

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 7 - PLANNING AND
ENVIRONMENT**

**INQUIRY INTO ALLEGATIONS OF IMPROPRIETY AGAINST
AGENTS OF THE HILLS SHIRE COUNCIL AND PROPERTY
DEVELOPERS IN THE REGION**

CORRECTED

At S1/S2, UNSW CBD Campus, Sydney on Thursday, 23 February 2023

The Committee met at 10:10 am

PRESENT

Ms Sue Higginson (Chair)

The Hon. Scott Barrett
The Hon. John Graham
The Hon. Penny Sharpe

The CHAIR: Welcome to the third hearing of the Portfolio Committee No. 7 inquiry into allegations of impropriety against agents of The Hills Shire Council and property developers in the region. The inquiry, which was sparked by serious matters raised in a speech to Parliament by the member for Castle Hill on 23 June 2022, is examining the integrity of processes, employees and elected officials of The Hills Shire Council, and the role and influence of developers and their interactions with councillors and members of Parliament in the region. I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing culture and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today.

Before we start this morning, I would like to make a few important comments. As many would be aware, the Committee has invited, and now summonsed, several key individuals who could have potentially shed some light on the matters raised in the terms of reference. These witnesses—Councillor Virginia Ellis, Christian Ellis and Jean-Claude Perrottet—have all chosen to not cooperate with the Committee's inquiry to date. Indeed, some have gone to great lengths to evade process servers and avoid answering questions of this Committee. This is extraordinary, and demonstrates a lack of respect for the Parliament and the Committee's very important work. With that said, I thank the witness who we will hear from this morning, Mr Alan Haselden, a former Hills shire councillor, for making the time to give evidence.

Before we commence, I would like to make some brief comments about the procedures for today's hearing. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. A transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. In accordance with the broadcasting guidelines, the House has authorised the filming, broadcasting and photography of committee proceedings by representatives of media organisations from any position in the room and by any member of the public from any position in the audience. Any person filming or photographing proceedings must take responsibility for the proper use of that material. This is detailed in the broadcasting resolution, a copy of which is available from the secretariat.

While parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses giving evidence today, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I therefore urge witnesses to be careful about comments you may make to the media or to others after you complete your evidence. Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. In that regard, it is important that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the inquiry terms of reference and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily.

All witnesses have the right to procedural fairness, according to the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. If witnesses are unable to answer a question today and want to take more time to respond, they can take a question on notice. Due to the very short time frame of this inquiry, written answers to questions taken on notice are to be provided within three days of receipt of the transcript. If witnesses wish to hand up documents, they should do so through the committee staff. In terms of the audibility of today's hearing, I remind both committee members and witnesses to please speak into the microphones. Finally, could everyone please turn their mobile phones to silent for the duration of the hearing.

Mr ALAN HASELDEN, Former Councillor, The Hills Shire Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our witness, Mr Alan Haselden. Before we commence with your giving of evidence, I make a point that two Government members have recused themselves for this part of the hearing on the basis of a declared potential conflict, in that they were part of the decision-makers of the Liberal Party Executive during a preselection process for those selected candidates who stood for The Hills Shire Council at the last council election. Would you like to start by making a short statement?

ALAN HASELDEN: It certainly is very short. I am Alan Haselden. I was on The Hills Shire Council as an elected East Ward councillor from 2012 through to 2021. I was deputy mayor under Councillor Byrne. I was elected on 18 October through until the following September-October. Beyond that, I am a retired mechanical engineer and I am on the board of one not-for-profit and a private company in industry. That's me.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you, Mr Haselden. The Committee appreciates your cooperation and willingness to come and answer our questions today, so thank you.

ALAN HASELDEN: It is all part of the democratic process. I appreciate it.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, and we really do appreciate—given where we've been—your cooperation. You've already gone to this; you were elected in 2012 for the East Ward. Could you explain to the Committee which suburbs the East Ward of The Hills Shire Council takes in?

