

INQUIRY INTO 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

Organisation: Willoughby City Council

Name: Mr Nick Tobin

Position: General Manager

Date Received: 14/05/2009

13 May 2009

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL
MATTERS INQUIRY INTO THE 2008 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS**

Please find enclosed a submission from Willoughby City Council to the Inquiry into the 2008 Local Government Elections.

Yours faithfully



Nick Tobin
GENERAL MANAGER



Phone: 9777 1010

2008 Local Government Elections

Submission to Election Inquiry

This submission is made to the inquiry into the cost of running the 2008 Local Government Election for Willoughby City Council.

Overall Costing Comparison

| Year of Election | 2004 | 2008 |
|------------------|--------------|---|
| Total Cost | \$117,040.69 | Budget estimate - \$326,100 Final cost - \$277,200 |

Voting Percentages Comparison between 2004 & 2008 Elections

| Ward | 2004 | Percentage | 2008 | Percentage |
|----------------|--------------------|------------|------------------|------------|
| Middle Harbour | No enrolled - 9506 | 84.1% | Enrolled - 11032 | 81.4% |
| | No voted - 8004 | | Voted - 8979 | |
| Naremburn | No enrolled - 9724 | 76.5% | Enrolled - 10336 | 76.7% |
| | No voted - 7437 | | Voted - 7923 | |
| Sailors Bay | No enrolled - 9100 | 82.8% | Enrolled - 10099 | 85.2% |
| | No voted - 7535 | | Voted - 8606 | |
| West | Enrolled - 10545 | 79.5% | Enrolled - 10681 | 77.4% |
| | Voted - 8385 | | Voted - 8267 | |
| Total | | 80.7% | | 80.2% |

Observations from Council

- The difference in the cost of the 2004 & 2008 elections was \$160,160. (2004 election cost \$117,040 and 2008 election \$277,200). This represents a 173% increase in cost to Council.
- Despite the significant increase in cost, there did not appear to be a noticeable commensurate improvement in the actual running of the election, i.e. there appeared to be a similar number of staff working as in previous elections, similar comments were made about lack of publicity, complaints about queues of people waiting to cast their vote etc.
- Notwithstanding the advertising campaigns by the Commission and its efforts to inform voters about the elections, the percentage of people who voted in the 2008 Willoughby election was virtually unchanged at 80.2% compared with 80.7% in the 2004 election.
- In the past, the Returning Officer worked with Council Officers to minimize the costs associated with the elections. In the 2008 Election, because the Electoral Commissioner had centralised and prescribed many of the operations, the

opportunities to make these savings were not available to Council or the Returning Officer.

- The election brochure seemed to be well received as it provided electors with information about which ward they were enrolled in, the location of polling places for each ward and information about pre-poll and postal voting if people were unable to vote on election day.

Issues and Comments Raised by Candidates

Polling Place Issues

- "I had some additional information about Harrington Hall (Our Lady of Dolours School in Chatswood CBD) - this was a dual booth which is always difficult but this was compounded by the fact that this originally was not listed as a voting place for Middle Harbour Ward and then at the last minute it appeared on the web site of the Electoral Commission.

What would have been helpful if there had been a large map outside on the wall so that people could clearly see which ward they were in.

People had to get into different queues for their relative ward and then if they were in the wrong queue when they actually got to have their names checked off then they had to turn around and go to the bottom of the other queue.

Several people when they had been through this experience decided they would take the fine for not voting as an easier option and they left."

- "My only other comments on the election would be:
 - The Clanwilliam Street Booth was barely able to cope with the election and the Community Fair that they were running. On the day it was very hot and people had to queue for a long time - the number of tables was inadequate. There has been a big increase in density in that area and it was not taken into account.
 - Castle Cove School Hall also did not have enough tables and people manning them."
- One thing I think we should note was that the pre-poll was a very unfriendly site for the physically challenged. The entrance had a steep set of steps. It was possible to divert to a steep ramp (not at a safe gradient) but this wasn't sign posted. Daunting site for the disabled.
- Re Castle Cove PS, very inadequate staffing. I have manned that booth several times and the queues were much longer in 2008 than previously. This may have been exacerbated by the fact that the Roseville Community Hall Booth didn't open this time (first time in living memory) and some Ku-ring-gai residents tried to vote at Castle Cove. However, I am almost positive that there were only about half the usual number of staff.
- The Our Lady of Dolours School Polling booth was difficult to access with little or no signage from Victoria Ave. It was more like traversing a construction site and quite inappropriate for the elderly, wheelchairs etc. Until candidates objected there was only one access point from the lane. It was quite dangerous for pedestrians/voters when cars entered the school from the lane. The queues were extensive and prolonged.
- The Chatswood Primary School Polling site had extraordinarily long queues. It was too hot and crowded for some who left before voting. More staff were required to deal with the queues. There was no information displayed that those in wheelchairs or the elderly

