

INQUIRY INTO LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Local Government in NSW

Introduction

I thank the Legislative Council for the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry. The issues raised by the Council, and by the council mergers proposed by the Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP), are extensive. My comments are limited to the issue of metropolitan Sydney councils which is where I have knowledge and experience. I note that other members of Mosman Council including the Mayor, Dr Peter Abelson, have made submissions and whilst I am an independent councillor with no alignment to any party or local grouping I fully support Dr Abelson's submission.

Let the People decide

I offer the follow observations and commentary in support of allowing local communities to determine how they should be governed. Surely any democratic approach to the issues of possible council amalgamation could simply and fairly be decided by appropriate plebiscites. If the government is serious about democracy I say put the arguments to the people and let the people decide. After all, we are not talking about tinkering at the edge. The NSW government is proposing a radical change to the structure of the tier of government closest to the people but is unable to articulate nor prove what benefits will accrue to citizens should it realise its wishes to enforce mega-councils on residents.

Labor and Liberal in - Independents out.

Forced mergers and councils of a minimum of 250,000 + people will mean the local government sector will become the almost exclusive preserve of the two major political parties, Labor and Liberal as, generally, independents will not be able to afford the cost of campaigning. The minimum cost of campaigning is likely to rise to at least \$150,000 per independent candidate and probably a lot higher, if one is to have serious chance of becoming elected. One does not need to be a student of politics to recognise the veracity of these observations.

Labor and Liberal mergers proposals

It is no surprise the only two metro amalgamation proposals lodged with IPART as at June 30 involve one liberal deal: Waverley and Randwick Liberal mayors who enjoy Liberal controlled councils have sought to advance their political careers, as is their right, by supporting their colleagues and masters in Macquarie St. In the inner west Auburn, Canada Bay and Burwood Councils have proposed a merger which I am lead to believe is all about the planned political careers of Labor members.

Risk of corruption to increase

The history of recent corruption scandals at the state level involving the two major parties means its reasonable to assume that corruption at the local level would increase with the domination of major parties at the local level.

Platitudes, assertions, but a glaring lack of evidence from the Baird government and its agents.

The lack of any substantial or even minor evidence pointing to the benefits of larger metropolitan councils has been the singular outstanding feature of the current campaign by the state government to force councils to merge.

None of the claims made by either the Baird government or the ILGRP head Graham Sansom are supported by evidence. Instead, Mr Sansom commenced this whole process by publishing papers that proclaimed that “that status quo is not an option’ and that councils had to merge if NSW was to become #1, which presumably meant that for NSW to have the highest growth rate of GDP or lowest employment, councils had to merge. NSW now enjoys the highest ranked economic position in Australian economic growth so by the Sansom and the government’s own logic: job done ! And council size was not so vital after all. It should be said that never was any evidence provided by the government, the current or previous minister or Sansom to explain how bigger councils would ensure higher levels of economic growth, let alone better service and better representation for residents.

Equally it never been explained by the governments or its agents and supporters how forcing two uneconomic or poorly performing councils to merge will provide lower costs or better services for residents. My colleague Dr Abelson has published research which shows the principal determinant of the economic viability of councils is the average level of income of residents. I have attached his research paper to this submission but note others have also submitted it to the committee.

It has to be said that the papers published by Mr Sansom and the ILGRP were breathtaking in their lack of scholarship, lack of evidence and quite frankly were an embarrassment for the authors/s. As someone who attended several consultation and information sessions under Mr Sansom’s management I can only note that his carriage of meetings was one of lecturing to, rather than engaging with, his audience and led one to believe that a predetermined outcome was at hand from day one.

Why does the NSW government want to merge councils?

After observing first hand the actions of the NSW government it is my assessment that there are 5 major drivers of the Baird government’s apparent determination to force councils to merge against the wishes of residents

1. To be seen to be ‘doing reform’ regardless of the real outcome
2. To further the career of the responsible Minister
3. To appease the property and development lobby
4. To reduce the number of organisations the Division of Local Government has to liaise with.
5. The issue was not a major issue at the recent state election (an SMH poll showed amalgamations were only a key issue for 1% of the voting population) hence there is little political risk in taking the course they have chosen to achieve 1-4 above

Members of the Committee will have their own views about this assessment but item 4. is the only one for which I have any sympathy, but bureaucratic convenience is hardly a sound reason to forcibly reduce local representation and the access to local government, which would be the result of the Baird/Toole/Sansom plan.

I conclude by noting residents of my own council Mosman have voted on three occasions in recent times to remain independent, the last in a referendum in 2012 where the result again was above 80% for no change, in this case 81%. The figure has been repeated in recent council surveys which showed a similar number are for the status quo.

I congratulate members of the Legislative Council for examining this issue and urge you to use whatever power you have to convince the government to give local communities a direct say in their future. If amalgamated councils are the will of the people so be it. If it is not lets all get on with governing as best we collectively can, including the state government.