

My issue with local government

by Brent Fleton



During September and October I spent most late afternoons and early evenings after work walking my local streets letterboxing a small summary of my basic policies along with instructions on how to vote in the 2013 local government election.

I ran for a Council seat in West Ward in the City of Bayswater. I ran on three simple issues – lower rates, tangible policies to address the crime wave impacting on my local area (I am a recent victim of a home burglary) and streamlining local council planning approvals processes.

Polling Day has come and gone, and there is no denying this fact – I got flogged. I polled a whopping 380 out of 5,455 valid votes.

For the past two weeks, after hearing and reading about how it's very distressing that voter turnout was historically low and the answer must be to force people to vote, I got to thinking about local government issues more broadly.

Sure, 20 odd per cent is a pretty low turnout, but I don't think we should be concentrating on this alone. The vital issue we ought to be discussing at great length (and at much higher levels of government), and even though this never seems to be on the agenda, is how to address the drastic overreach by local governments.

Don't get me wrong, this average punter firmly believes state and federal governments in Australia have all drastically overstepped their boundaries. Let's just focus on local government for now.

Did any journalist who contributed to the various columns conveying the collective dismay at the turnout stop to consider the reason that a vast majority of eligible people don't vote in these elections may be because most common-sense people probably expect the only matters their local council should be in charge of are lawns, libraries, roads and rubbish?

Contrary to popular thought, I firmly believe local government should be small and efficient, taking care of only these aforementioned issues.

Most people in my neighbourhood wouldn't know that the 2013/2014 City of Bayswater Budget totalled spending of around \$70million, and consisted of a taxation of local ratepayers of some \$34million. This was through a rate increase of almost double that of inflation. During the Budget process, City officers described this increase as 'prudent'.

Now, to my point:

When did local governments get the power to turn a traditionally small operation charged with the responsibility of fixing our roads, maintaining libraries, taking care of our local parks and gardens and collecting our garbage into a multi-million dollar 'tax and spend' machine?

The constant splurging of ratepayers' funds on hiring sustainability consultants and 'buzz-word' doctors, creating make-work programmes in the form of diversity and cultural projects and awarding often ridiculously generous grants for 'art' projects has reached a point where serious reform is required.

A few quick facts will assist in highlighting my point. 13 local government CEOs earn more than the Premier of Western Australia. 23 CEOs earn more than the Minister for Local Government. There is something seriously wrong with this. A city with just over 60,000 people has a CEO earning more than Barnett. Please.

In addition, local governments pay groups like WALGA and ALGA annual fees. These two lobby groups spent millions of dollars of ratepayers' funds on a political advertising campaign for constitutional recognition, and regardless of the fact the referendum never occurred, they still won't give the funds back to ratepayers. Hashtag integrity.

If we must spend money on hiring 'sustainability' consultants, I'd like to hire a sustainability consultant in the form of an economist or an accountant to first examine the 'sustainability' of the alarming rate at which local governments are taxing and spending.

Unfortunately for those libertarians among us (yes, me included), our governing structure agreed upon at Federation created a monster. There is a solution. I would like to see a genuine push by the WA Liberal-National Government, by the end of this term, to legislatively cap any future local government rate increases to that of CPI. We could and should go further, but I believe this could be the start of overall reform which will have broad community support.

If we can stop the ability for over-taxation, we can slowly stop the ever-expanding purview of local governments and attempt to return it to its traditional role.

I know fixing roads, maintaining libraries, mowing lawns and disposing of garbage costs my local council money, but its purview should end there. Local governments must be made to recognise, by way of state legislation if necessary, the unsustainable practice of ridiculous rate rises and over-the-top spending.

Forcing people to vote in local government elections, just to be able to say people are now 'engaged' with grassroots politics, would fail to address these alarming issues with local government entirely.

Compulsory voting on local government elections would give councils a mandate which could only lead to further over-government and over-taxation in our country.

This would be a disastrous outcome for what little freedom is left in Australia.

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