
ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

REDFERN-WATERLOO'S RECENT EXPERIENCE

WITH 'CONSULTATION'

by Geoffrey Turnbull

The stand off over the future of The Block, the most contested area of Redfern-Waterloo, highlights the gap between the promises made to the community when the Redfern-Waterloo Authority ('RWA') was announced and what has been delivered on the ground. The RWA was intended to ensure consultation and communication between the New South Wales ('NSW') Government, the Redfern-Waterloo community and various community, government and non-government organisations, in decision-making regarding the future of the area.

Since 2001, the NSW Premier's Department has been working in Redfern-Waterloo through the Redfern-Waterloo Partnership Project ('RWPP') attempting to address the complex issues confronting the area.¹ A review of the area's human services² and the proposal for the RWA emerged from their work. The RWPP was intended to continue alongside the new RWA to handle the reform of human services but was absorbed into the RWA on 30 June 2005. The Minister is responsible for their combined operation.³

The RWPP's activities were well documented in evidence to the NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues *Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern/Waterloo* ('the Inquiry') through both the NSW Government's report to the Inquiry⁴ and submissions from the community about the RWPP's activities.⁵ The Inquiry was very critical of the way the RWPP had failed to work with local people. The recommendations of its second and third *Interim Report* were:

That the NSW Government, through the Redfern/Waterloo Partnership Project, take all possible steps to achieve genuine partnership between State and Commonwealth agencies, the City of Sydney Council, the non-government sector and the local community in order to address the issues facing Redfern and Waterloo.

That the Redfern/Waterloo Partnership Project develops and implements a comprehensive strategy to ensure there is effective consultation and communication with the Redfern and Waterloo communities. In addition, to improve its

relationship with the local community, particularly the Aboriginal community, the Redfern/Waterloo Partnership Project should establish mechanisms to facilitate capacity building within the Aboriginal community.⁶

On 26 October 2004, before the Inquiry was completed, the NSW Government announced it would establish the RWA under the *Redfern-Waterloo Authority Act 2004* (NSW). In the words of the Premier's media statement:

Mr Carr said we need a coordinated government approach to this area. 'We will work with the local community to achieve this, and build on the work already done.'⁷

This article examines examples of the RWA 'working with the community' to determine the extent to which the RWA and the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo are working cooperatively with the community, and the response of the RWA to the findings of the Redfern-Waterloo Inquiry.

CASE STUDY 1 – THE LEGISLATION 'CONSULTATION'

When the RWA was announced, REDWatch, a residents' watch group, requested time for the community to consider the legislation before it was introduced to Parliament.⁸ The NSW Government instead rushed the legislation into the Lower House and, despite significant opposition, little change was accepted.⁹

REDWatch then joined with individuals and groups to campaign for changes to the legislation in the Upper House.¹⁰ Aboriginal groups came together under the banner of the Organisation of Aboriginal Unity ('OAU') (later re-formed as the Redfern Aboriginal Authority)¹¹ to prevent the NSW Government from compulsorily acquiring The Block and to support the *Pemuhwy* project.¹²

While the changes came about as a result of the campaign, Minister Sartor described the changes in the following way:

In drafting the legislation, the Government was conscious of the need to consult widely with key stakeholders...

From these consultations, a number of amendments were proposed and accepted. These include:

- ...
- Guaranteeing Aboriginal representation on the Advisory Committees; and
- Consulting with the Aboriginal Housing Company and the Aboriginal community on the long term strategic vision for The Block.

These amendments ... ensure that consultation will occur with the local community.¹³

Within a month, the history of RWA consultation was already being rewritten.

CASE STUDY 2 – THE THREE MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEES

In December 2004, Minister Sartor asked residents to write to him with their views regarding community advisory structures. The request indicates that the Minister already had clear ideas regarding what such structures would involve:

The current thinking is for three advisory committees of about 15 members each, comprising residents and State and local government...

I am also considering public forums for residents or representatives of community organisations...

...[T]he Redfern Waterloo Plan...will be subject to public exhibition and input at each stage.¹⁴

During the lobbying on the RWA Bill, REDWatch and a number of other groups argued that the legislation should be strengthened to ensure that community consultation mechanisms were guaranteed in the legislation rather than left to Ministerial discretion. The groups wanted at least the same opportunities for community participation in planning decisions under the RWA as are available under local government legislation.¹⁵ It was argued that there should be an overarching community advisory group or council, as existed under the RWPP. The Government had accepted the need for a more integrated response to human service delivery in the area,¹⁶ and the same principles should apply to the RWA advisory structure. Further, it was argued that the Minister's appointment of a few residents to the advisory groups would not adequately ensure a community voice.

In April 2005,¹⁷ it became clear that the Minister's request for written responses from the community was considered to constitute 'community consultation'. The

final outcome of the 'consultation' appeared identical to what the Minister indicated he had in mind in December 2004. The leaflet said in part:

Following community consultation, the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo, the Hon Frank Sartor MP, is now inviting Expressions of Interest from residents of Redfern, Waterloo, Eveleigh and Darlington to participate in any of three Ministerial Advisory Committees...

A Community Forum to meet at least four times a year will be open for members of the public to attend. The purpose of this Forum is to provide the Minister with advice on the broad strategic direction of the Redfern-Waterloo Plan and to provide the community with a direct link to the Minister.¹⁸

Back in December 2003, the RWPP presented the community with their *Community Engagement Strategy*.¹⁹ It was well received as it covered a range of consultation mechanisms. The strategy, however, was never implemented. There has not been a Community Forum of either the RWPP or the RWA since 2003 and the RWPP Community Council was only convened a couple of times in 2004 and not reappointed.

