

PUTTING THE AUCKLAND JIGSAW TOGETHER AGAIN: AT LARGE OR WARD-BASED COUNCIL?

One of the central themes of the Super City debate has been the need to have greater unity and less in-fighting. Greater co-operation is one of those characteristics which has universal appeal, however, the broad range of vested interests across the new Super City will not disappear overnight and conflict will remain about what the best direction for Auckland should be. That conundrum is played out in the debate about whether the new Council will be made up of at large or ward-based Councillors.

Now that opponents to the government's proposal for Auckland governance have accepted that the government will not follow the Royal Commission's recommendations and retain some of the existing Councils, focus has shifted to the make up of the Council wards (or electorates) from which the Super City Councillors will come. The recent hikoi is, at its heart, an expression of the concerns by some in the community about how the new Council's wards will be constituted.

Generally, the Auckland Mayors (except John Banks) want a larger proportion of ward-based Councillors and would prefer all Councillors to come from individual wards spread across the new Super City. They do not favour at large Councillors who are not elected by voters from a geographically defined ward or electorate, but rather are elected by voters across the city.

In contrast, the Royal Commission and the government's original proposal included a significant number of at large Councillors. The Royal Commission suggested a 10 ward / 10 at large split and the government originally proposed a 12 ward / 8 at large split.

The arguments against an at large system

Those who support a ward-based system, argue that an at large system will reduce local representation and see "more rich and famous" Councillors. They point to the high cost of campaigning across the whole city, and say that only those with a lot of money, or existing name recognition will be able to campaign effectively on that basis. They imply that Councillors elected on this basis will not represent the full Auckland demographic. The other factor supporting this argument is that historically, the low-socio economic areas have a lower voter turn out than affluent areas. If this continues to be the case, then an at large system will tend to favour politicians supported by wealthier constituents and therefore reflect those constituents' political leanings. While some of these predictions could play out, it is also likely that, rather than rich individuals, the at large system will favour party politics, either at a local level via groups such as Citizens & Ratepayers, or perhaps in the future, at a national level via parties like Labour, National or the Greens.

The arguments against a ward-based system

Those who support an at large based system point to factionalisation and so called pork-barrel politics being the result of too many ward-based Councillors. It is suggested that the campaign machines for each candidate will be embedded in each of their communities and more related to individual candidates and less disposed to organised party politics. In essence the concern is that because each Councillor's survival is dictated by placating his or her own ward, the Council will be focused on ward politics at the expense of a region-wide focus.

Our thoughts

It's arguable that a ward-based Council has more potential to be less cohesive because it will not necessarily have the ready made alliances and connections amongst its Councillors that allow the formation of a functional majority from the start. The allegiances that do exist may, at least initially, relate back to the old Councils. An analogy at the national level would be to an MMP Parliament as opposed to a "first past the post" Parliament.

In contrast an at large model would be more amenable to organised party politicking because the parties would not have to rely upon the local electoral and campaigning infrastructure and could instead concentrate on city wide campaigns. These campaigns could perhaps seek out higher profile candidates who had good name recognition within the broader community. The resulting Council is more likely to have clearly demarcated voting blocks and political allegiances, and have a more certain political direction from the start. It is more likely to concentrate on broad strategic issues affecting the whole city rather than encourage divisions about local concerns and is more likely to result in a unified Council.

Given that the new Council will be expected to provide decisive leadership from the start, the government is obviously attracted to the stability of an at large model. However, the government has stated that the Select Committee process relating to the Local Government (Auckland Council) Bill is a genuine process of consultation and that material changes to the Bill could arise from it. One of the genuine areas of debate will be the make-up of the Council's constituent parts. The government's decision on this issue will have a substantial impact on Auckland's political landscape in years to come.

This article has been prepared for information purposes only and not as legal advice.
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