ALAN HASELDEN: I live in West Pennant Hills, which is a key population component. East Ward, from West Pennant Hills, now extends into parts of Castle Hill and I think even parts of Baulkham Hills today. In 2012, of course, before the council boundary adjustments, it extended into Carlingford and North Rocks.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are they still in the East Ward, or no longer? They were removed?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, they are not. They are all part of Parramatta city council now.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is right. They were moved. What made you decide to run for council prior to 2012?

ALAN HASELDEN: I entered what I call "semiretirement" in 2011 after I—I'd headed up an American company for the Asia-Pacific region for 16 years prior to that. I had a call from the former member for Mitchell, Alan Cadman, who asked me if I had ever considered running for council. I hadn't, but I have always had an interest in politics first, and community as well, so it seemed like the right sort of thing to have a go at. I got permission from my wife, which is equally important—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Very important, yes.

ALAN HASELDEN: —and that is when the process started.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Obviously you were on the council for quite a long time—nine years or so.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was your intention to keep going with your council career?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, it certainly was. I felt that I was still sufficiently energetic and engaged. Of course, the thing about council—when you join council as a private citizen, you don't know anything at all about the workings of local government. I had involved myself, over the nine years that I was on council, in a range of activities. I was on the audit committee, because I have some finance background; I was in the Parramatta River Catchment Group when it was formed; and I was a council representative on Floodplain Management Australia. There were lots of insights into local government and the things that I had hitherto no previous knowledge of. I felt that I had learned a lot and that I was in a position to carry on and contribute to the community.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It sometimes takes a while to understand that complexity.

ALAN HASELDEN: It certainly does.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: A length of time is helpful in relation to that.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In the lead-up to the election, before you ran, had you indicated that you were going to run publicly and had you submitted a nomination form?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, I had—yes to both of those questions.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So there were no surprises within the local Liberal Party that you were preparing to run again?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Were you expecting that there would be a preselection? Obviously you were nominated. How did you think that that issue would be resolved?

ALAN HASELDEN: Like others, I was of the expectation that there would be a normal preselection. I was fully prepared for that. That was the process that I went through in 2012, which was enlightening, and that's what I expected would happen.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Were you aware that others perhaps wanted to challenge you for that preselection? If there was going to be a preselection, were you expecting others to run against you?

ALAN HASELDEN: Certainly. It's an assumption. Going back to 2012, which is my entry into local government politics, the preselection was hotly contested. There were a lot of candidates for the positions. I was surprised for my personal outcome. But based on that experience, I was fully prepared to submit to further preselection.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That's great. Can I just clarify then, in 2021 you were the deputy mayor. You were still the deputy mayor then.

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I wasn't.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry. When were you the deputy mayor till?

ALAN HASELDEN: Late 2018 through 2019.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Right, okay.

ALAN HASELDEN: There were two other councillors that held the role subsequent to me.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And that changed every year.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, that's right.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Because that was the process.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, it was.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Great. I just wanted to clarify that. But you'd been the deputy mayor, so you had a lot of experience. Were you confident that you would be successful in a preselection if it was held?

ALAN HASELDEN: I think so. Confident is a very subjective word.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: As confident as you ever can be.

ALAN HASELDEN: I was. I was happy to stand before the members of the party and say, "This is who I am. This is what I've done. You know me. Please vote for me."

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure. When were you told that there wasn't going to be a preselection for The Hills Shire?

ALAN HASELDEN: I don't remember specifically, but it was late in the day. The process just dragged. There was little communication. Since all this happened in 2020-21, one sort of switches off from this sort of thing. It's not part of my life anymore, so I don't remember the timing of the—from memory, it was an email from HQ.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That's Liberal HQ.

ALAN HASELDEN: Liberal HQ, saying that there'd been—I think there was an inference that there was insufficient time for a normal preselection process and that there was a leak. I think it was State Executive or HQ had endorsed a list of candidates without going through preselection.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to be clear, you had serving councillors. How many Liberal councillors were there at the time? Were there six or seven?

ALAN HASELDEN: Of the entire council of 12 plus the mayor, we had two that were not for the Liberal Party.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But none of the continuing councillors were on that list, were they, when you received it?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, there were. There was a couple.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Which two are the continuing ones?

