

Sally Betts: the Waverley mayor who rules Sydney's east

SMH March 18, 2016
Anne Davies



Member for Coogee Bruce Notley Smith, left, with Mayor of Waverley, Cr Sally Betts and Member for Wentworth, the Hon Malcolm Turnbull at the opening of the Mill Hill Early Education Centre located in Bondi Junction. Photo: Bruce Notley-Smith Member for Coogee website

At Liberal party functions in his seat of Wentworth in Sydney's east, Malcolm Turnbull is fond of introducing his staff member, Sally Betts as the most powerful person in Sydney's east. It usually gets a chuckle, particularly since he became Prime Minister.

Ms Betts is the grandmotherly figure who works two days a week in his electorate office while also serving as Waverley Council's mayor.

But while there may be a just a little hyperbole in Mr Turnbull's description, Cr Betts is not your usual municipal mayor.

Ms Betts has over the last 12 months manoeuvred herself, through her advocacy of council mergers in the eastern suburbs into the position where she is virtually unassailable for the new mega council mayor's position. She is also Mr Turnbull's eyes and ears on the numbers in the Liberal party branches.

She has been influential in state pre-selections such as that of Bruce Notley-Smith, and she is integrally involved in the machinations within the Liberal party in the east, often listed as the point of contact for fundraisers.



Polarising figure: Waverley Council's mayor Sally Betts has been dubbed "the most powerful person in Sydney's east".

But within Liberal party circles in the east, Cr Betts is a polarising figure. Some speak fondly of her and her political acumen. Others fear her, or even despise her.

What's clear is that through a combination of hard work and getting close to the powerful she has leveraged her own power to become one of the most powerful figures in Sydney.

Most in the Liberal Party and even her colleagues in Labor, see Cr Betts' inexorable rise as a foregone conclusion, when the elections are held for the new mega council — probably sometime after September.

If Betts had not got on board with the Baird government's amalgamations push, the state government would have faced a solid wall of opposition from Liberal councils. Instead Betts and her Liberal counterpart in Randwick offered the first chink in council resistance, giving the state government cause to claim the councils were divided on the issue.

While Cr Betts initially claimed to be on side with the community opposition to mergers, she quickly declared mergers an unstoppable train.

"We voted to merge because we believe we need to take control of our future and be part of the decision-making process," she said after Waverley agreed to merge with Randwick.

"If the amalgamation does proceed, I would certainly give consideration to making myself available as a candidate for mayor of the amalgamated council," Cr Betts said in a written statement to Fairfax Media, sent via her lawyers.

The position as Eastern Suburbs mayor will rival that of Clover Moore at the City of Sydney. The new council will cover a population of more than 260,000, roughly the same as City of Sydney. But it will have a very wealthy cohort of ratepayers and include the lion's share of Sydney's movers and shakers.

In a deft political move, Cr Betts also engineered the option that was most likely to cement her power base – an eastern suburbs council – rather than the option put forward in an independent report on amalgamation for a larger "global city" council incorporating the City

of Sydney and Botany with Randwick, Waverley and Woollahra. This would have pitted her against Clover Moore.

It is likely – though not certain – that the new council will be controlled by the Liberal Party, particularly if Woollahra is forced into the mix.

So who is Cr Betts?

Arriving as an immigrant from South Africa in 1974, Ms Betts settled in the eastern suburbs and worked in the tourism industry before deciding to join the Liberal Party in 1983. According to her website, she wanted to make a contribution to her new home and became integrally involved with the Liberals. Her first tilt at office was for the state seat of Waverley in 1988, which was unsuccessful. After that she set her sights on local government.

As one of the longest standing councillors she rules the roost among the Liberals. The only time Labor has held the mayoralty in the eight years was for one year in 2011-12, when Cr Bett's deputy, Kerry Sloan resigned and crossed the floor.

The falling out between the two women is deep and bitter, prompted, according to Ms Sloan, by Cr Betts refusing to listen to community concerns about hotel opening hours in Bondi Junction. More on that later.

Ms Betts' ability to "move on" from people, is frequently mentioned. Ms Betts secured power over the eight years by encouraging conservative independents like Miriam Guttman-Jones to run, effectively giving the Liberals the edge over Labor.

Since a by-election in 2013, the Liberals now have an outright majority and Ms Betts has no need of independent support. It too has left a bitter taste.

Others cite Betts' forthrightness as the reason behind the deep divisions in council.

"Outside of council she and I have a very polite and civilised relationship," says John Wakefield, the most senior Labor councillor on Waverley council.

"In council she is pig-headed, arrogant and vindictive," he said. "Her attacks on people who she believes have slighted her are extreme. Members of the public have been branded 'a rentacrowd' and 'a rabble'."

There is also bad blood with neighbouring mayors. Toni Zeltzer, the Liberal mayor of Woollahra, is no fan. She is deeply worried about what she sees as the more pro-development stance of Betts' council, evident in Bondi Junction, and what she will bring to Woollahra and Paddington, one of the largest neighbourhoods of well-preserved terrace houses in the world.

"The cultural differences, were evident during the amalgamation debate, where the Liberal mayors of Waverley and Randwick called meetings early in the morning on the weekends to vote on the amalgamation proposals, says Cr Zeltzer.

"Woollahra prides itself in being transparent, accessible and inclusive which is not how one would describe the timing of meetings held by Waverley and Randwick at the ungodly hours of 9.30am on Sunday and 7am on Saturday."

