

'The Case for Independence'

A summary of the Independent Mosman Committee's submission to the Independent Local Government Review Panel – March 2013

The demonstrable and historic will of the Mosman community is for autonomy and independence... or, if it ain't broke don't 'fix' it!

Community Passion

Mosman residents hold to the notion that where you live is an important part of who you are.

A great many Mosman residents have lived most of their life in the municipality. Mosman has a strong, indeed passionate, community spirit. And local governance is definitely part of that spirit.

Mosman residents have a high propensity to volunteer for community service, with one of the higher per capita rates of local volunteerism.

We believe the fact that Mosman is relatively small and contained has been an important factor in our 'community ambience'. Consider the following questions:

How many councils have an annual address (The Mosman Address) delivered by a prominent citizen that forms one of the major local events of the year?

How many Sydney residents know the name of the Mayor AND the General Manager of their council, let alone know the GM's first name as well?

How many councils regularly receive 180 entries from local resident artists for the municipality's annual art exhibition, or stage one of the most prestigious national profile art prizes?

And it is not as if Mosman is an isolated or insular community.

Mosman contains two of the city's major tourist attractions, namely Balmoral Beach and Taronga Zoo and Council has managed its obligations to its residents and the wider community in relation to these and other treasures with distinction and success for around 100 years.

On six occasions in the last 50 years Mosman residents have voted overwhelmingly – averaging 86.5% – against any amalgamation with another council.

NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell's first pledge to his colleagues and the state on the day he was sworn in – 28 March 2011 – was to reiterate his five-point plan for government. Point number five was:

'Returning the power and decision making to the community'

The Premier is also on the record multiple times pledging:

'No forced amalgamations for local councils in this term of government'

Taking the Premier at his word we believe this should be the end of the matter as far as Mosman is concerned, unless of course, it can be shown that our council is either corrupt, incompetent or financially unsustainable.

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A word from the Committee members...



I have been a sole practitioner in Mosman for 43 years, working on projects locally, within this state and interstate.

Working in those many Municipalities and Town Councils throughout Australia, I have found that it is those smaller authorities that have, on the whole, contributed to thinking and discussions in a positive way, they have shown that they are able to adjust to the changing needs of society, in a timely manner. Smaller Councils are 'lighter on their feet' and have the ability to adapt appropriately to changing conditions, whereas larger councils are burdened with bureaucratic weight; it's a case of 'one size fits all!'

Throughout my career, I've recognized the importance of designing work that is responsible to 'Place, Culture and Technology'. Throughout those years I've been met with many difficulties in pursuing those ideals through the prejudices of a number of Council officers; Councils must react responsibly to the necessary changing needs of society such as environmental considerations that will likely modify compliance conditions within the built environment. Smaller councils like Mosman can take the initiative and lead, not just follow!

Mosman Council has already shown over many years how to lead, it has been progressive in many fields through initiating and adopting many important programs (refer Mosman Council – seven page submission to the Independent Local Government Review Panel 6 March 2013).

I am pleased to be able to support this Council in its quest to remain an independent Mosman Council."

Glenn Murcutt AO



Having spent over 15 years working overseas and then trying to create an idyllic existence in France, my wife and I returned to Mosman because none of the places where we lived, could in our view, hold a candle to the wholeness and peace of living in this village. The scenery and history of so many European and American cultures are alluring. However, for sheer ease of living Mosman has nearly everything. Take the beauty of harbour views, open spaces, tree lined streets, heritage and iconic architecture, the friendliness of most neighbours and the willingness of so many to help others, like the 400 strong army of dedicated volunteers, makes our suburb unique.

Amalgamation into any of the super councils is a threat we must fight or we will lose so much of our valued independence and unique lifestyle. That is why I volunteered to fight for our suburb."

Will Tuck

There has never been a suggestion that Mosman is corrupt, whilst by any objective measure Mosman is:

efficient, financially sound, and a widely recognised model of good local governance in NSW and Australia.

Mosman is regularly acknowledged as an innovator, leader and standard setter for the local government sector ranging in disciplines from corporate and financial planning, library services, traffic administration, the visual arts, waste management and recycling, to name but a few.

