CARMICHAEL'S COLUMN

Sean Carmichael was elected to Woollahra Council as a Liberal Councillor in 2008, aged 20. Sean chaired Council's Double Bay Woolworths DA approval and he ensured the then-closed Ritz Carlton was reopened as a hotel. Sean writes for *LattéLife* as a local resident and community advocate.

Too many cooks in Council's kitchen

Woollahra Councillors are up for election in the next 12 months and it is not difficult to imagine the type of themes we might hear about. Some candidates will highlight their green credentials, whilst others will sell their approach to planning and the urban environment.

The sensible ones will include in their individual and party manifestos ways to support local businesses who are struggling through a national retail recession, and also commit to delivering a more efficient use of your hard-earned ratepayer money.

The process can feel cliché at times, and Bill Heslop's old chestnut, "You can't stop progress," is bound to be quipped more than once... As if Muriel's Wedding had been released this year, and not back in 1994.

Regardless, it is still an important time for us to decide the future of our community, and should be treated in earnest. Local councils affect our lives in many more ways than you might realise, so it always pays to choose well at the ballot box.

Elections are not only important times for choosing our leaders, but they are the one time councils have every four years to hold referendums on important civic questions of the day, such as whether or not to adjust the number of representatives we elect to public office.

For my two cents, I think this is a really important question that should be in focus. Allow me to explain:

Woollahra has 15 Councillors representing 57,000 people, all within 12 square kilometres. Woollahra also functions much the same way as a corporation does. Councillors are the board members, the Mayor is the Chairman, and the General Manager is the CEO.

Sounds normal, except 15 board members is not a normal size for almost any type of body. Think about your favourite Australian company, charity, community group, school, government board, or organisation. Their boards would have somewhere between five to 12 members, but unlikely any more than 12 – unless extenuating circumstances justified it.

Not only is Woollahra's elected Council much larger than all of those, it is also significantly larger than in equivalent Sydney Councils. Mosman Council happily works with just seven representatives. Lane Cove and Canada Bay Councils equally have similar board numbers to Mosman, and all function just fine.

Woollahra did have one extenuating reason for having so many until quite recently, back when Councillors still had the power to approve or refuse development applications. Without this responsibility, it appears

Woollahra Municipal Council Chambers

Election campaigning for 15 Woollahra Councillors in 2017

routine Councillor workload has been cut by a good third, with little emerging to fill that void.

Council should recognise this change by paring back our elected body to a normal board size. Not only will it save money, it would really enhance the quality of debate in Woollahra Council meetings.

Take meeting length for instance. You want meetings to only be as long as is necessary to make a decision. You want Councillors to be genuinely interested in each other's points of view, and to be stimulated by the diversity of ideas on offer.

Long and tiresome meetings are really unhealthy for decision making. Duplicated arguments going late into the night are a chore to listen to, and can mean Councillors begin to switch off. That happens on plenty of issues, because many Councillors will want to virtue a signal or 'peacock' to secure that elusive newspaper quote. The trouble is, they all too often don't bring anything new to the table by grandstanding. It can really drag out the meeting.

By paring the numbers back to a typical board size, duplicated peacocking is also heavily cut down. Council meetings will then naturally become more meaningful, productive, and indeed enjoyable for its participants.

You could argue that board composition matters more, but good board composition can only go so far. On this occasion, size does matter, too.

The voters themselves would also benefit as locals would be more likely to know who their local Councillors actually are. They would also need to lobby fewer people on important matters, yet still have the benefit of highly localised representation.

A successful referendum held this coming election would not come into force until the term after the next one (2024). Councillors voting to put this question to the people would know that, if successful, they would all still have another full term before returning to office becomes any more challenging.

And what is the preferred new number? I would think that three councillors from the east, three from the centre, and three from the west of the municipality, totalling nine, would be just as useful to voters as the five wards of three Councillors currently is. It would neatly respect that Woollahra is a historic amalgamation of Paddington, Vaucluse and Woollahra Councils. Finally, three wards of three is unlikely to unfairly alter the representative balance on Woollahra from what it is today.

If there is some other extenuating reason to maintain the status quo, I would be happy to hear it. After having carefully observed over the past 15 years, and at one stage where I participated, I am struggling to see what that other extenuating factor might now be.

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