

A SMALL MATTER OF RIGHT AND WRONG IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

By David Brooks

This article is written specifically for those who may have an interest in local government rating. The questions contained within are designed to extract the basic information as to how the rates are being levied. From these figures it should be a simple task to reveal who is getting the benefits and who is getting slugged. One thing is for sure. The answers may not be entirely what you would expect.

Justice is best served when everyone and everything is on an equal footing. This has nothing to do with people being equal for most surely they are not. It has everything to do with the way people are treated. And everyone should be treated equally and most surely they are not.

There has been much criticism about local government rates. Not unusual, for we all hate paying governments. Especially when we see little or no return. Or is it that we don't wish to recognise the return?

One thing is certain. People, generally, are not dumb. While not always able to specifically identify a wrong, the community knows when it is being ripped off. And local government is certainly ripping off the community when it comes to revenue collection. But how? And is it in the way we suspect?

The basis of raising local government revenue, in New South Wales, was the subject of probably the most intensive inquiry into the subject ever conducted in the Western world. The result of that inquiry, published in 1967, was that N.S.W. had the most (well almost) perfect rating base in the world. What has gone wrong?

We have become accustomed to taxation being used as a weapon. Used by various governments to achieve some elusive fiscal ideal. Usually the general populous suffers, grins, and struggles a little harder to make a living. So it can come as no surprise to see local council members manipulating the collection of revenue. And just to help things along the State Government freezes the valuations, upon which the rates are based, at some arbitrary date. We appear to have a recipe. It is named "kill the rating system".

It is fortunate that it is an enduring system and not easily destroyed. It is, however, necessary to restore the natural equilibrium or we may lose the system for ever.

One of the many things to reveal are those who are being unjustly taxed because of the created anomalies; conversely, to reveal those who gain from the anomalies.

But first things first. If South Australia can implement annual revaluations of its land why is it not being done in N.S.W. and other States? Are we so backward? This is a question for all our state politicians. After all, this is the age of the computer.

There are avenues open to anyone who wishes to pursue a matter with zeal. The "Freedom of Information Act" is useful if none of the local councillors are inclined to assist. The questions that require answers from each council include:

What is the total rateable value of the City (Town, shire) of . . . ?

Did Council declare differential rating and if so what categories were declared?

What was the rateable value and rate declared in each category?

How many rateable properties are there in the Council area?

How many non rateable properties are there?

How many properties are there in each category of differential declared?

What was Council's total income from all sources?

What income from rates was expected?

What are the 30 highest valuations in the Municipality, what differential category are they and what rates did each pay?

These questions should enable a reasonable analysis of any local council's income and sufficiently identify those who lose and those who gain from manipulation of the rating system.