

Hunters Hill Council: 'We Will Never Give Up'

Clr Sheil Challenges Baird

BY OUR CIVIC ROUNDSMAN

Hunters Hill Council Dr Meredith Sheil defied a conference hall full of faceless Liberal Party men and women to confront dictator Premier Mike Baird last week.

Councillor Sheil was among dozens of Save Hunters Hill supporters who attended this week's Local Government Conference in Wollongong where she sought - and won - a promise from Baird to discuss the proposed forced merger of Hunters Hill and Lane Cove into Ryde.

"He told the Conference, in front of the media, he would organise a meeting on Hunters Hill and I don't know if he'll back out of his commitment or not, but he sounded genuine," Dr Sheil told *The Weekly Times*.

"We want that meeting held in Hunters Hill and we want him to meet us without his political advisers", Clr Sheil said.

Hunters Hill Clr Peter Astridge won a similar commitment from Local Government Minister Paul Toole.

Until Councillor Sheil's challenge, the Conference had been dominated by Liberal Party apparatchiks with pre-prepared questions on forced mergers reminiscent of the Peoples Rally's organised by North Korean dictator Kim Jong-Il.

The comparison is not lost on Hunters Hill's Clr Peter Astridge.

"When Meredith Sheil spoke I noticed at least four tall, solidly built guys in suits heckling her," he said.

"It was very, very similar to North Korea, in my opinion."

Dr Sheil agreed.

"Baird has been completely dogmatic on every level and he's been wrong on every decision he's made, which have been made behind the scenes," she said.

"And what they (Baird's Cabinet) are doing to Hunters Hill is wrong on every level, social, cultural and economic.

"That is why I was inspired to speak out at the Conference because I wanted to test him out, that's why I stood up to him."

Should Baird front the people of Hunters Hill Dr Sheil and Clr Astridge hope he will understand the "enormous dissatisfaction" the proposed forced merger with Ryde has caused and the risk it poses to Hunters Hill's heritage, character and sense of place.

"We'll be represented on a mega council by one councillor out of twelve and we want him to understand that Hunters Hill is such a special place that it

will not benefit us, or Ryde, to be merged," Dr Sheil said.

The Save Hunters Hill Municipality Coalition was also at the Conference and made its anger known.

"We did give Baird a hard time, there were hundreds of people outside the conference who supported us," Coalition spokesman Phil Jenkyn said.

"We applauded Meredith Sheil for her courage to stand up to Baird, who just doesn't seem to get it."

Baird's speech indicated he is only willing to drop the dogma when it impacts on dogs.

"We've gone through a difficult period, but a period that I believe we're going to come out stronger," he said of the forced mergers.

"Whether there be an opportunity to get to the position 100 per cent agreeing, I don't think we'll get there but I certainly believe we're united in trying to make the best possible difference to every ratepayer that we have the privilege to represent."

"His speech is only what I could describe as deliberate lies," Mr Jenkyn said.

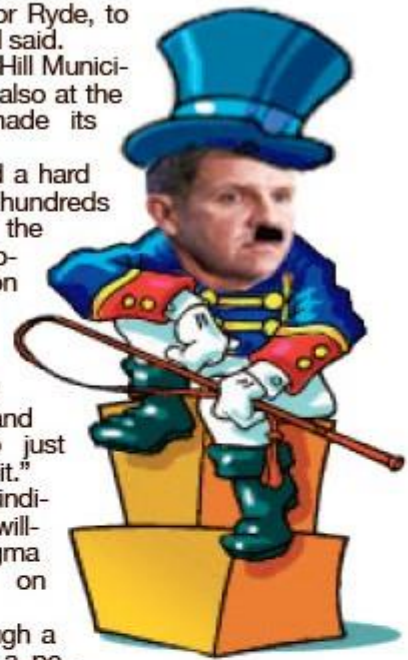
"I've never seen a government or a Premier perform worse."

Another outspoken opponent was Shellharbour Mayor Marianne Saliba whose council is also earmarked to be abolished.

Her heartland covers an area known for its love of greyhound racing and its famous "Dapto Dogs" culture.

"Baird said last week that he hadn't been listening to community and said he's now listening, well I hope he's listening loud and clear to the people of the Illawarra," she said.

There was also opposition from people in Woollahra who support their Mayor Toni Zeltzer and the council's legal challenge to a forced merger with Waverley Council, led by pro-merger Liberal Mayor Sally Betts.



Protesters at Conference



Save Hunters Hill Municipality Coalition spokesman Phil Jenkyn blasts the Baird dictatorship on television at last week's Local Government Conference in Wollongong. TWT on-the-spot PHOTO