ALAN HASELDEN: I think Councillor De Masi and Councillor Jethi were on the list of candidates.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But the others were brand new.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, that's right.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Did you know these other candidates?

ALAN HASELDEN: I knew one or two of them, but I didn't know them as a group.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: But you'd been a councillor for nine years.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You obviously know the area and are fairly active within the Liberal Party and the community. There was a list of councillors that had been endorsed that you had never heard of before.

ALAN HASELDEN: That's correct.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Do you know whether they were all living in the area at the time?

ALAN HASELDEN: I certainly knew that one of the candidates for East Ward didn't live in the ward. In fact, I don't believe at the time he lived in The Hills Shire. But I think because of rules about business activities, he was entitled to nominate in The Hills Shire.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, because they're on the roll.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I see that. My final question before I hand over to my colleague was: Did you take any action after being, I suppose, disendorsed by email? What was the sort of follow-up that you were able to do—or did you pursue—in being dumped from a position that you'd held for nine years?

ALAN HASELDEN: I didn't, apart from making my sentiments apparent to my colleagues. It was clearly a fait accompli, and I felt that there was no good to be gained by further comment either privately or publicly. I really literally just walked away from that at that time.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thanks again for giving evidence today. It obviously would have come not just to you but to the team as a bit of a shock, given the circumstances you're describing. How did you feel at the time?

ALAN HASELDEN: I'm not sure that it was such a shock because there was a subtle build-up to the ultimate email because time had just disappeared. There simply wasn't time, and everybody knew it. There wasn't time for a preselection. I think it was just a dawning realisation that there was going to be a change in the candidates for The Hills Shire Council election.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Did you feel that that delay was related to this idea that that team might be changed over?

ALAN HASELDEN: I did personally. Yes, I did.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So the preselection had been delayed—this was your observation—in order to facilitate that change. It made it easier.

ALAN HASELDEN: The sentiment that I held was that the process was being delayed because there were discussions within the party organisation that were difficult to resolve and, as a result of that, the sand in the hourglass just slipped away. I could see this coming.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Were you ever given any explanation to your satisfaction about why the change was required?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Were you ever given any explanation, even not to your satisfaction? Did anyone say, "This is why this is happening"?

ALAN HASELDEN: The information I was getting was as much reported in the media as it was through anecdote. It was clear to me that there were factional arrangements within the party that were finding it difficult to agree on a group of candidates.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: There must have been some discussion between the seven of you who were then not on the ticket. Did any of the others who you spoke to have any views about why this had happened?

ALAN HASELDEN: I think similar to mine, similar to those that I've just expressed. There was a general sentiment. I'd add, I joined the Liberal Party in 1992 and I have never aligned myself with factions. I think that factions are just a form of tribalism. I think they serve no purpose. I think they are potentially destructive to political parties generally.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You would have made that view known inside the party.

ALAN HASELDEN: Very well known.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You would have been perhaps proudly non-factional. Is that a fair way to characterise it?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, proudly non-factional. That was my banner.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So you're saying that you had a general sentiment, and perhaps the team had a general sentiment, but really, as you're describing it, not a clear sense of what the motive was for this change?

ALAN HASELDEN: That's correct—not a clear sense at all.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Okay. I'm looking at the electronic ballot form, which was issued on 15 October 2021. You've already told us that a number of these councillors—perhaps one, perhaps two was how I think you put it—did not live in the area. Was it one or two do you think who did not live locally?

ALAN HASELDEN: Frankly, I can't remember. It was certainly one.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: At least one.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You couldn't rule out two.

ALAN HASELDEN: No. But as I said, the candidate, although not living in the area, was entitled—and I checked this with the general manager at the time—to nominate as a candidate through business interests.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So you raised that as a concern—

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, I did.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: —that on technical grounds they were allowed to run.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, they were. There was nothing illegal about the issue.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Understood. One of the things that this indicates is that it should be noted that—I'll quote from the document:

It should also be noted that other candidates listed above, who did not originally nominate for these positions, will need to confirm in writing with the State Director, that they are happy for their nominations to be amended to include the ward and/or position listed above.