could go to the front - advocacy was required. Many voters appeared unsure of which ward they were in - large prominent posters with clear maps illustrating ward boundaries and booths, placed at polling entrances, would have been useful on the day.

- One good thing about this election was, however, that we were able to hand out to voters inside the school grounds. It is very difficult for an Independent with no political party to man a polling place with multiple entrances if you are forced to hand out outside the grounds. This time we were permitted inside as long as we stayed outside the line imaginary around the hall where voting took place.

Legislative and Electoral Funding Issues

- Many candidates were confused about the new Election Funding requirements. There were comments that these requirements would discourage prospective candidates from standing due to their complexity and onerous nature.
- There is marked dissatisfaction with the effect of recent legislative changes, specifically those relating to the Election Funding Authority responsibilities and its administration of them.
- It is acknowledged that the changes to NSW legislation being precipitate, have proven a challenge for the officers responsible for their administration. However there has been no quarter extended to candidates caught up in this confusion - much less any apology for the stress and inconvenience incurred as a result. Contradictory letters and emails of advice from the EFA to candidates can be provided, should they be required (specifically related to the appointment of "agents" in the case of independent candidates – as candidates and as head candidates of groups).
- In local government elections, many "ordinary citizens" stand as independents and the current Minister Perry is on record as stating that this ("ordinary" citizen candidates) is "a good thing". However the new rules relating to funding disclosure demonstrably favour political party members who have access to the infrastructure, experience and already retain such documentation.
- The effect of the new regulations is a gross disincentive to ordinary citizens standing for election. Any government remotely interested in testing the truth of this assertion will be readily able to test it.
- Independent candidates typically fund their own campaigns and should not be required to appoint agents, auditors and the like when funding their own campaigns – particularly when these amounts are a matter of less than few thousand dollars and which can be readily identified as having been drawn from their own personal bank accounts.
- Neither should ordinary citizens be forced to request family members (or employ professionals!) to undertake examinations in order to provide assurances of integrity when the amounts of funding are as has been stated, matters of a couple of thousand dollars sourced from a candidate's own personal bank account.
- It has yet to be demonstrated that this new regime of accountability has brought to light any corrupt practice and specifically amongst those demonstrated to be most vulnerable to it i.e. political parties and their members.

Other Comments from Candidates

- It is a matter of public record that recently corrupt practice in NSW local government (said to be the reason for recent legislative change) has been found to be exclusively associated with political parties and their members and yet the burden of the new regulations appear to fall hardest on those who have no apparent record official or

otherwise of any corrupt practice. Further, research has demonstrated that "ordinary " citizens and independent candidates - especially at local government level - are collectively held in higher esteem as regards freedom from corruption - than their party political colleagues. The public record supports public opinion.

- The information provided at the briefings held by the Electorate Office was inadequate.
- Several candidates reported that, from their experience at the polling places on the day, many people were still unaware that the election was being held despite the advertising campaign and the fact that an election brochure was posted to every household in the electorate.
- People complained that information on the candidates was not readily available and, when they did access the information on the website, many of the candidates had not completed the Candidate Information section.
Many thought that this should be a compulsory requirement for candidates so that the electors at least can find out who is standing and what their platform is.
- Some candidates thought that the delay in finalising the results was too drawn out with the poll not being announced until a week and half after the election.
- Several candidates expressed frustration in trying to contact the Electoral Commission's 1300 Enquiry Telephone Service. Apparently in the days immediately leading up to the election and on election day itself, there were considerable delays in telephone calls being answered or people couldn't get through to the number. The impression was that the service was under resourced.
- The Commissioner's decision to hold seminars for intending candidates was a good initiative which provided first time candidates with helpful information.
- Candidates in the 2008 election have advised that they have completed a survey about conduct of the election & have received no feedback let alone any analysis of findings. Since it was completed electronically there seems little excuse for not having advised participants of the result by the same means.