

# We need independents like Ted Mack more than ever

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One day in the early 1980s, a lady called North Sydney Council to complain. She'd been parked in her driveway. The council said to call the police; the police said to call the NRMA and the NRMA said to call the council. Finally, she called the mayor's office. "I'll be there in 10 minutes," said mayor Ted Mack. "Luckily," he reflects now, "I kept a rolling jack in the boot of my car."



*Ted Mack in 1993. As mayor, he was renowned for helping people fix plumbing, replace washers, put out the garbage and answering every letter with a personal visit.*

Ted Mack, one of Australia's most revered and beloved politicians, is dying. That by itself is sad – although, he drily notes, death does reduce your money worries. But there are bigger things at stake here too. As the world races headlong down the chute of "strong leadership", we should all hope that his life's work is not in vain, and that the slender thread of practical principle in Australian politics doesn't die with him.

Strong leadership, in the Trump-Putin-Erdogan-Howard-Abbott sense, is a furphy. I understand why people are drawn to apparent strength in times of trouble. That's natural. But brutality is not strength. Indeed, it is almost the opposite. Brutality betrays weakness. Strength is the capacity to resist brutality for the greater good.

Ted Mack did that consistently. His distinction, as the only Australian politician elected to three levels of government, is the more remarkable because he was a genuine independent: never a party stooge in neutral garb, never provisionally "independent" – until one side or other made him an unrefusable offer.



Illustration: Cathy Wilcox

This integrity – which led him to resign as mayor and state MP in 1988 in order not to qualify for the million-dollar political pension he thought excessive – is why, despite such success, he had money worries in the first place. Find another polly who'd do that. Many call themselves independent. Ted Mack was the real, incorruptible thing.

It may be naive to hope that the West Australian election shows this to be a lesson learnt. But, as fate would have it, the next test election is for Mack's old seat, North Shore, where independent Mosman councillor Carolyn Corrigan is a lead challenger to the much-loathed Coalition government.

And it's the same question facing this tiny microcosm that confronts world politics. Whom do we trust: "strong" but brutal leaders with closet links to Big Money? Or ordinary people of principle?

Mack was first elected as a North Sydney alderman in 1974, and as mayor in 1980, when he was deputy chief architect for the Housing Commission. It is tempting, now, from our brutalised present, to see his kind of idealistic, community-based, village-building independence as an era of forgotten innocence.

But that's illusory. Sydney was never innocent. Mack's mayoral predecessor was Dr Michael Fitzpatrick, a Liberal party officeholder and campaign adviser to then-premier Robert Askin. Mack, then a Public Works architect, was mobilised into politics by the Fitzpatrick administration's early 1970s approval of three high-rise towers near his house.

What Ted Mack's (and colleague Robyn Read's) North Sydney independents represented was the start of a fine minority tradition in Australian politics; one that we should struggle to protect.

To his first-ever mayoral council meeting, on October 14, 1980, Alderman Mack put four recommendations. One, that the mayoral Merc be sold – he would famously use his own, curvaceous Citroen instead – with funds going to a community bus. Two, that spare council land be made available for public housing. Three, that all council meetings be open to the public unless for compelling legal reasons (in fact, says Mack, not once during his eight years as mayor did council move into closed session, for any reason). And four, a series of dignifying and scale-preserving amendments to the residential flat code; a first step towards North Sydney's now-renowned "village feel".

These four smallish measures neatly foreshadow the principles that drove and shaped Mack's political career. Equality, efficiency, open government and urbanism, principles that many politicians mouth but few practise.

What endeared Mack to the people was his mix of altruism and groundedness. As a boy, he spent much time with his builder grandfather, acquiring a taste for making things, and making things happen. Even now he regards local government as the most important layer. Why? "Because you're actually doing things."

As mayor, he was renowned for helping people fix plumbing, replace washers, put out the garbage and answering every letter with a personal visit.

There were much bigger projects – Civic Park, which took the place of a high-rise development, a proposed hundred-acre parkland over the Warringah Expressway, and the council's office block behind Stanton Library, which rendered council independent and self-sufficient. And there were policies: North Sydney's first heritage study and conservation plans.

But "the best thing I ever did" says Mack now, was North Sydney Oval, where he personally positioned many of the 7000 trees and copying the seat design from public benches in Hyde Park. "Wendy [Mack] and I went there," he recalls, "found our favourite, copied the curve onto a piece of cardboard, modified it a bit – and got the council blacksmith to make it. How," he wonders, "do councils these days get on without a blacksmith?"

It sounds quaint. These days, you'd suspect spin. But for Mack, this belief in political grassroots was genuine. From his earliest days in politics he worked to strengthen the local precinct committees, giving them a real and respected role in decision-making.

Why, you might wonder. Don't people make mistakes? "People make mistakes," Mack replies without missing a beat. "Just less often than politicians." And, he might add, less egregious.

This made Mack both a people's politician and a strong leader – but in a way that is the inverse of contemporary demagogues. Strength, he showed, is not the opposite

of kindness or humility or patience, but one and the same. Strength lies not in the telling, but in the listening. If only there were more of it at the top.

**Elizabeth Farrelly will deliver the Ted Mack Oration on March 23.**

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