Are you aware that some of these candidates who were selected, including in place of you, had not even nominated?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That's the first you've heard that—

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes. That's the first I've heard of that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: —as seven councillors were swept aside, some of the councillors who replaced you hadn't nominated for The Hills Shire Council.

ALAN HASELDEN: That's news to me.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: This was the position put in the electronic ballot to those who voted to replace you. Up till now, no-one has put that to you.

ALAN HASELDEN: I'm bewildered.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you.

ALAN HASELDEN: I would have just assumed that everybody went through a normal nomination process that I went through.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I assume there was a deadline for nominations.

ALAN HASELDEN: There was. Yes, there was.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: So your nomination was in; there's a deadline.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, exactly.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The idea that it could just be given to people who hadn't even nominated, would that be outside the rules as you understand them in the way the Liberal Party operates?

ALAN HASELDEN: I don't know. The Liberal Party constitution, like all constitutions, is a massive document. I'm familiar with sections of it but not all of it, so I don't know.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: The other thing this document says—and I won't name the individual candidates:

It should be noted that proposed candidates [1 and 2]—
they're named in this electronic ballot—
above have not been vetted.

Again, I would have thought that was a usual process—to vet the candidates before they're voted in—

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: —particularly over sitting councillors.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Were you aware that the candidates who replaced you had not been vetted by the party?

ALAN HASELDEN: No. Again, that's news to me today. No, I didn't know that. I mean, we were advised that our nominations would be scrutinised by an independent organisation. I think, from memory, it may have even been an American domiciled organisation that would vet the veracity of our nominations.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So you had been vetted. You had nominated. You had been vetted.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: In this preselection process.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I might just put one other element of this to you. In relation to the endorsement of local government candidates for The Hills, the electronic ballot states:

The State President has been advised that there is now an agreed position with respect to selecting and endorsing candidates to contest the 2021 local government elections in The Hills local government area.

To your knowledge, was there an agreed position? Who agreed?

ALAN HASELDEN: That was my assumption, that there'd been an agreement at, if I could use the term, the highest levels of the New South Wales branch of the Liberal Party.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, but you hadn't agreed. You were still nominating and hopeful. At no point did you withdraw.

ALAN HASELDEN: Oh, no—not at all.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So it had been agreed by someone. Can you give us any guidance? We will obviously pursue this elsewhere but, listening to that now, can you tell us who you think may have agreed to this?

ALAN HASELDEN: Look, I think it was State Executive—that's a body in the Liberal Party that I've never nominated for, never been part of, and the State Director—sorry, the State Director and probably the State President. But, as I said earlier, because this was happening at a late hour, I had accepted this. The term I used then was a fait accompli. I wasn't slashing my wrists over this.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes. You seem remarkably at peace with it so far—

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: —which is very good. That's a good decision; a good life decision, perhaps.

ALAN HASELDEN: Well, it's a good life decision.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: But, in summary, you lived here.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You nominated. You were vetted.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: But other candidates didn't live there, didn't nominate, weren't vetted, but they were selected.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Is that a fair summary of the situation?

ALAN HASELDEN: I think so; yes, I think so. From what you've said to me today, yes, that's a fair summary of things.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: And you knew that at least one candidate didn't live there, but you didn't know until now—

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: —years later, that others didn't nominate, weren't vetted.

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I didn't know that. I'd also add, just in relation to my own ward, that not only was one of the candidates not domiciled in the ward but one of the other candidates lived in another suburb in The Hills local government area, but outside East Ward. I know I found that a little puzzling as well because, as I think everybody in this room knows, local government is about community politics. It's about community.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes. Thank you. This is obviously a big change in the ticket with little explanation. That's how it sounds to me when I hear you describe what happened.

ALAN HASELDEN: Fair summary.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Who did you hold responsible? Who was driving this process?

