HISTORY OF SYDNEY CITY COUNCIL

In 1842 Sydney was incorporated as a city. The oldest municipality in Australia is Adelaide, created in 1840, just four years after the settlement of South Australia.

The settlement of Sydney was established in 1788 as a convict colony ruled by British Governors. In 1823, a Legislative Council was established but the Governor retained the power to appoint officials to the Council and to over-ride their decisions. By the 1840s, convict transportation had virtually ended and the colonists wanted more control over their affairs. An Imperial Act of 1842 created a new Legislative Council, of which one third was nominated and two thirds elected by property holders.

MUNICIPAL BEGINNINGS

The wealthy pastoralists and land-owners on the Legislative Council were concerned with weightier matters than the state of Sydney's roads or the lack of sanitation. Under an Act of 1833, three police commissioners were responsible for local conditions. Most Sydney residents were happy enough for the British Government to go on paying for this service. As Sydney's population grew, however, so did the need for some form of local government. In 1840, Governor Gipps introduced a bill to the Legislative Council to establish municipal institutions in New South Wales. On 20 July 1842, an Act (6 Vic.No 3) was passed 'to declare the town of Sydney to be a city and to incorporate the inhabitants thereof'. On 12 August 1842, Melbourne was incorporated as a 'town'.

At the first municipal election, some 3,000 adult males were eligible to vote. There were to be six wards with four Councillors per ward and each had to hold property worth £1000. When the results were declared on 3 November 1842, it was clear that the electors had chosen local businessmen to run local affairs. Prior to the elections, the governor nominated magistrate Charles Windeyer as interim Mayor. At the first Sydney Council meeting on 9 November, a merchant and contractor, John Hosking, became the first elected Mayor of Sydney. But, in an inauspicious beginning for the Council, he had to resign less than a year later when he went bankrupt in the financial depression of the early 1840s.

At the second Council meeting on 15 November 1842, solicitor Charles Henry Chambers was appointed Town Clerk. He too resigned by 19 July 1843 because of conflict with the councillors and was replaced by the John Rae, a writer and artist, who held the post until the dissolution of Council in 1853. Other matters determined at early Council meetings were the design of Seals for both the Council and the city, official dress for the Mayor and aldermen, and the appointment of a City Treasurer, Surveyor, Mayor's secretary and other staff. Eventually the Council would become a major employer in Sydney.

IN SEARCH OF A TOWN HALL

The first Municipal Council meeting was held in the George Street Market Building (now the site of the Queen Victoria Building) on 9 November 1842. From 1842 to 1843, quarterly meetings took place at the Royal Hotel in George Street and then at the Pultenay Hotel in York Street.

In April 1843, Council suggested that if the graves were removed from the old, disused and overgrown burial ground in George Street, the land could be used for a town hall. But the Legislative Council was appalled at the idea of disinterring the dead. Council continued searching for a permanent site, meeting at various hotels in the meantime. By 1869 it secured the George Street site and the graves from the old burial ground were removed to Sydney's newest cemetery, Rookwood Necropolis. The Town Hall was occupied in September 1874 and gradually extended to include the clock tower in 1881, the Main Hall in 1889 and its grand organ in 1890. Later an administration block was built behind the Town Hall, and the current Town Hall House replaced this in the 1970s.

A public holiday was proclaimed when Sydney Town Hall opened on 27 November 1889. In the 1890s a porte-cochère replaced the wide steps approaching the Town Hall entrance, but when the underground railway was put through under George Street in the 1930s this began to crack. It was removed and the steps reinstated. Town Hall steps became a popular meeting place.

The elaborate sandstone building has been illuminated and decorated to celebrate such significant events as Royal visits and Coronations, visits of the US Fleet, Victory celebrations, the 1938 anniversary of white settlement, Australia's bicentenary in 1988, Sydney's sesquicentenary in 1992, and a reception for Olympic athletes in 2000. Until the Sydney Opera House opened in 1973, the Town Hall was the cultural hub of Sydney, being the venue for concerts and organ recitals, as well as for official receptions, balls, banquets, meetings, exhibitions, and rallies.

