



Australian Citizens Party

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MEDIA RELEASE

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Parliamentary scrutiny works! Westpac reverses branch closures

The campaign against bank branch closures, which achieved the establishment of the current Senate inquiry into bank closures in regional Australia, has had a major victory.

Yesterday Westpac informed the Member for Kennedy Bob Katter and other local MPs that it had reversed its decision to close its branches in Gatton, Cloncurry, Ingham, and Tully in Queensland, as well as Denmark in WA, its Bank SA branch in Kingston SA, and Robinvale and Sale in Victoria.

Westpac's statement to Bob Katter reads:

"As you are aware, we had paused the closure of the branches and have now decided to keep the branches open. This decision follows discussions with our customers and community leaders such as yourself. I hope this decision gives you and your community certainty."

In a letter to the Senate inquiry, Westpac declined to appear at the next hearing next week in Cloncurry, and then revealed it had reversed its remaining regional branch closure plans.

Australian Citizens Party Research Director Robert Barwick said today that this Westpac announcement shows the importance of Parliament asserting its Constitutional authority over the banking system, especially when it comes to essential banking services for communities.

"Westpac only made this call because of the scrutiny it is coming under from the current Senate inquiry," he said.

"Westpac was embarrassed at the 2 March hearing in Sale in Victoria, because they had to admit under questioning that the only time they had consulted with the town or the local Council on their decision to close the Sale branch was on the day of the hearing.

"Now, a week before the Senate inquiry is to hold hearings in Cloncurry and Ingham because Westpac is closing branches in those towns, Westpac suddenly announces it is no longer closing regional branches.

"This is the power of the Senate inquiry, using the authority of Parliament to subject the banks to real scrutiny."

Robert Barwick said the reason the banks have closed so many branches to date is because too many politicians in the major parties believe in the neoliberal ideology that governments shouldn't regulate private businesses.

"Banking self-regulation has been a miserable failure for the people who matter—bank customers", he said.

"Banking has become a lawless sector, where the banks have come to think they can get away with anything, including a massive, coordinated social engineering campaign to force everyone into digital banking so the banks can increase their profits.

"However, when there are politicians in Parliament with spines who are prepared to take the banks on, like the Senators conducting this inquiry, it's another matter entirely.

"Westpac and the other banks are feeling the pressure of scrutiny, and Westpac has responded.

"Even before completion, this inquiry has already saved regional towns."

Barwick said despite the good news, Westpac's decision should also make people mad.

"If Westpac can so easily reverse these closures, what is the justification for closing branches at all?" he demanded.

"Westpac admitted in the Sale hearing that profitability is not the reason for its branch closures—it has been closing profitable branches!

“The real reason is the major banks are all colluding to force all bank customers into digital banking, so they can extract even greater profits—from surveilling and monetising our transactions data; from taking a cut of all digital transactions; and from cutting the costs of branches and staff.

“They don’t care that they are exposing customers to the dangers of online scams, or making them vulnerable to power and communications failures, which are especially common in regional Australia.”

Robert Barwick said while Westpac’s decision was welcome, it underlined the need for the ACP’s policy of a government bank operating through post offices to force the major banks to compete on service, so Westpac doesn’t reverse its decision again after the inquiry is over.

He also noted the Senate inquiry has received well over 500 submissions, making it a major inquiry.

[Click here to sign the Citizens Party’s petition for a post office people’s bank.](#)