ALAN HASELDEN: As I indicated earlier, this body that we know as the State Executive, the State Director and the State party President, I suppose they were the individuals who ultimately rubberstamped this arrangement, but other than the State President, who I knew pretty well over the years, I didn't know the State Director. I couldn't recite the names of people on State Executive then and I couldn't—well, I probably could with maybe one exception but I certainly couldn't now. So I've never immersed myself in the party structure at that level, deliberately.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, but you felt perhaps that was part of the explanation for why, in your case, this change happened, when you look back.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes. I suppose I'd become not so much a victim but I'd become a by-product of arrangements that were utterly outside my control.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can I just ask on that, who was the one exception that you would name that you knew?

ALAN HASELDEN: Well, I know that Councillor Byrne was on State Executive for our time, but I don't think she was on State Executive at the time this was arranged. In fact, I'm fairly sure she wasn't. There was former Councillor Jefferies, but he goes back to my first term in 2012. He was on State Executive for a while as well. But, other than that, I didn't know anybody personally.

The CHAIR: In the immediate period when it became obvious what had happened and that you weren't on there, did you get calls from members of the Liberal Executive—

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The CHAIR: —saying, "Sorry, mate. You've missed out", or—

ALAN HASELDEN: No, no—not at all.

The CHAIR: Okay.

ALAN HASELDEN: As the process dragged on—and I'm just trying to recall when it might have been—it was clear we were running out of time for the normal preselection process, so I called the party's State President at the time to just express my dismay at what was happening and what I saw was a denial of the democratic processes which underpinned everything in this country. He was understanding, he was sympathetic, but it was quite clear that there were things moving beyond his domain that were influencing all of this. So it was a very inconsequential conversation.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The public reason for no preselection was the so-called running out of time. Were you aware, though, that at the same time the preselection for Hornsby council just right next door was going ahead?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, I was.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Was that issue raised, not necessarily by you but by others in your team, in terms of, "Why is it that Hornsby is able to do this but there's some perceived non-reason for us not being able to run it in The Hills?"

ALAN HASELDEN: I read Councillor Byrne's transcript the other day and I think she made reference to that. But, had she not made reference to that, it was again something that had just slipped my mind in the intervening period.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sure.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: One of the things Councillor Byrne put when she appeared at the inquiry was that she felt one of the reasons, one of the motives, for the change had been that she certainly was perceived as not as friendly to development as others might have been. Is that something you feel, either at the time or as you look back, that that may have been a motive here?

ALAN HASELDEN: I didn't feel that at the time. I felt that there were, in terms of the tribalism that comes from factional disputes—and I mean *The Sydney Morning Herald* today's got lots of stuff about that very topic—I felt that they were the underlying issues for this. I think the issue of development-pro or anti-development didn't cross my mind. It wasn't in my perception of things. From a personal point of view, and I said this publicly in my preselection, I was in general terms pro-development. I believe in economic advancement. I believe in the rights of the individual, of free enterprise, so I had never nailed myself into a corner where that was less than clear.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes. You say that was your view at the time. Looking back from now, particularly after the revelations had been put on the floor of the Chamber—the suggestions by Liberal MP Ray Williams that there may have been more going on—do you now have concerns that there may have been more afoot?

ALAN HASELDEN: I do, but I was floored at the accusation. I've said to a number of people—colleagues, acquaintances, family—that over my nine years on The Hills Shire Council I was not aware even remotely of any impropriety on the part of council officers or councillors, so I was completely surprised at the release of the member for Castle Hill's claim under parliamentary privilege.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: To be fair, I don't think that statement did suggest there was impropriety by council officers or by councillors in your time. I think that's consistent with—

