustainable energy efficient practices with 'solar passive' design being mandatory".

The second-largest response (24) raised concerns in relation to the recent government stimulus investment in developing new public housing stock, particularly in regard to “the State Government pushing through public housing developments without community consultation and Local Government approval”. 14 respondents raised concerns that new medium/high-density developments will become future ghettos.

Other major housing comments included:-

- "there are not enough affordable public houses available for rent in our area" - (21);
- "make housing more affordable for everyone" - (21); and
- "we need to retain government incentives for low income earners and first home buyers" - (19).

Rank 9 - Environment and Climate Change - (451 written responses)

While the electorate ranked environment and climate change in 9th place, residents in the Armidale Dumaresq local government area ranked it in 7th place with Tenterfield, Uralla and Inverell residents ranking this issue in 8th place.

There was a strong view amongst 31.7% of written respondents that Climate Change is a natural phenomenon (143) and nothing that governments/politicians in Australia do about legislating in relation to Climate Change will make a scrap of difference. There was considerable anger that the Federal government's plan to introduce an ETS is “just an excuse to impose more taxes (and doesn't make sense if the rest of the world is not ‘on board’)” - 49 responses.

While a majority of written responses focused on opposition to increase taxes and scepticism over Climate Change science, there was also strong support (17.5%) that “we need to take better care of our environment by taking steps to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and recycling more” – (80).

Rank 10 – Regional Arts and Events – (268 written responses)

The vast majority of respondents (41.2%) rated this issue as the lowest electorate priority, which was summed up best by the largest written response (52) – “this is a low priority in comparison to other survey items”.

Whilst regional arts and events was considered to be a lower ranked priority, they are still valued highly with 41 respondents feeling that “the Northern Tablelands is well catered for” and a further 33 respondents indicating that “regional arts, entertainment and events are an important part of a strong and vibrant community (even though it is frequently undervalued) as it adds to the quality of life”. Only 0.6% of all survey respondents (19) expressed negative attitudes towards this issue.

11.2% of written respondents (30) raised concerns that regional arts and events/facilities do not receive sufficient government (state and local) funding and therefore rely very heavily on volunteers to function.

Other issues - (474 written responses)

Of the other issues raised, the Kibble Review into the collapse of the New England Strategic Alliance of Councils (Armidale Dumaresq, Guyra Uralla and Walcha) attracted the most responses (66). In Walcha 22 opposed forced amalgamation and one supported it. From Uralla, of the 28 people who raised amalgamation as an issue 9 supported it and 19 were against and in Armidale Dumaresq 15 people raised the issue with nine pro-amalgamation and six against. A further five responses supported Tingha and Bundarra becoming part of Inverell Shire Council. Respondents also raised concerns over potential council rate increases, management, road maintenance, the cash reserve position of their councils, problems with footpaths and street lighting and water quality.

Daylight saving drew 28 comments expressing the view that it should be cut back and finish in early March.

Some respondents raised federal issues (such as immigration) and these have been referred to Member for New England Tony Windsor to put to the Commonwealth government.