

Letter to the The Weekly Times Editor from Cllr Meredith Sheil



Smaller Councils can be better

Dear Sir,

Last Thursday I presented the opinion to the Premier that the concept that “bigger councils are better” may be his vision, but it is not shared by the majority of the community and is violently opposed by many.

Although ideologically appealing from an economic standpoint there is little if any evidence that “bigger councils are better” in the real word situation.

Rather, evidence shows that smaller councils can be highly efficient and effective and offer better community representation and can achieve the same efficiencies of scale through partnering with neighbouring councils in regional organisations (ROCs).

Most importantly the “bigger is better” ideology ignores the single most important role of councils to communities – that of controlling the “look and feel” – the development and character of their local areas.

The councils that do this well, have strong community support.

This is of fundamental importance to Hunters Hill.

Hunters Hill has a very unique character that has come about through 160 years of having a small highly representative local council that has prioritised the preservation of heritage and character.

In forcing his “bigger is better” vision on Hunters Hill the Premier is effectively asking Hunters Hill Community to hand over the control of the look and feel and future development of Hunters Hill to our much bigger neighbour Ryde Council.

Hunters Hill would only have one representative on the new council who would be outvoted on any and all decision making regarding character and development in Hunters Hill.

Ryde council currently does not prioritise heritage and preservation, and in fact believes that this gets in the way of growth.

The new council would therefore have the power to re-zone large areas of Hunters Hill for redevelopment – and Hunters Hill residents representative would only have one vote.

For this reason, maintaining the independence of Hunters Hill is something highly valued by many local residents and something they will fight to the end to protect.

I presented the opinion, that in continuing to forcing his “big councils are better vision” on communities that do not share his vision, he was cementing the view that he was arrogant, dictatorial, “not listening” and bulldozing his way over community concerns.

I presented the opinion that the forced council merger agenda was the issue at the core of the Premiers plummeting popularity, and the Governments catastrophic loss of support that was recently evident at the by-election in Orange.

In forcing this issue, he has effectively defined his brand as “arrogant”, “dictatorial”, “not listening”, “trampling community concerns” – *right across NSW*.

This perception has been further cemented by similar actions of the Government such the bulldozing of swathes of heritage homes in Haberfield, the wholesale felling of the Anzac trees for light rail, and for Westconnex, just to name a few.

The cumulative effect is that the Government is being experienced by people as trampling and bulldozing it’s way through their homes, their environment, where they live, their local communities – stripping away the things important to them – disempowering them... There has been no pausing, no listening, no compromising, no finding better ways forward.

We talked of better alternatives for improving the sustainability and cost efficiencies of councils without mergers – including through better support and enabling of the regional Organisation of Councils that already exist for this purpose.

I express the opinion that unless there is wholesale change in approach and the Government does learn to “push pause”, listen, compromise and find better ways forward – the people who elected the Government to power are unlikely to do so again.

And they will find that many – even previous rusted-on heart-land supporters, will actively campaign to kick them out – as was witnessed in Orange.

I do thank and congratulate the Premier for holding the meeting to listen to our points of view.

I encourage him to meet with other Mayors, councillors and community groups that are opposing mergers to better understand the depth of community opposition to this process, and the reasons for it and discuss and consider alternative ways forward.

I commend strengthening the existing ROCs as the method to achieve this on the North Shore.

Clr Meredith Sheil

Hunters Hill Council

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