

IPART process a farce and a disgrace

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The NSW Government released the IPART report on the fitness of local councils at a media event in Parliament House on Tuesday 20 October 2015. Shortly beforehand the Premier had privately briefed Mayors via webcast.

Parliament was in session and one might have thought that such an announcement may have been made to the Parliament, the people's house. There it could have been debated and exposed for what in fact it is – a direct attack by Government on local democracy.



Premier Mike Baird and Local Government Minister Paul Toole releasing the IPART report.

The findings in the Report from the so-called ‘Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal’ (IPART) were pre-determined by the terms of reference that required all councils to meet ‘scale and capacity’ as well as the financial criteria, in order to be ‘fit for the future’. In the Sydney Metropolitan region the scale was determined as being a council of the order of 250,000 people.

IPART looked closely at overall financial criteria, sustainability, infrastructure and service management, and efficiency. It did not properly evaluate social and community issues, including views of councils and their communities. Approximately 80% of residents are against forced amalgamation of their council.

IPART did not properly consider what constitutes a successful local council and its community – including the needs of residents, local representation, community of interest, identity and sense of belonging, community groups and volunteers based on place, local history and heritage, natural boundaries – no, IPART did not and could not evaluate these crucial matters. That is however what local government is all about.

It is clear that IPART and the Government have little appreciation or respect for the significance of local communities and their local councils in our democratic society. For Government it appears that it is all about control and dominance, and rolling out developments wherever and whenever they want.

Of the 41 councils in Sydney, the ten largest in population and/or area were not required to amalgamate. Of the 31 earmarked for mergers 5 councils opted for mergers against the strong objection of their communities. IPART found these were fit through the act of merging.

Of the 26 remaining councils, all satisfied sustainability and the overall financial criteria. This was an incredible result given rate-pegging and cost-shifting by State Government over many years. IPART had to admit this in its report “In general, most Metropolitan Sydney councils demonstrated their current and forecast financial performance was relatively strong.”

These 26 Councils all being economically fit were declared ‘not fit for the future’ because none of them had a population of 250,000. They never did have that population - the whole exercise was a sham and a farce from the start.

The NSW Premier Mike Baird said that councils now have 30 days to respond to the IPART report and he hoped many would volunteer to merge during that time.

But he said the Government would then consider all options, indicating that he would try to force mergers if necessary.



The Save Our Councils Coalition (SOCC) media conference under the ‘Tree of Knowledge’

Save Our Councils Coalition (SOCC) called a Media conference under the ‘Tree of Knowledge’ behind Parliament House immediately after the Premier’s announcement. Representatives from community groups, residents, councillors and politicians from all political parties attended.

However there was one exception, there was no one present from the Liberal/National Party. They were all hiding in Parliament House - keeping well away from the people, the people they are supposed to represent. All TV stations covered the conference and all reported on the news that evening.

At the media conference Phil Jenkyn from SOCC said "The whole IPART procedure is a farce. The Tribunal was controlled by the dictates and terms of reference of the Government. It has done what it was told to do."

"We totally reject this whole process, we will not be part of it, we will fight this Government and we will win ... including in the courts."

Tom Sherlock from Mosman Council said "We have a local democracy, we are proud of our local democracy and we will not let it go just at the dictate of an undemocratic government."



Labor, Shooters, Greens, Christian democrats, & independents against council mergers.

The Government would face a massive hurdle if it tried to put legislation through the Upper House, with Labor and the crossbenchers who hold the balance of power, vowing to block any forced amalgamations.

"We call on the Premier to review this steamrolling campaign," Christian Democrat MP Fred Nile said.

Shooters MP Robert Borsak expressed his opposition - "What communities want they should be entitled to have, and that is not being forced by governments to do things that aren't in the interests of local communities."

"Every politician in the Parliament except the Coalition is saying this is a sham and they won't support increased legislative powers for the Government," Greens MP David Shoebridge said.

Hunters Hill like many Sydney councils successfully met all financial criteria - overall financial, sustainability, infrastructure and service management, and efficiency. The Joint Regional Authority (JRA) model involving cooperation between Hunters Hill and adjoining councils on efficiencies and regional issues was shown to produce additional benefits, scale and capacity.

However Hunters Hill was found unfit as it allegedly did not to meet the Government's 'scale and capacity' test when compared with a six council amalgamation stretching from Ryde to Mosman and north to Willoughby, a Mega Council of over 300,000 people. The fact that the

6 councils involved had all voted against merger for good reason, and their communities were over 80% against a Mega council, carried no weight with IPART. The same trick was applied to one of the most successful councils in the nation, the City of Sydney, found unfit because it didn't have the scale of a Mega Global City.

This process brings great discredit on the Government. It shows a lack of understanding of local government and its purpose. It shows no respect for local communities and their wishes. Local communities know far better than State Government as to what their legitimate needs are.

Tuesday's events were covered by [ABC News](#) - [SMH](#) - [The Daily Telegraph](#) – [The Weekly Times](#) and [here](#), and the [Northern District Times](#). Also in [Letters](#) to SMH.

TV coverage included [7News](#) - [9NEWS](#) - [TEN News](#) and [PRIME7 News](#). [ABC News](#) led with the story on TV News at 7pm.

Radio commentator [Alan Jones](#) on 2GB confronted the Premier over whether he was going to force amalgamations. Listeners to the program who were able to get through on a line red hot with anger can be heard [here](#) at 1:45:17 to 1:51:20.



Ribbons and signs, in the colours of the Municipality's Coat of Arms, are going up around historic Hunters Hill (1861) – representing the community's outrage and determination to keep its local council and local democracy.

For further information see:

Save Hunters Hill Municipality Coalition (SHHMC) www.savehuntershill.org and www.facebook.com/savehuntershill

Save Our Councils Coalition (SOCC) www.facebook.com/saveourcouncils