

THE TRULY HONORABLE MR MACK

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Note: I have re-published this article as a tribute and due to the passing of Ted Mack. It was written following an interview with him in 1999.

By Kevin Glancy

I was fortunate to spend some time recently in the company of Ted Mack and his wife Wendy. The meeting took place in their North Sydney home. A remarkable sandstone building that Ted shamefully admits he's been trying to finish for the last 30 years. To sit in the company of a man who's listed as one of Australia's National Living Treasures and the only Australian to have ever been elected to all three levels of Government as an Independent, was rewarding enough. But the visit was made even more memorable by the delicious homemade, pumpkin soup that Wendy served. I think it was the best pumpkin soup I have ever tasted and it took the chill out of an otherwise cold winter's day.

We talked about the past, the present and the future. We talked about the role of democracy in Australia through Federal, State and Local Government. About the Republic and even about the North Sydney Bears and although Ted Mack might not live on the Central Coast I found many of his comments highly relevant. Particularly in view of the Bears move to Grahame Park, the upcoming Local Government Council Elections and November's Republican Referendum.

To those who have always supported Ted Mack, he's been the peoples' politician. A truly independent man who, throughout his long political career, belonged to no party but his own. The only people who benefited from Ted's party were his constituents. Unlike the major political parties, there were no vested interests lurking in Ted Mack's background. No big

developers or businessmen. No United Nations Agreements, World Trade Organization Treaties or an International Monetary Fund telling him that Australia must have a GST – Ted wouldn't have listened anyway, because Ted Mack has only ever listened to the people he served.

But if you've never heard of Ted Mack I can assure you that he will be remembered by many. Because although he was a lone voice in Australian politics, Ted Mack never wavered in his solitary quest to make Australia a true and genuine democracy. Never weakened in his determination to remove politicians from their self-created pedestals. Their perks of office, their overseas trips and their over generous, self-awarded retirement benefits.

Had Ted Mack been a political party you can be sure of one thing. Australia would now be run by its citizens. Not by the outside influence of a global order that, while it might be considered a necessary consequence of progress, our governments continually surrender to, instead of making sure that all Australians actually benefit by such an order.

Unfortunately for all of us, Ted Mack was never a political party, simply the Independent Federal Member for North Sydney. But when he left parliament for the last time, he left with something that most politicians desire, but can never achieve. He left with our respect, retiring one day before he was due to qualify for those generous retirement benefits. Those same rewards that he believed politicians had unfairly granted themselves while constantly telling the Australian people to tighten their belts.

Considering the time he served and how he served, Ted Mack undoubtedly deserved more than just the ordinary pension he was left with. But he stood by his own principles and left parliament with his integrity intact. It's a priceless and rare commodity in the world of politics and you can bet that it's the very reason he won't be missed by the major parties.

That, and his belief that people, whether by using citizen initiated referenda or any other genuine democratic process should dictate the course that governments take, certainly not the version we have now with our entrenched, two party preferred system. You see, Ted Mack's version of a democracy is a real democracy, something the major players in Canberra would never ever want the people of Australia to experience. However, for at least seven years in the eighties thanks to Ted Mack, North Sydney ratepayers enjoyed the closest thing to true democracy experienced anywhere in Australia and it's a pity that more of us couldn't have shared that same unique experience.

I had been curious to meet Ted Mack ever since I had heard that he had switched sides in the republican debate. Curious because, not only was Ted Mack elected as a delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention with the largest personal vote of any candidate, he went to the convention as a pro republican delegate. But while Ted is still committed to the republic in the long term, he believes the ARM model that is being put to the vote in November is a "dangerous piece of work" and like other eminent pro republicans who have followed him to join the "Vote No" side of the debate, he believes with good reason that the proposed model is "seriously flawed" – but more about that later.

Prior to the 70's Ted Mack didn't see himself as a politician. In fact he was an architect and as such, in the 60's was responsible for all Public Hospitals in NSW. Later on, his profession was to play an important part in the manner and the way, as Mayor of North Sydney, he set about rebuilding North Sydney Oval and if you've ever sat and watched cricket or football at that beautiful ground, thanks to Ted Mack, you would be hard pressed to work out which is the old and which is the new in this splendid example of cost effective public works.

But even before his political career began Ted Mack was

passionate about the need for true democracy. As he says. "People, not politicians should shape government policy and that governments should constantly reflect the wishes of the people and not the assumed wishes of the people as they often do."

So as a man who has always practiced what he preached, inevitably such a strong belief would lead Ted Mack to the political stage, because that would be the only place that he could attempt to effect change.

Ted Mack's political career began in 1974 as an Alderman with North Sydney Council, but the fun really started in 1980 when he was elected Mayor. It was here that he brought about the most sweeping changes to local government that Australia has ever seen. Firstly, he threw away the perks of office, the flash cars, the overseas trips and secondly, he did what would be considered by most major party politicians as blasphemous. He put the control of the North Sydney Council directly into the hands of the people who had elected him – the ratepayers. Of course governments at any level should be servants of those who elect them, but unfortunately in Australia, politicians once elected often completely lose sight of how they got there.

