

Ian Mutton's plan for more green space

Councillor Ian Mutton has a perfect retort to those who make claims about Liberals dressed up as independents. He says he abandoned the Liberals in the early 1970s over the Vietnam War. It's a not too subtle reminder that not only is he independent but he is of a vintage that he doesn't really need to take his ideological cues from people a generation or two below him.

Mutton is heading the Cammeraygal ticket for Community 1st, in alliance with sitting councillor Jessica Keen, who ran for mayor in 2017 and is now leading their ticket for St Leonards.

He has only been on the Council for one term but he has already etched out a key role for himself as the ranking lawyer on Council: figuring in key processes such as the sub-committee oversight of the renovation of North Sydney Pool. And if he is re-elected next month he could also, along with Keen, play a central role in determining who is the next mayor.

He spoke with Grahame Lynch.

SUN: What would you regard as your achievements as a councillor?

MUTTON: Look, what I really learned was how green I was when I started. And that really surprised me from my background (as a lawyer for decades).

The other thing that became really important as far as I was concerned was, previously, I sat on the outside of council and was very critical of staff. I now actually have quite a high opinion of the senior staff at North Sydney Council. And you can only do that if you see it operating from the inside.

In terms of what have I achieved? I actually see the capital works program that saw the swimming pool commenced is actually very important.

A long term investment to build up the amenities rather than just flashing paint around the corner. I think things like the Olympic pool, when it was built in 1936 was visionary, I think the current Olympic pool is visionary. And I think councils need to be visionary. They need to be planning not for the next couple of years, but the next decades.

SUN: Now let's move on to this election and what you are running on in terms of major issues.

MUTTON: There is an incredible shortage of open green space in North Sydney available to the public. And with that, there's actually huge opportunity to increase the amount of open green space that's available to the public. And just starting at Berry's Bay on the Western foreshore. The state government has been promising that to North Sydney year in, year out since 2016. I think the time is now for the state government to deliver it as promised and not as some sort of barter deal to win support for the freeway and the tunnels.

Likewise, the incredibly underutilised rail line between Waverton and

Lavender Bay if repurposed as a walking track would connect various parks and build them into a mosaic of integrated parks, at the same time, adding near to four hectares of open green space to the community.

If you go up to the tragedy that the government's inflicting on Cammeray Golf Course, much of that infrastructure that they're building, that they want to put on the surface of the land, should be buried.

The building tunnels take traffic under the surface. So should the infrastructure and the ventilation system also be underneath.

The opportunity is there now, and what council has to do is motivate the state government to stop talking about what it might do in the future in terms of making park plans available, and do it now instead, at the very time they're damaging our community, and they're taking parks away with their tunnels and freeways.

SUN: Now, if you are elected on to council in the next term, what will you do to implement these policies? It's one thing to obviously talk about them, but what can you do to make it happen, and how will you further these goals?

MUTTON: This is not an issue of one councillor standing on a soap box, this is an issue of working with all of the other councillors to get a shared vision. And sometimes you've got to compromise to get those shared visions. We do need to get a shared vision that we can project, and dare I say it even impose on the state government, that's how these things are going to be achieved.

And that may mean that the North Sydney community actually have to stand up to the state government and tell it what we want rather than have the state government say what it's prepared to give. They can't do that unless we have a unified council with that shared vision.

I will work hard to bring about a collegiate approach from Council. I will work hard to get rid of the adversarial approach that seems to be the hallmark of this council and indeed the one before it. This is a time for change. There is time for councillors to actually work on shared visions, rather than trying to find the differences and focus on the differences. What we've got now, what we've had in the past three years, is not good. What we need in the future is that shared vision, that preparedness to come together.

SUN: Will that be assisted by the move to council vote for mayor?

MUTTON: What we have at the moment is a mayor that is from time to time out of step with the majority. And that is fuelling, if you like, the divide that exists in council at the moment. I think the reality of direct election is it doesn't work. The reality of it is you need the speaker or the mayor to actually have the support of Council.



Ian Mutton and Jessica Keen

SUN: In your estimation, will we end up with that model situation post-election, or are we facing another term of rancour.

MUTTON: It's going to be a challenge but with good will and shared objectives should be able to be made to work. It has to be made to work because the alternative would be the appointment of an administrator.

SUN: One of the big issues raised in this election is over-development. You've evolved your view on this but is there really much Council can do given the powers of state planners?

MUTTON: The Neutral Bay high rise vision is one that I no longer share. And I certainly don't share it after seeing what can happen down at St. Leonards. I think we need to be mindful that there's always the fear that the state government will, through one of its planning alternatives, step in and sanction high-rise. So, I think actually as a council need to express a single view. I hope we will express a single view that high density without serious additions to amenities such as park lands, such as walkways, such village areas is not on.

SUN: I wanted to move on to a question about the financial side of Council, and there are concerns that the council's getting heavily into debt, and obviously it's increasing rates by the maximum allowable amount. Are you comfortable with the trajectory of council financially?

MUTTON: The council base rate was set when Ted Mack was in power. He favoured the idea that the business section would subsidise the residential section. And that gave rise to a very low base residential rate in North Sydney. And even with all of the increases we've

had in recent years, and indeed the last rate lift of 7%, we are still significantly low in rates that are when compared to Mosman, Lane Cove, or Willoughby.

So, I know people talk about the rate rises being high, but it's really important to understand that people in North Sydney also have very high expectations for services.

Now, we don't get a complaint that the library resource is excessive, we don't get complaints about poor sanitation. We get praise for that.

It's not good enough for people to sit back and say, 'I don't want an increase in rates' when we have a rate that is significantly lower than our peer councils, and we're struggling to meet the cost of delivering those services. Those people need to tell us what services do they want reduced? Then they sometimes come back and say, we'll do things more efficiently. That's a coward's way out. You actually have say how you are going to achieve the savings to keep the rates down.

Now, is North Sydney ploughing into debt? No, it's not. The debt levels are subject to the financing of pool. They're in fine order. Does Council have property that it could sell? Yes, it's got a lot of real estate. Perhaps \$100 million worth that I believe Council should seriously look at, whether it wants to retain that property, or whether that property can be sold, to produce capital to increase the overall amenities in our area.

If I am elected, I will be driving one thing in Council, and that is a complete re-evaluation. An arms length commercial valuation of all of the council properties and analysis of the rental return on those properties, and then I'd be encouraging a serious debate about what we should do with the capital tied up in those properties.

Leave it in the properties, or use it for getting amenities for North Sydney.