

Brave Lane Cove councillor defies his Liberal mates to take Baird to court

BY OUR CIVIC ROUNDSMAN

Lane Cove Council voted five to four on Friday to take the Baird Government to court over its proposed forced merger of the municipality with neighbouring Hunters Hill and Ryde.

The deadlocked vote was broken by Liberal Cllr Scott Bennison who defied his own party block to vote for the legal action, expected to total around \$63,000.

The legal action will challenge the process and procedure used by the Baird Government's forced merger regime now widely accepted to be deeply flawed and undemocratic.

In an exclusive interview with The Weekly Times, Cllr Bennison revealed why he voted with Lane Cove's independents - against his Liberal Party mates - who only favoured giving in principle support to legal action being taken by Hunters Hill Council.

"To go against my party and my own colleagues was not a decision I took lightly but representing the best interests of Lane Cove is what I was elected to do" he said.

"I have acted according to my conscience because I can't see any merit in what the government is trying to do or the way it is doing it.

"I'm aware of the cost involved but at this stage it is only \$1.50 per ratepayer and I believe this is what our residents want their elected representatives to do".

Neither of the two motions on Friday were to back the Baird dictatorship and Lane Cove stands united in its decision to oppose forced mergers.

Councillor Bennison declined to confirm or deny if he was under pressure from local Liberal branches to vote along party lines.

He nonetheless revealed that one of the issues that weighed heavily on his

conscience is his loyalty and support for Aboriginal people, who have been disenfranchised by the forced merger process.

"I'm respectful of Aboriginal people and you can't just tumble into other people's land without consulting them, the way this government has" he said.

"Aboriginal people have not been consulted or even mentioned in the reports used by this government and this is an insult to our Cameraygal People and to the Dhurug People in neighbouring Ryde.

"This is one significant area where the (forced merger) process is flawed.

"In fact I would go further than legal action and demand a plebiscite".

Councillor Bennison's action has been applauded as courageous by the Save Hunters Hill Municipality Coalition.

"This is an outstanding effort by Scott and a sensible decision", Coalition spokesman Phil Jenkyn said.

"To put the community before one's own political party takes courage and has to be commended by anyone who values local democracy and honesty in government.

"We strongly support Scott's call for a plebiscite, which has also made by some Waverley councillors and it should be held when the Federal Election is held and the Federal Government should pay for it".