

'Growing push' to withdraw Liberal brand from local councils

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The Liberal Party would stop running candidates in NSW council elections under an idea increasingly in favour within party leadership.

Sources have confirmed the idea is being considered ahead of council elections to be held in 2020, but is not yet the subject of any formal motion or agenda item.



Former mayor of Hurstville Con Hindi. Photo: Simon Alekna

The Liberal Party already does not run candidates across a host of council areas and, historically, has housed a strong view party politics should be kept out of local government.

But the Liberal Party has run candidates in a growing number of council areas in recent years. At that same time, that involvement has entangled it in numerous local scandals.

There has, for instance, been the involvement of Liberal (and Labor) councillors in the rampant developer culture at the former Auburn Council, the involvement of Liberal (and Labor) councillors in developments subject to a corruption inquiry

relating to the former Canterbury Council, as well as the travails of former Hurstville mayor Con Hindi.

On Tuesday, the lead image on television news bulletins was not of Treasurer Dominic Perrottet's second state budget, but of a brawl outside an Arncliffe cafe ahead of a Bayside Council Liberal local government committee meeting.



The brawl erupted outside a cafe in Arncliffe. Photo: Channel 7

Momentum for withdrawing the party from formal involvement in local politics has been building for the past couple of years. The idea enjoys the support of leaders in the party's hard right faction, as well as the dominant moderate grouping.

"The days of party politics in local government are numbered," said one source.

Another said: "People are saying we've got to re-evaluate it, because we are hitting hurdle after hurdle with our local government people.

"It's not a formal agenda item, but there is a growing push."

The idea would face strong internal resistance. "The argument that we shouldn't have councillors is all about self-interest," said one source opposed to the idea. This source said withdrawing from local government would mean abandoning west and south-west Sydney to Labor and the Greens.

Endorsing candidates in council elections is useful in political organisation and training, as well as encouraging party involvement in branches. Withdrawing Liberal endorsement would also hurt the ability of some to compete against Labor and Liberal candidates.

But an argument against party involvement is that council decisions – determining the scale of local development, the shape of community services – should not be complicated by party-political manoeuvring. Another argument is simply that council scandals have damaged the Liberal brand.

Former prime minister John Howard has opposed party involvement in local politics. A spokesman said his views had not changed.

“The former prime minister has always opposed the Liberal Party endorsing candidates in local government elections except in very special circumstances, such as the Brisbane City Council,” the spokesman said.

Another factor bearing on the push for change is the split within the moderate faction. Joe Tannous, a lobbyist and former Strathfield councillor, has shifted from the dominant faction led by member for Hornsby Matt Kean. Mr Tannous is close to a number of Liberal MPs and councillors across western and southern Sydney.

The next NSW council elections are not until 2020. However, the timing of federal and state elections within the next 12 months means that if the Liberal Party were to withdraw from local government it would need to begin the process soon or face a rush to do so ahead of the 2020 polls.

One option would be to be more selective about where the party endorses candidates. Another would be to stop running candidates across the board.

In areas where the Liberal Party does not stand candidates, Liberal-aligned locals run as independents. The current president of the NSW Liberal Party, Phillip Ruddock, is also the mayor of Hornsby.

<https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/growing-push-to-withdraw-liberal-brand-from-local-councils-20180622-p4zn63.html>