ALAN HASELDEN: Well, it was simply a very broad assertion that something was not right.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Did you feel or do you feel, looking back, that it may have been the case that something was not right?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, when this parliamentary inquiry first raised its head—and even before that with the *Four Corners* program, when *Four Corners* approached me, I said to them at the time, "Look, I don't think there's a smoking gun here, personally. I'm not sure that I can contribute or help. I don't want to waste anybody's time." In the terms of council that I was party to, we continually approved very significant developments in The Hills Shire. There was never a suggestion, in my view, that we were anti-development. Of course we disagreed on developments for a variety of reasons, but there was no overarching sense—there was no overarching direction—that we were a bunch of nimbys, to use that hackneyed term.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, except that looking at the more recent developments, since that time or around the time of this preselection, do you have concerns about the evidence that's now been given to this Committee where a businessman says he was approached for a significant amount of money, \$50,000, to impact politically—to stack branches was the view that was put to us—in your local area to change the political complexion of your local area? Were you aware of that?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I wasn't. Again, it was a little like the parliamentary revelation. I was flabbergasted at that—disappointed, surprised.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Can you think of any reason why the witness we had, who I have to say appeared very credible—

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I can't.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Like you, he came and said what he knew and said what he didn't know.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, he's under oath, as I am. No, there's no reason for me to doubt what he said.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, and there's no reason why you believe the Committee should discount that evidence?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Or any motive he might have to—

ALAN HASELDEN: No, not at all. It's up to the Committee to assess the importance of that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: There's some more general discussion about the political activity in this area, and I'm just interested in whether you do or do not know anything about this. Are you aware of a group who refer to themselves as the Reformers?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So that wasn't a name that was familiar to you?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I saw that name the other day in, I think, Councillor Byrne's submission. No, I wasn't aware of that group.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: So you're not aware of activities associated with this group?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You wouldn't be able to name individuals associated with this group?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: And you are not aware of a dossier containing details of their methods and their activities—including dates, times and locations of their meetings—which has now been tabled?

ALAN HASELDEN: No. I would add, returning to what I said earlier, that because I have never aligned myself with a particular faction in the party, it's conceivable that some of the things which are now being aired were just things that I wasn't involved with.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Yes, understood.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You've made it fairly clear, in fact, that part of your own personal—I don't say "brand" but I suppose values, in terms of your participation as a councillor, was very much that you're not factional. You're a proud member of the Liberal Party—not factional, not interested in factional games.

ALAN HASELDEN: That's right, yes, and I also believed in the integrity of individuals. Whereas they may publicly say that they are aligned with a particular faction, when the secret ballot is—and that's why the secret ballot is such a powerful thing. The only reason I was elected in 2012, or preselected in 2012, was because the factional machinery obviously didn't work when people made their own private assessments of who they thought Alan Haselden was and what he might be able to contribute for the party to the local community through council.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Based on that, do you think the desire to not have a preselection was because, as you said, it just wouldn't guarantee the outcome that perhaps some of those factional players were looking for? If you were ready to front up to a ballot—

ALAN HASELDEN: I'm sure that's the case. I've said that to people over the years, based on my own experience: Don't believe people when they say they've got the numbers. If it's a secret ballot—I can see I'm preaching to the choir here.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That's very good advice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Only ever believe the people who say they won't vote for you; that has been my experience.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I might just turn to one other matter to see if you can assist. We have sought one of those councillors who has replaced you to give evidence to the Committee, Councillor Virginia Ellis. She hasn't been sighted by her council colleagues or heard from since 10 February.

ALAN HASELDEN: So I see.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Do you have any clues as to where the Committee might find Councillor Virginia Ellis, in order to—

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I listened to a transcript from Ray Hadley's show yesterday, and he seemed to be able to—that's all I know. I don't recall ever meeting Virginia Ellis personally; I may have at a function, but I don't remember.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: But you couldn't give us any direction about where to find her?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You haven't heard from her?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, sorry. No, I haven't.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You're not aware of anyone who's heard from her in general?

ALAN HASELDEN: No.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Can you give us any guidance about the other witnesses who have also been very hard to find?