There can be little doubt the bigger the local government the bigger and more remote the bureaucracy. The Independent Local Government Review Panel (ILGRP) would be familiar with the 2012 work of Dollery, Grant and Korrt (Federation Press) who provide convincing domestic and international evidence that forced council amalgamations do not lead to financial sustainability or any cost savings.

What is the case for across the board change?

The ILGRP released its discussion paper 'The Case for Sustainable Change' in November 2012. This paper can be found at www.localgovernmentreview.nsw.gov.au.

While the ILGRP stresses the concept of making 'NSW Number One', it does not define this vague notion.

The ILGRP seems to argue that this notion of 'number one' is to be achieved by making local councils have greater 'strategic capacity'. Yet this very notion is never explained or illuminated by way of concrete examples.

As shown in the same paper (P18) many voters would be interested to see that NSW has by far the lowest council rates per capita, with the average rate per capita of all other states being more than 25% greater than NSW. This could surely indicate that NSW is already Number One in a metric very close to ratepayers hearts.

Page 37 of 'The Case for Sustainable Change' states the panel is 'looking for sound evidence from submissions on which to base its findings and recommendations.' This is despite the paper making many assertions and generalised statements about local government, but offering no clear evidence, simply vague statements like:

'Local government seems to be stuck in a rut' (P3). It is not apparent what this means.

'There is a case to consider a significant consolidation of local government across the Sydney metropolitan area' (P5). But the ILGRP does not actually make that case in the paper.

'The future (of local government) can be exciting and full of opportunities' (P15). We would respectfully offer the view this is simply a 'motherhood' statement.

'Defining required core services is probably both impossible and undesirable' (P19). We argue an agreed set of required core services would be a good starting point for informed comparative analysis.

'The evidence suggests that NSW has too many local councils' (P23). However no clear evidence is given.

Conclusion

1. Focus on councils which are dysfunctional, financially unsound or displaying evidence of corruption, or unworkability.
2. Develop an agreed and rigorous means of measuring the performance of councils so they can be objectively compared.
3. Resist the urge to make easy, broad-brush changes that may win short-term favour from the property and industry lobby cheerleaders for mega-councils but effectively disenfranchise ratepayers in well run municipalities.

In short, fix what is broken and nurture what is not.

As an overwhelmingly and historically Liberal voting electorate Mosman citizens would be disappointed at best, and feel cheated at worst, should their community be dissolved by fiat by the party for whom the vast majority voted.



I have lived in Mosman for over forty years and my children and grandchildren also live here. One of the major attractions for me and for my family is the village atmosphere and the real sense of community in Mosman.

I volunteered to serve on this committee because I am deeply concerned about the future of Mosman if the proposals for amalgamation with other Councils currently being considered by the Independent Local Government Review Panel, set up by the present NSW government, come into effect.

That Panel has made clear its view that "Local Government in NSW must change" and that there is a "case to consider significant consolidation of local government across the Sydney Metropolitan area". It is clear from a reading of the Panel's second consultation paper released in November 2012 entitled "Better, Stronger Local Government. The case for Sustainable Change" that it is committed to a policy of amalgamation.

If Mosman were to be amalgamated either with another or several other Councils to become part of a distant and remote super council I believe that its sense of community and village atmosphere would be lost and that creating these huge councils will take away any sense of local engagement and power and result in just another arm of state government.

It is also curious that in an age where there is strong support for devolution and localism that this proposal for amalgamation is seriously being considered. It does not have community support and in the last Council elections Mosman residents voted overwhelmingly against any proposal to amalgamate. It is however supported by business and developer lobbies.

Size at the expense of character is bad policy. Mosman Council is a well run efficient and financially responsible council supporting the local community and I believe we should fight to keep it."

Patricia Robertson



One of the most important lessons I have learned in 40 years of involvement in the political process in Australia (both engine room and armchair) is that bigger seldom leads to better.

The key finding for me in the government's Local Government Review is that, while NSW has proportionally a greater number of councils, the cost to ratepayers in NSW is significantly less than in other states, with service delivery in NSW judged to be at a high level.

The conclusion seems inescapable to me. The NSW model - that is, more local councils, cheaper rates, high efficiency - should be the national model to be followed. Amalgamation, particularly for unique and special places like Mosman, would be a backward step."

Rod Cameron