

Theo Maras: Restoring true democracy to Adelaide requires that all ratepayers are treated equally

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THE City of Adelaide Act is now 15 years old and it's time the State Government took a good look at how we can strengthen its democratic backbone and breathe new life into our city heart.

Just recently I proposed that the Council [abolish the ward system](#) , automatically register all ratepayers as voters (that is, commercial and retail ratepayers as well as residents) and then make voting compulsory.

Here's why I believe this is necessary. When the City of Adelaide Bill was originally debated in state Parliament, the arguments that were put to us in favour of reform are eerily similar to the same old complaints we hear today.

This suggests we didn't get the legislation right. So while we've made some headway, 15 years later we've ended up on the same dead-end street.

Just have a look at what then Local Government minister Mark Brindal said when he introduced the City of Adelaide Bill into Parliament in 1998: "...the city must resolve a number of persistent problems, such as the static commercial property values, the rapid decline in retailing activity and the high vacancy rates in commercial buildings".

He went on to say the Council had inherent structural problems that included "in-built tensions between the investment and commercial importance of the state's capital and the proper representational requirements of residents".

Those same problems exist today because fundamental democratic changes were not introduced into the City of Adelaide Act at the time.

The only way to properly restore true democracy to the City of Adelaide is to ensure all ratepayers are treated equally and that they all get to vote for a single group of area councillors that represent the entire city council area.

This would have the effect of ridding the city of the ludicrous Ugandan-style gerrymander that exists today where a few councillors elected by a few hundred voters in the leafy streets of North Adelaide or the southeast corner can successfully ride roughshod over critical commercial investments in the CBD.

The Adelaide City Council derives about 80 per cent of its rates from commercial and retail interests that are predominately located in the city square mile. There could be many more people on the voting roll if all ratepayers were automatically added to it.

If the Council is capable of issuing rate notices, it is capable of adding those people to the roll. Commercial ratepayers should not be forced, as they are now, to apply to the Council CEO for a vote.

South Australia is one of only three states (the others are WA and Tasmania) that has a voluntary local government voting system.

The result is that fewer than a third of eligible voters participate in the council elections.

Of the 23,200 voters on the roll in 2010 City of Adelaide election, fewer than 6500 people voted for the Mayor, of which the winner Stephen Yarwood achieved 2319 first preference votes. Some ward councillors won with less than 500 votes and the vast majority of councillors were elected with fewer than 1000 votes. The current democratic system is not one that should sit easily with anyone.

Nor is it one that best serves the interests of a capital city centre that hosts the highest concentration of private and public assets in the state, not to mention the 118,000 workers who commute to it every weekday. The City of Adelaide needs to be governed under a structure that will allow it to prosper. Residents who live in it must understand they are living in a developing city that is far from finished.

Like all capital cities, it is a dynamic, living organism and it must be allowed to change, grow, adapt, compete and thrive.

So let's have a balanced debate about how to get it done. and dispense with the nonsense we've seen in recent days from the likes of Clr Mark Hamilton.

I'm not saying commercial interests should sideline residential considerations. Far from it. I want to see many more people living in the city square mile.

What I'm saying is that harmonious coexistence of commercial and residential areas is both possible and desirable, especially if they are governed intelligently.