There were, however, limits to democracy. Aborigines were refused use of the Town Hall for their 'Day of Mourning' conference on Australia Day 1938, as was the Communist party during the Cold War paranoia of the late 1940s and 1950s. The Town Hall terrace often functioned as a saluting base for military parades, but in 1970 it was the focus for the anti-military demonstrations of the Vietnam Moratorium movement.

THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

Municipalities in NSW are established by an Act of the State government, which determines their powers and funding. For much of its existence, Sydney City Council has competed with the government for control of the city of Sydney.

The Council of 1842 had insufficient funds to provide adequate services and, despite a new Corporation Act in 1850, was abolished by the government in October 1853. The city was administered for the next four years by three Commissioners who were able to borrow more money but also failed to deliver water and sewerage services. One of the first acts of the new NSW Legislative Assembly in 1856 was to restore the Council.

Inadequate funding remained a problem and even though the Corporation Act of 1879 gave Council more financial strength, it was constantly criticised for failing to solve all of Sydney's urban problems. The sacking of the first Council set a precedent which was repeated in 1928-30, 1967-69, and 1987-88 when, amidst allegations of incompetence and corruption, Council was dismissed by the State government and the city was administered by unelected commissioners.

THE CITY OF SYDNEY – BOUNDARIES & ELECTIONS

The 'City of Sydney' of 1842 was little more than an unruly village of dusty poorly lit lanes and unhygienic dwellings. There was no water or sanitation system. Cattle were routinely driven through the streets. The Corporation Act defined the boundaries, which took in present-day Woolloomooloo, Surry Hills, Chippendale, and Pyrmont, an area of 11.65 sq. km. Six wards were marked by boundary posts, one of which survives at the front of Sydney Square.

Since 1900, the boundaries of the City of Sydney have been fairly elastic. In 1909, the Municipality of Camperdown was amalgamated with the city and in 1949 Alexandria, Darlington, Erskineville, Newtown, Redfern, Waterloo, Paddington and Glebe were included. Most of these were shed again in 1968. The majority of them made up a new municipality of South Sydney. In 1982, South Sydney was brought back into the city but became independent again under the City of Sydney Act of 1988. The City Council area contracted to 6.19 sq. km, smaller than its original size. The State government has the power to remove whole districts from Council, as it did with the creation of the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority in 1968 and the Darling Harbour Authority in 1984.

At the first 1842 Council election, voters had to occupy property with an annual value of £25 for at least one year. This low property qualification alarmed conservatives who warned of the dangers of democracy. In 1879, the vote was given to those who paid the rates, whether they were owners or renters. By 1900, even lodgers and women could vote (but they had to be property-holders) until 1941 when all resident adults were entitled to vote in Council elections. Since then there have been numerous tinkerings with the franchise, so that sometimes it favours property owners more than at other times. The party in power in the State government is able to slant the vote in the direction that favours its own interests.

WHAT COUNCIL DOES – OR 'VANISHING FUNCTIONS'

Sydney City Council provides a wide range of community services and facilities to residents, business and tourists but many of its original functions have been taken over by the State government and its authorities.

The Police

One of the reasons for Incorporation was control of the local police force. Under the Incorporation Act of 1842, the police were paid by Council and controlled by the Colonial Government. After four years of failing to levy this unpopular rate, Council passed control back to the government so that the police force ultimately became a State rather than a local matter.

Markets

Another Council priority was the control of markets. In the nineteenth century markets formed an important part of the trading experience, and the tolls raised from running the wholesale and retail markets was a large part of Council's revenue. They traded in produce, livestock and fish. The markets were unhygienic and unruly places, and unscrupulous trading practices were common. Hence many of the earliest Council by-laws were attempts at maintaining law and order. This was not easily attained and there are many 'colourful' stories generated by the market culture.

Initially the markets were located in the centre of the town, but rising land prices and changing transport methods eventually forced them further out. In 1945 the State government assumed control of the fish market, and later in 1968 the State Marketing Authority was formed to take

over the fruit and vegetable markets. Several of Sydney's old city market buildings survive under other guises.