ALAN HASELDEN: Unfortunately I can't. No, honestly, I can't. I have no idea where they are.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You've turned up here to give evidence, and you've told us what you do and don't know. Unlike you, they haven't. Are you aware of any reason that these witnesses have not appeared at this inquiry?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I'm not. Going back to the *Four Corners* program which the ABC did, I was surprised that I was the only one of the former councillors that was prepared to make a contribution to that program. Equally, I'm surprised that none of my former colleagues have elected to appear in front of the Committee. I mean, I can't see that there's anything—I think that what the Committee is doing is the appropriate thing to do. I don't have anything personally to hide, and I don't believe any of them have.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: To be fair to some of your former colleagues, the Committee hasn't invited all of them. I should place that on the record. But given you had spoken out publicly, I think that was the reason for the invitation.

ALAN HASELDEN: Okay, I understand.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I think that's important just to place on the record.

ALAN HASELDEN: Right, I understand.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: We have sought these other witnesses—in fact, there's an attempt to summons them—and there is no sign of them at all. Can you give us any clue about what these people have to hide?

ALAN HASELDEN: No, I can't. I can give you no more indication than any other person on the street. I have no idea as to what their activities are, what their motives are. I don't know anything about them, sorry.

The CHAIR: Mr Haselden, did you meet Jean Nassif in your role as a councillor?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, I did.

The CHAIR: On a number of occasions, or was it—

ALAN HASELDEN: No, just once. I've thought a bit about this, going back to the *Four Corners* issue, because it wasn't a meeting that I recorded. I'm pretty sure it was when I was deputy mayor in that year of 2018-19. I'm also fairly sure that it was because Councillor Byrne, who was mayor at the time, had called me and said, "Can

you meet Mr Nassif?" I attended a meeting in one of council's committee rooms with Mr Nassif and one of his senior executives, whose name escapes me. He was in a senior role.

I remember the discussion, really, for two things. First of all, it was an extraordinary portrayal of what Toplace were envisaging, literally within 800 metres of where I live in West Pennant Hills. Ostensibly, the purpose of the meeting was to have Councillor Byrne and I express an opinion as to which of these three architectural styles was the most appropriate or most favoured. Until that point, we were aware that Toplace were acquiring lots of land along Castle Hill Road. I suppose, loosely, I was aware that there were some large things proposed, but it was when I saw these drawings that the magnitude of what was proposed staggered me.

I can't remember; I think they were of the order of 15 or 20 storeys. These were colossal structures, literally. And I said at the time, "This is like creating a small town in the middle of nowhere". There were 6,000 people going to be living here, just simply because the Cherrybrook metro was there—and that's to say nothing of the Landcom development on the other side of the road, which was far more modest. I remember that distinctly, that that was one aspect of the meeting. The other aspect of the meeting which I vividly remember—because I'd been in senior management over the years—was the way Mr Nassif took over from the other fellow. I was a little embarrassed for him.

The CHAIR: For the other fellow?

ALAN HASELDEN: For the other fellow.

The CHAIR: I see. Because he's very boisterous and overbearing?

ALAN HASELDEN: He's an enthusiastic fellow—a good, enthusiastic entrepreneur. But that's the only time. The meeting probably went for between half an hour and an hour. There was nothing in that meeting that was untoward. As I said, there were two things that surprised me, but nothing else surprised me in the meeting.

The CHAIR: Did Mr Nassif, in his verbose way—was it all on the assumption that this was going to happen? This was the development that he was—

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, he was pretty bullish about the whole thing, and I just sat there like the proverbial stunned mullet, I think. I knew that there was large-scale development proposed and I had been party to discussions about similar sorts of developments in Norwest Business Park, Bella Vista and around that area. But to me this was a very, very impactful meeting. It was a wow moment: Wow, this is serious stuff here.

The CHAIR: Did you provide him what you thought your views might be in terms of the palatability of that proposal, in terms of your local government, your council?

ALAN HASELDEN: I don't recall doing that. I think I'd gone into the discussion with an open mind because this was simply a show-and-tell thing. And I think, thinking back, I was probably so stunned at the enormity of what I was seeing—and I was mindful of the fact that we're not talking next year. These projects take five, 10 or even 15 years to develop. But, no, I don't recall telling Mr Nassif and his colleague that this was unacceptable. I was probably ambivalent about it. I do remember saying that I thought, of the three architectural proposals that were put forward, one in particular just looked nicer architecturally. But that's all.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You were stunned at the meeting about how big it was. As you were thinking about it going into the future after that, did you have a view about how it was going to meet the controls that were currently in place? Was it obvious that this was outside the current controls? Or did you have thoughts about how council was going to manage such a large development that was being proposed?