To ensure that this wasn't the case Ted divided the council area into precincts and installed the first true democratic approach to local government – Citizen Initiated Referenda or CIR, as it's more commonly referred to. This process meant that nothing was done in council without the approval of the majority of all ratepayers by way of referenda voting and for those here on the Central Coast, who worry about certain aspects of Council behaviour, the use of CIR would at the very least ensure that those in local government would act appropriately, as servants of the people.

It will be interesting to see if any candidates in the upcoming local council elections have CIR as a core policy.

Critics of CIR would tell you that it's unwieldy, unnecessary or too costly. But how much is a true democratic system of government really worth? Even regardless of the answer, Ted Mack and the ratepayers of North Sydney are living proof that CIR works very efficiently and it certainly isn't costly.

Just stroll around North Sydney and look at the unique bus shelters, the distinctive street signs, the sporting facilities, including a superb oval that actually pays for itself. Above all check out the rates that residents currently pay to live in North Sydney, because they are still amongst the lowest. When Ted Mack became Mayor rates accounted for 66% of Council revenue. After introducing CIR and running council like a company with its residents acting as "shareholders" he was able to reduce that figure to only 38%. During that time a lot was achieved and while Ted Mack established democracy, "Warts and all!" as he puts it, North Sydney developed rapidly and smoothly, while rates actually went down. Most of that improvement is still in evidence today, over ten years later. So much for the unwieldy or costly nature of Citizen Initiated Referenda.

I asked Ted about his long relationship with the Bears at North Sydney and find that he doesn't have too many kind words to say about that particular association. "As the Council we could never seem to do enough for them. They had full use of North Sydney Oval and a practice ground but they always wanted more and of course in the end they left."

The way Ted spoke of the Bears it was obvious that he was quite happy to see the Bears leave North Sydney and he asked me about Grahame Park and how our own Gosford Council were getting along with the Bears. Having provided him with my observations we moved on to a much more interesting subject, something else that in, life after politics, Ted Mack is really concerned about – Australia's move towards a republic.

It's on record already that Ted Mack will be voting "no" at

November's Republican Referendum and yet Ted Mack wants Australia to eventually become a republic, so I asked him why not this time?

"Firstly, in the interests of getting it right, it's not something that should be rushed. If we want to become a republic then the power of the monarchy by convention, must be replaced by the power of the people....That's the definition of a republic. The people must be sovereign, the so called President or whatever must be a representative of the people, not one elected by the two party political system as the Turnbull republic wants. More sinister is the fact that the ARM model gives the Prime Minister the power to dismiss the president without any reason nor explanation and that in itself is very dangerous."

Ted tells me how Harry Evans, the Clerk of the Senate likened that particular aspect of the ARM model to a game of cricket, in which the captain of the team that's ahead could change the Umpire in the middle of the game. As Ted says, "Very handy, particularly if the Captain thinks he's about to be sent off!"

Ted continues warming to the discussion. "Look! While the Australian Constitution needs reform, it does contain two outstanding features. Firstly, the separation of powers and secondly, the exclusive right of the people to change the Constitution. Can you imagine what could be done to the Constitution by the powerbrokers in this country without that protection? Many in the media and academia know that if the referendum is carried there will be no separation of powers instead, a fundamental concentration of power and a weakening of any democratic strength we have left. Yet they continue to defend these changes by pretending that it's simply about substituting one of us for the queen."

Finally, I asked Ted why he thought the move towards a republic was being handled so badly with a model that was obviously suspect. His response didn't surprise me. "The

answer lies in a fundamental distrust of democracy and the desire to eliminate any source of power outside the two party system, because genuine democracy is a major handicap to corporatism and centralisation of power. The ARM model is designed to remove any such handicap to that kind of power.”

I think many would agree with Ted’s comments considering the lengths that the major parties have gone in the past to restrict the possibility of any other party getting in the way. Whether by combining as they did in the last Federal Election to use any means whatsoever in order to stop One Nation or, by using a two party preferred voting system that clearly leaves no room for genuine democracy. So it shouldn’t surprise anyone that the move towards a republic is similarly tainted.

As I drove away from the Mack residence in North Sydney leaving their warm hospitality behind, I wondered about November’s referendum and the many issues raised by Ted Mack. By the time I reached Gosford I had made my mind up about one thing. No matter which side of the fence you might be on as we head towards the Republican Referendum. If along the way you become confused, swayed by emotional arguments or nationalistic jingoism from one side to the other, I know which side I’ll be on. It will be the side Ted Mack’s on. Why? Because Ted Mack has already proved during his long political career that he’s always been on our side and more importantly, he can be trusted – beyond any shadow of doubt.

