

**Submission  
No 155**

**INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH  
WALES**

**Name:** Mr Robert T. Dunn

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I was one of the original executive members of the Pittwater Municipality Committee (PMC). Between 1987 and 1991 this committee, under the chairmanship of the late Des Creagh, organised and oversaw the successful application for the creation of the new Pittwater Council by secession from Warringah Council.

Pittwater Council was proclaimed on 1 May 1992 and led by my friend and former colleague from Warringah Council, the late Councillor Eric Green. Following the new Council's first election on 24 October 1992, I was elected Mayor and served in that capacity for 4 of the first 6 years of the new Council.

In 2002, under the leadership of my successor Mayor Patricia Giles and General Manager Angus Gordon, Pittwater Council won the greatest accolade a Council can achieve, the coveted A R Bluett Memorial Award for the most outstanding local government organisation in NSW that year.

In its short history of 23 years Pittwater Council has not been without fault but it has generally continued to show outstanding local government leadership. It has given the people of Pittwater their own democratic forum in which to ensure that this beautiful area of the Peninsula and its environment may be preserved both for its current residents and for future generations.

Thus I make this submission to advocate for the survival of this democratically constituted Council now placed under threat of amalgamation by a non-democratic and heavy-handed process instituted by the New South Wales government.

Of the three options presented by Pittwater Council to its community for consideration: the third option of amalgamating Pittwater, Warringah and Manly into one super council is so obviously unacceptable to the people of Pittwater and Manly alike, that it almost needs no further comment. For Pittwater, that option is even more outrageous and illogical given the history of secession and Pittwater's subsequent success away from the suffocating bureaucracy of a much larger Council.

The second option, the so-called compromise in which the behemoth Warringah Council is slaughtered and carved up between Manly and Pittwater councils, is being dangled in front of the people of Pittwater by a heavy-handed and patronising New South Wales Government as the only way to avoid the unpalatable third Option.

**It is naïve to believe that this carve-up option would solve the continued difficulty of a still failing Warringah Council, albeit that option may be appealing to a State Government keen to have one less Council to worry about.**

Not only is this simplistic approach naïve, but forcing it upon the various communities affected is grossly undemocratic and unfair to all concerned. It fails to understand and comprehend the whole system of local government in New South Wales, which has been built on communities of interest and an acceptance of the fundamental need to petition for a majority of people within the affected area to accept any significant boundary adjustment and the change in their local government representation that will necessarily entail.

True local government is not and never will be about drawing simple lines on a map, as logical as that may first appear to the bureaucratic mind. Such a simplistic approach does not take into account the common elements that bind a community together. It ignores the history, the culture and the sense of place that have been ingrained in the people of a well-established community. Those elements of social cohesion are not apparent on any map (let alone the calculator of an IPART statistician) and yet are powerful forces which ought to be given primary consideration, even ahead of the understandable desire to bring water catchment areas into a single council's control.

Despite the problems within Warringah and the fact it appears more than willing to swallow up its smaller neighbours, there is no proper moral or ethical basis to justify the dismemberment of that Council. To do so would set a dangerous and undemocratic precedent. This would inevitably be used by future governments to amalgamate the two mid-sized councils that would result.

Pittwater was not created to meet the political objectives of the coalition government of the time. It started with a community group made up of ordinary citizens who believed they had sufficient cause to overcome the population's usual reluctance to change the status quo and who pitted themselves against the might of the Warringah propaganda juggernaut. Pittwater was won after the most exhaustive process of establishing equity and fairness as well as cohesiveness and self-sufficiency of the proposed new Council area. The recommendation of the Boundaries Commission was supported by a greater than 70% voluntary postal referendum of the proposed new Council area and the then NSW coalition Government under Premier Nick Greiner and Local Government Minister Gerry Peacocke heard and respected the community's voice.

The threat of forced amalgamations is not a threat justified by some dire economic imperative. KPMG recently found that the three councils each passed the specified tests to be declared 'fit for the future' and did not identify any significant economic benefit from amalgamation. **The KPMG report supports the contention that this large, thriving, but diverse community, from Manly to Palm Beach can both support and continue to be best served by three councils for its separate communities of interest.**

The only reason that these three Councils and their citizens are now being compelled to devote significant resources to justify their future existence is that the current Government now refuses to rule-out forced amalgamations for viable and functional Councils. This appears to be some attempt to show even-handedness toward those councils that are not viable or functional, a position no-doubt exacerbated by having the three local members concerned also occupying important roles in Cabinet. This approach wastes considerable community resources that ironically could be better spent making each Council fitter for the future.

In the wider context of the State's planning system, forced amalgamation of councils could appear to be part of a broader agenda to "oil the wheels for progress" for the benefit of developers. The Minister for Local Government in parliament on Thursday 14 May, in defending the Government's refusal to rule out forced amalgamations cited the different planning restrictions between Council areas as one of the key problems sought to be overcome by this reform.

In applauding economic progress by 'NSWINC', the not so idealistic big business lobby must be waiting in the wings for all the opportunities this new so-called reform will bring. As the old adage says "All power corrupts, but absolute power corrupts absolutely".

Whilst there will always be a need for change to respond to our rapidly changing world, the real danger is in letting economic goals drive such changes without regard to the checks and balances that safeguard the right of communities to guide.

If the State Government seeks only to lift standards of councils, then they should do that through the regional council forums that already exist like SHOROC and it should respect the rights of individuals to have their own council without reference to size uniformity and hence mediocrity.

Above all the Government should respect the liberty of individuals to have a meaningful say in their Councils, to protect their environment and shape their communities of interest without being stood on by the "big is best" bullying approach.

**Finally and mostly importantly, the New South Wales government has no mandate for forced amalgamations.**

Robert T. Dunn

*Former Mayor of Pittwater 1992-94, 95-97 & Councillor from 1992-99*

*Former A-Riding Warringah Councillor from 1987-91*

VIDEO FOOTAGE OF PUBLIC MEETING 19 MAY 2015

*This submission is based on the address I gave in favour of retaining the existing Pittwater Council to the very well attended public meeting held at Pittwater RSL Club on 19 May 2015. I include the video footage taken at that Public Meeting as part of my submission:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXd9A8gSvDc>



[THIS VIDEO FOOTAGE WILL PROVIDE THE COMMITTEE WITH AN EXCELLENT INDICATION OF THE SENTIMENT OF THE PEOPLE OF PITTWATER WITH REGARD TO THE GOVERNMENT'S SO-CALLED REFORM PROPOSAL.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXd9A8gSvDc)