ALAN HASELDEN: I understand where you're coming from. Mr Edgar, in his submission, made a number of comments about the integrity of his planning staff, which I run unreservedly echo.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: And can I say I'm making zero allegations.

ALAN HASELDEN: I realise that. I was confident that whatever any developer was going to put around the Cherrybrook metro station within The Hills Shire would be subject to the same sorts of appraisal, scrutiny, criticism and observation that all similar developments would have. So I wasn't concerned about that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Just on that description of the meeting that you've just given, you've said that this was serious stuff. You're really referring there to the scale of the development here.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thousands of apartments.

ALAN HASELDEN: That's right.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: You've already characterised yourself as not anti-development.

ALAN HASELDEN: No, not at all.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: But this was on another scale to what you had looked at or considered or supported in the past.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, it certainly was.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: And, of course, thousands of apartments means a significant amount of money if this was approved.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, of course—serious amounts of money. It's a very, very large area—the properties that Toplace now own along Castle Hill Road. I don't know how many hectares it is, but it's very substantial. It's a substantial investment.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: It is a substantial investment. The stakes are high for Toplace.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, they are. The other issue, on the southern side of Castle Hill Road, is that of the geotechnical issues. There is some land instability in that area, as there is in other parts of The Hills Shire, so for any of that land to be developed substantially there has to be a significant amount of preliminary civil engineering. So to offset that cost—and we've aired this argument not infrequently within council in my time—height is pretty much a given. As to how much height, that's a question of economics.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Understood. Thank you.

The CHAIR: After the news of your receiving of the email that you hadn't been successful, did you and your colleagues, the other "unsuccessfuls"—sorry to put it that way, but perhaps you were successful in other ways—then collaborate? Did you have a conversation with those other councillors and the former mayor about what had happened, who was responsible and how? We've talked about how you've proffered your views and your understanding. Did you then have a conversation and hear others' views?

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, to the extent that there was a broad agreement that we shared the same sentiments that we were the by-product of a factional arrangement within the party. In fact, a few of us got together and had dinner as sort of a post-reflection dinner. But even at that dinner, which was at a hotel in Norwest, we talked about issues other than politics and council as much as anything else. We'd been a reasonably collegiate bunch of people. Some were more factionalised than I was, but it was done. There was no point in beating your breast about this sort of thing.

The CHAIR: Did you have any views on the former mayor running as an independent?

ALAN HASELDEN: I thought it was brave and perhaps a little foolish, because in the preceding election we'd had a councillor who had been not endorsed by the party through the normal processes who decided he would take the party machine on and run as an independent. And I think he ran under the banner of—I can't remember what the political banner was. But he acquired about 14 per cent of the vote, I think, which was significant but nowhere near enough to assure him under the process. It's very difficult, I think, for independents in local government to stand if there is a party machine standing as well.

The CHAIR: And it sounds like, perhaps, that is particularly so in The Hills Shire as well.

ALAN HASELDEN: I think so. As hard as I tried to work when I was on council, I could walk through Castle Mall after nine years on council and I don't believe many people would recognise me. I wouldn't stand as an independent. I think it's folly, at this stage.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I just want to go back to one of the references you made. You were talking about the discussion you'd had about the preselection—the discussion on the phone with the president that you said was, in the end, not consequential. I took that you were referring to Liberal president Philip Ruddock.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, correct.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I just wanted to clarify who that was.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for attending. There have been no questions for you to take on notice.

ALAN HASELDEN: I'm sorry I haven't been very helpful.

The CHAIR: You've been very helpful. If committee members do have additional questions for you, you will be contacted and the answers to those are to be returned within three days. But the secretariat would be in contact with you.

ALAN HASELDEN: Yes, that's fine.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your cooperation and willingness.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 10:59.