For all that, Betts is an effective political operator whose "can do" attitude seems to appeal to small and large property owners alike. Mr Notley Smith, the local state representative and a

former Randwick mayor, said she's a hardworking, solid progressive, who has great leadership skills.

"She's led the Liberals and been an exemplary mayor," he says. "Yes, she has her critics but they are mainly Labor and the Greens."

Under Betts, the Liberals have increased their majority. The council has embraced development in Bondi Junction and other shopping centres while home owners in Waverley face far less onerous conditions on development compared to neighbouring Woollahra.

The council has also embraced the use of voluntary planning agreements with developers, in which developers agree to make contributions to the council in return for additional floor space.

Such agreements have been controversial with residents because they involve the council weighing its own financial interests against those of local residents, who see them as embodying a conflict of interest.

For instance, the Forum Building in Bondi Junction was allowed to build additional units and exceed the height limits in return for a \$3 million payment to council under a VPA.

In her written answers to Fairfax Media, Ms Betts said: "Returning the council to financial sustainability and improving local infrastructure are probably one of my greatest achievements."

It is Cr Betts' perceived close relationships with some of the biggest developers and financial interests that causes the most consternation. The council has implemented a business forum to meet with local business and developers, on a regular basis.

In 2015, Cr Betts made headlines when she wrote a reference for Luke Lazarus, son of the family who owns two of the major pubs in Bondi Junction. Mr Lazarus has since been released after a successful appeal.

Cr Betts said she did so because "I am friends with Luke's grandmother and I provided the reference at her request."

"This issue has been debated at length and I have never been found to have acted other than properly."

But her closeness to the Lazarus family and its offshoot the Parras family – the owner of two hotels in Bondi Junction – is a constant source of criticism from her political opponents.

Cr Betts has supported additions to the hotels and extended trading hours to 5am for the Parras-owned hotels, despite resident concerns that Bondi Junction mall will be awash with drunks in the early hours, as they wait for the early opener to begin service.

Asked about her relationship with the family, Cr Betts acknowledged that she had held her 60th birthday at the Eastern Hotel "but added that she paid for it herself – and was not given any discount. I held my birthday party at the Eastern because I like it," she said. "I did not declare any gift to council because there was no gift to declare," she said.

Other business interests with whom she is close are developers, Allen Linz and Edvard Litver, owners of the Swiss Grand Hotel which has just been extensively redeveloped into the Bondi Pacific multi-use development.

Cr Wakefield said she recently initiated a fundamental change to the way Waverley licenses outdoor seating which will potentially benefit the Swiss Grand.

Instead of the tenant applying for outdoor seating, Waverley council has now decided to licence the developer, who will sub-licence to the tenant.

In contrast the precinct committees, representing residents, say they rarely see the mayor at resident meetings.

At the Western end of Oxford Street where a controversial tower development is proposed, precinct committee convener, Marcia McAdam said Cr Betts had attended only one meeting in 2015, and this was a meet-the-candidate session for the state election.

"Since then – no Cr Betts at meetings despite several times personally contacting her office inviting her to attend to meet with residents," said Ms McAdam.

"We know she is still very interested in her jewel in the crown known as Bondi Junction and the proposed Civic Precinct Centre, so residents are surprised she doesn't make the effort to meet with them."

Woollahra councillors receive rude shock

Just before Christmas, several Liberal Party branches in the eastern suburbs held their annual meetings. Anthony Marano, a Woollahra councillor and president of the Darling Point branch, simply assumed he would be re-elected as president.

As a Woollahra councillor he had taken the fight against council amalgamations up to the Baird government. Fellow councillor, Peter Cavanagh, in the Paddington branch also thought his would be a routine re-endorsement.

They were in for a rude shock. Cr Marano arrived to find that another branch member, Andrew Isaacs, had rallied his supporters and had the numbers. Mr Cavanagh was ousted by James Brown, the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull's son-in-law.

Shocked, the two men believe they were the victims of an organised campaign to remove them motivated by their opposition to plans to amalgamate Woollahra with Waverley and Randwick.

Several branch members told Fairfax Media they see the long hand of Waverley mayor, Sally Betts, a mover and shaker in the east, who also works part time in Malcolm Turnbull's office, behind the branch ructions. In her capacity as an electorate officer, Cr Betts has a unique insight into the Eastern Suburbs branches.

Others say there is nothing more to it than younger members wanting to get involved and that it was time for new, more active people in the branches to step up.

For her part, Cr Betts says allegations she was behind the changes are "untrue".

The conspiracy theorists also point to the changes at the Cooper Park branch as proof that someone is co-ordinating a coup with an eye to the local government elections some time after September 2016.

The long-time president retired and his anointed successor, Matthew Thompson, was beaten by Woollahra councillor, Katherine O'Regan. Even though Ms O'Regan's council is staunchly opposed to amalgamations, Ms O'Regan has been a less than enthusiastic member of the

"anti" campaign. She was the only Woollahra councillor not to sign an anti-amalgamation letter co-ordinated by Waverley councillor John Wakefield, branding it a political stunt.

There is a long way to go on council amalgamations, and the timetable could get longer if Woollahra challenges the mergers in court.

But if it does go ahead as planned, the three councillors in the new merged council from the Woollahra – of which two are likely to be Liberals – would be crucial to deciding if Ms Betts would become mayor. Having supporters in powerful positions in the branches would be a good start.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/sally-betts-the-waverley-mayor-who-rules-sydneys-east-20160316-gnkeav>