The RWA's community engagement strategy, as so far advised to the community, falls well short of that proposed by the RWPP. There is neither a Community Council nor opportunities for community involvement in Taskforces and public discussion workshops to have in-depth discussion around specific topics or areas of concern to the community. It is unclear how Community Forums four times a year will provide the 'broad strategic direction of the Redfern-Waterloo Plan' as well as the opportunity for the community to meet the Minister, find out what the RWA is doing and raise their concerns. Nine months into its operation, no Community Forums have been held and clearly the RWA's strategic direction is coming from somewhere other than the community.

Proper mechanisms to inform the community about RWA activities have not even been put in place, let alone the genuine partnership that the Upper House Inquiry recommended. We are yet to see 'a comprehensive strategy to ensure there is effective consultation and communication with the Redfern and Waterloo communities' or the improved 'relationship with the local community, particularly the Aboriginal community'.²⁰

CASE STUDY 3 – CONSULTATION WITH THE ABORIGINAL HOUSING COMPANY

Prior to the RWA announcement, the Premier's Department had been working with the AHC on the

Pemulwuy Project.²¹ The project was based on an award-winning²² social plan²³ and included 62 homes to be built in The Block area. There had been many meetings discussing crime prevention, design and other issues of concern to the AHC and the RWPP.

As the land owner of The Block, the AHC expected that, in the words of Minister Sartor to NCOSS and other organisations:

The RWA will... consult closely with the Aboriginal community and the Aboriginal Housing Company when considering plans for The Block and Aboriginal housing. The government recognises the importance of The Block and it will remain a place of significance to the Aboriginal community.²⁴

In early December 2004, the RWPP had spelt out the Government's position on The Block:

No decisions have been made about the future of The Block. The Aboriginal Housing Company and the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo are working together to establish a sustainable vision for the area.

There is a continuing dialogue between the Minister's office and members of the Aboriginal Housing Company. Whatever happens on The Block, a broad community consultation strategy will occur.

The site is of great significance to Aboriginal people in NSW and across Australia...

The NSW Parliament Social Issues Standing Committee Inquiry into Issues Relating to Redfern-Waterloo acknowledged that the redevelopment of The Block is of utmost importance.

There is no intention by the State Government to compulsorily acquire The Block.²⁵

However, the first time Minister Sartor personally met with the AHC Board on 8 February 2005 he made it clear that he would not support the *Pemulwuy* Project. Instead the Minister said he was only prepared to replace the 19 homes still existing around The Block and that the Government would find housing for the balance of the 62 homes elsewhere in Redfern-Waterloo.²⁶

The Minister wanted to establish a taskforce with the AHC, which would also include representatives from State, Federal and local Governments, to establish 'a new positive vision for The Block and its environs'.²⁷ While the Minister promised it would have an Aboriginal majority

it would not consider the *Pemulwuy* Project or The Block being used for Aboriginal housing. Apart from the AHC representatives, the other members would be Government representatives or of the Minister's choosing. Under this proposal, the Minister retained the power to unilaterally overrule any suggestions proposed.²⁸

The offer was made on a 'take it or leave it'²⁹ basis and the AHC board decided to leave it and to continue to work to bring the *Pemulwuy* project to realisation. The AHC then proceeded to establish the *Pemulwuy* Vision Taskforce, chaired by Australian Labor Party elder statesman Tom Uren, to look further at both the *Pemulwuy* Project and at the broader vision for the area.³⁰

On 29 August 2005 the Minister admitted publicly that the RWA and the AHC had reached an impasse. He said, '[e]verything's negotiable except for concentration of high-dependency housing there'.³¹ A subsequent request by the RWA for a copy of the AHC's plans for The Block 'as a means of moving matters forward' brought some hope of an agreement.³² Hope died a few days later, however, when an open letter from Frank Sartor to Mick Mundine, AHC Chief Executive Officer, appeared on the front page of the RWA's first newsletter.³³ The letter re-stated the Minister's position and attempted to hold the AHC responsible for the failure of the RWA and the AHC to sit down 'to come up with a shared vision for The Block'.

The ongoing battle between the Government and the AHC is being documented on the AHC's website.³⁴

CONCLUSION

These case studies illustrate the community's early experience of the RWA and its Minister who, under the RWA legislation, has the final say in what will and what will not happen in our area. They demonstrate that the consultation, partnership and community engagement which were called for by the Legislative Council's Redfern-Waterloo Inquiry have not been put into practice by the NSW Government. Further, they highlight why the community wanted their right to have input into the decisions made about them by the RWA protected in the legislation rather than left to the discretion of the Minister for Redfern-Waterloo.

While the community was not successful in gaining legislative rights, both the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Redfern, Eveleigh, Darlington and Waterloo continue to agitate for the NSW Government to 'achieve genuine partnership between State and Commonwealth agencies, the City of Sydney Council,

the non-government sector and the local community in order to address the issues facing Redfern and Waterloo' as recommended by the Redfern-Waterloo Inquiry.³⁵

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- 36 Most documents referenced in this paper can be accessed via the REDWatch website at <<http://www.redwatch.org.au>>.

Four Women Having a Chat and One Woman Looking In, 2005
Miriam Giles

Hi my name is Miriam Giles. This is my first year at Nyangatjajara College. I love to paint and ride camels. At school we go digging for honey ants and Marku which are really sweet. I live in Mutitjulu Community with my mum, Gloria. I love swimming and going to the library and playing games.

