

POLITICAL GRANTSMANSHIP: NOW YOU'RE A LOCAL GOVERNMENT COUNCILLOR ... LOOKING IN, LOOKING OUT, LOOKING WELL BEYOND

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The turnover of popularly elected mayors across Queensland (35 percent) in the local government election held in March 2016 is similar to the turnover of councillors (36 percent), albeit 14 sitting councillors were returned as mayor.

Of course this is an average and in some councils there was little change in representation in 2016. Sunshine Coast Regional Council, for example, with an experienced mayor returned and only one new councillor, will continue on where they left off. On the other hand, Gympie Regional Council returned the mayor (of only two years) and just two sitting councillors. Noosa, in between these councils, returned a sitting councillor as mayor and has 50% new councillors (although one was a councillor 28 years ago). Clearly some councils will be up to speed on the politics of intergovernmental relations in Australia. For others it will be a baptism of fire.

After the early flush of excitement of being elected a mayor or councillor in Queensland local government, in March 2016, new incumbents will soon be consumed with sessions on meeting procedures, pecuniary interest, planning reviews, budget setting and the like. The good serving officers are armed and ready to help, and see this as the best thing they can do for the newbies on council. The returning mayors and councillors will be able to side-step these activities as they begin to assess the numbers and decide how they will negotiate with their fellow councillors to address all those promises made during the election.

While this introspective look is occurring, neighbouring councils will be doing the same thing. Getting the administrative ship of state back on track is an important first step. They will soon come to realise that many of the issues they are asked to address, such as employment, transport, and economic development, for example, cross local government boundaries. Cooperation with neighbours will be the only game to play if councillors are serious about the sustainable development of their communities. This cooperation will also involve negotiations with both the Queensland and federal governments.

In addition to the regional view, understanding the way in which the Queensland Government relates to local government determines how the council will perform. New mayors and councillors will soon be introduced to the concept of cost shifting, or unfunded mandates, as state government missives trickle in. This requires councils to attend to (and thus fund) more layers of administrative burden. Paradoxically, all in the name of reducing red tape.

Turnbull's recent foray into giving revenue raising responsibility to the States is a timely reminder for the newly elected councillors of the continual tension in the Australian federation over revenue raising and expenditure. The Prime Minister is attempting to hold the states and territories accountable for expenditure in areas such as health and education.

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The Federal Government raises much more money through taxation than it spends, and makes significant transfers to the states and territories who continue to ask for more. Intergovernmental transfers to local governments from the Federal Government via the States' grants commissions is also a continuing source tension. The accountability of local governments across the nation continues to be called into question. In 2014, the Abbott Government froze the Financial Assistance Grants to local governments across Australia, resulting in a loss of revenue over time.

Like the Federal Government, state governments are looking for politically appealing policies such as rate capping (well established in NSW and being introduced in Victoria) to curb what they see as the excesses of (some) local governments.

The new Queensland councils will need to be ever mindful of the politics beyond their local community if they are to respond to the increasing grant funding game being played by the other levels of government. The councils' dilemma is that their local community will be focused on parochial issues and have much less understanding of, and thus interest in, the politics of intergovernmental funding and the battles that have to be fought on their behalf.

Given the lack of uniformity in the turnover of mayors and elected members across Queensland local government, some councils will be on the front foot in managing the day-to-day demands of their local communities, while others will also be chasing the myriad of grants coming from our politicised intergovernmental funding from state and federal governments.

Those councils with a majority of new councillors will be subjected to the steep learning curve that is the administrative process of local government, distracting them from the political grantsmanship game, which continues on regardless. Such is the dilemma in renewing local government in the Australian federation.