In the 1840s, fruit and vegetables were sold at the George Street markets adjoining the Old Burial Ground site, linked to the Corporation wharf at Darling Harbour by Market Street. In 1887, the Council erected the Corn Exchange near the wharf. This is now part of the Nikko Hotel. The Belmore Produce Markets functioned from 1869 at Campbell Street and in the 1890s the New Belmore Markets opened next door on the site of the old cattle markets (hence the name of the area - Haymarket). This building has been refurbished as the Capitol Theatre. The George Street markets, expanded in 1858, were deteriorating by 1891 and were replaced by the Queen Victoria Market Building (QVB). While this was still called a market building it was really arcades of high-class shops, because the City fathers had worked out that this would create more revenue. By the 1950s there was talk of demolishing the QVB, but by 1988 it was restored and remains one of the city's most imposing heritage buildings.

A fish market was established at Forbes Street, Woolloomooloo in 1872, and upgraded in 1893, before moving in 1914 to the Sydney Municipal Markets at Haymarket. What is now known as Paddy's market was originally the Sydney Municipal Markets. They were built between 1909 and 1914 and were the source for all wholesale fresh produce in the city, containing vegetable and fruit markets, a fish market, poultry market and cold storage.

Rocky Roads

Council's attempts at road making, drainage and repair were often less than successful and by the 1870s numerous roads remained unformed, pot-holed or prone to washaways. From the 1880s, major streets were overlaid with woodblocks. This surface was durable but slippery, and bituminisation was soon added to the procedure. In the 1930s the Council's laboratory at Pyrmont (Wattle Street) pioneered methods of dry rolling concrete, thus creating a surface that could be laid cold and used almost immediately. Newer asphalt techniques did not catch on until Council's massive street upgrading program after World War 2.

The 1909 Royal Commission on the Improvement of Sydney was critical of the traffic chaos on Sydney's narrow streets. It was bad, but it became much worse after World War 1 when motor vehicles joined horses, sulkies and other incompatible forms of transport on the congested and dangerous streets. A Board of Metropolitan Transit Commissioners had taken over Council's responsibility for vehicular traffic in 1873. Now there was a need for State-wide legislation. The Main Roads Act of 1925 transferred ownership of some roads to the State, left some in local control, and in addition levied the City for contributions to the construction of roads outside its own boundaries.

The Cahill Expressway (1958 & 1962) was jointly funded by the State and the Council and built with Council labour.

Lighting the City

In 1841, the streets of Sydney were first lit by gas, provided by the Australian Gaslight Company. There were 165 gas lamps in the city but most householders still used the cheaper oil lamps. Council left it to the private company to provide Sydney's lighting for the next half-century.

It was a different matter in 1904, when the Lady Mayoress switched on the first electric street lights at Pyrmont Power Station. Sydney Council took on the provision of electricity to both

private customers and suburban councils. In the 1920s, there was an explosion in domestic consumption as people enthusiastically acquired the new-fangled electrical gadgets. Council's huge Electricity Department was unable to keep up with the demand. This, combined with a corruption scandal at Bunnerong Power Station, led to the creation of Sydney County Council in 1935 to generate and supply electricity. This later became the NSW Electricity Commission.

An Unhealthy City - Water & Sewerage

Until it became polluted from over-use in the 1820s, the freshwater Tank Stream was the town's water supply. By 1839, convicts working under Thomas Busby had carved out water tunnels from a swamp in what is now Centennial Park to Hyde Park. This was called Busby's Bore. Pipes conveyed water to standpipes at various parts of the town and water-carters sold water at one shilling a cask. Council had connected some 72 private houses to the main water pipes by 1844 but their inability to improve the supply was a major reason for their sacking in 1853. In later years, dams were built at Botany and Bunnerong and reservoirs at Paddington and Woollahra and the water mains were gradually extended beyond the Council's boundaries. Supply was often erratic, water was not always pure, and in dry periods it was rationed.

The sewerage system was even worse with raw sewage being discharged directly into Sydney Harbour. After a series of near catastrophes, fraud allegations, and investigations, legislation in 1880 enabled the construction of a new dam on the Upper Nepean and a sewage outfall at Bondi. All this was beyond Council's capacity to administer and in 1888 these responsibilities went to the new Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board

Rubbish & Rats

Garbage disposal is one function for which Council is still responsible but it was not always a priority. In the nineteenth century garbage was dumped indiscriminately. The bubonic plague in 1901 alerted Council to the health hazards of accumulations of rubbish throughout the city. Garbage was incinerated or tipped at Moore Park and then at Pyrmont, or punted out to sea. There was public outcry in 1929 when spring tides washed up assorted debris including rats and butcher's offal onto city beaches. After years of wrangling, the Pyrmont incinerator was rebuilt in 1937. More than just an incinerator, it was an architectural marvel designed by the American architect Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion Mahony Griffin. After being decommissioned in 1970, Council allowed it to deteriorate and, despite the best efforts of heritage groups, this unique structure was demolished in 1992.

Currently rubbish is dumped at the Council owned site at St Peters, and waste management is administered according to various state acts, including the NSW Waste Minimisation and Management Act 1995 which established the Inner City Waste Board.

For the good of your health

Today the Council is concerned with a wide range of health and environmental issues. Quality of services and cleanliness of premises and public areas are policed by health officers. From the beginnings of local government local by laws allowed the prosecution of offenders against the public health, but the general level of understanding of what was required to keep a city healthy was limited. The City Health Officer was a part time employee with an independent medical practice who did little more than offer advice to aldermen who had little expertise to deal with the health problems that kept infant mortality rates high and visitations of infectious diseases frequent.

The Nuisance Inspector oversaw a range of regulations from markets inspections to kite flying to house-to-house inspections. By the early twentieth century there was also involvement in infant health protection and maternal education.

In 1896 the first state public health act was passed. This was not a case of the state taking over. It was more an expansion by all authorities into the new realm of public health concerns.

City Planning – or the lack of it

By the early 1870s, Sydney's urban population was more than 135, 000 people , many of them crowded into unventilated housing with little or no drainage. Under the new Corporation Act of 1879, Council gained control over insanitary and unsafe buildings but it had to share this power with a government-appointed City of Sydney Improvement Board. During the 1880s, the City Health Officer and the Nuisance Inspector ordered the demolition of many slum areas. Others remained, however, and when bubonic plague threatened Sydney in 1900, Council was held responsible for failing to eradicate the rats blamed for the public health scare. The State government took over Council's health powers and resumed the wharves and slums of The Rocks and Millers Point, placing them under the control of the newly formed Sydney Harbour Trust.

When Council received further powers to demolish slums in 1905, large residential areas of Ultimo, the Haymarket, Camperdown, Chippendale and Surry Hills were cleared for commercial and industrial development.

Many of these demolitions had been recommended in the 1909 Royal Commission on the Improvement of Sydney. There were years of disruptive street-widening and construction projects in central Sydney.

Another strand of development thinking involved recommendations for 'Greater Sydney'. Numerous proposals in the twentieth century to enlarge the boundaries of the city and to give it more powers were routinely knocked back by state governments. The most recent inquiry into boundaries occurred in 2001, but currently there has been no implementation of any change.

From 1957, the city's skyline changed dramatically when the 1912 restriction on building heights was lifted. When it was built in 1962, the 26-storey AMP building was Sydney's tallest but not for long. Council's town planning efforts had little effect on Sydney's rampant development. In 1964, ultimate authority was vested in the State Planning Authority (SPA), empowered to overturn local development decisions.

The 1960s and 1970s saw profound physical change and landmarks like Anthony Horderns and the Regent Theatre were demolished. Many felt Sydney was disappearing too fast. Under Council's City of Sydney Strategic Plan in 1971, massive commercial redevelopment was planned for Woolloomooloo. Helped by the Federal Government and 'Green Bans' imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation, the Woolloomooloo Resident Action Group (WRAG) managed to avert wholesale demolition and acquire some low-income medium density housing.

In 1988, the Central Sydney Planning Committee, including both Council aldermen and ministerial appointees, was set up to approve major development applications, thus removing significant decisions from the City Council. The role of the Land and Environment Court in overturning decisions of the Council and of the Central Sydney Planning Committee is currently the subject of considerable criticism and comment.

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