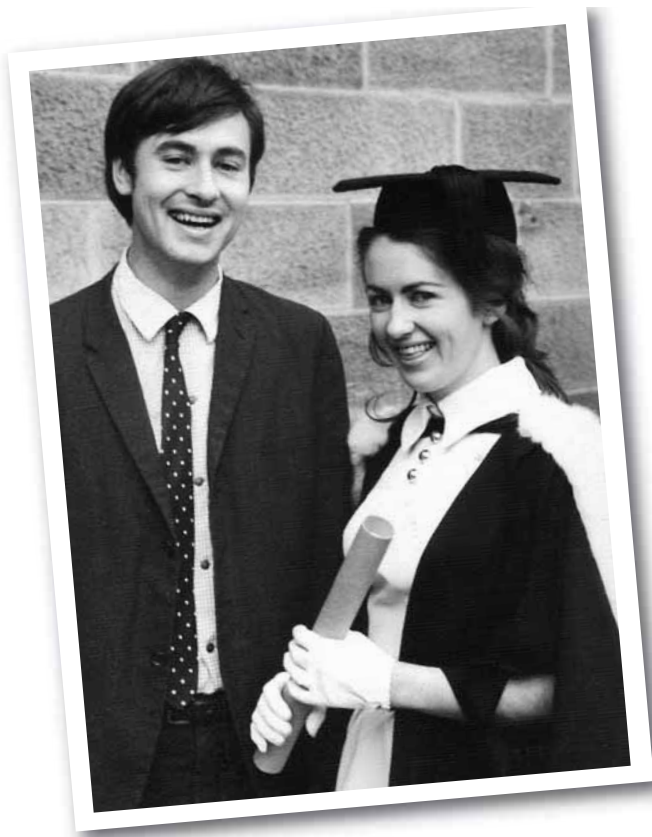


Independent's Day

The Moores in 1967 and 2007



For two decades Clover Moore was a lone public voice for people power, the livable city and honesty in government. Now, her time and ideas have come.

Geraldine O'Brien* reports

It's a curious thing about Australians: historically, we've always clustered in cities and now, when 50 per cent of the world's population are city dwellers, here it's a whopping 64 per cent.

Yet it's still easier to whip up sympathy for drought-stricken farmers than it is to stir informed debate on the future of our cities. There have been sporadic attempts: back in the 1970s, Gough Whitlam and Tom Uren worked to provide a few basics – such as sewerage systems – for Sydney's forgotten west. Paul Keating and Brian Howe tried again with the Building Better Cities program, swiftly dumped after 1996.

Sydney, in particular, has been the laissez-faire city, lolling by its gorgeous harbour and river system, its scalloped coastline, with not much thought for the "urb" itself. The *suburbs* were where life happened for most people.

The city was where you went to work, maybe. It was where some who continued the fine traditions of the Rum Corps could get rich. It was also a political battleground, with a scattering of urban poor who didn't have much say in anything, so it could be expanded or contracted at political whim, according to the times.

* Geraldine O'Brien is a Sydney journalist specialising in urban issues. She is a part-time writer at City of Sydney

The concept of “city” as a political, social, financial and cultural organism was notably absent.

Long neglect, and creeping gentrification, changed all that. In the following decade, so, too, did financial deregulation and the growth of the knowledge economy, which eventually positioned cities around the world as drivers of their national economies.

The conjunction has been a fortuitous one for Clover Moore, the Sydney University alumnus who has gone from battling for decent swings for the kids in her local Redfern park to battling for decent infrastructure in Australia’s largest city.

The path has been unusual, to say the least.

At Sydney University, Clover Collins – the girl from Gordon – worked in Fisher Library to pay her way through. There was little time for student politics but she plunged with enthusiasm into university social life, and by night she studied archaeology, English, history and a year of Biblical Studies. “I wasn’t planning a life in politics at the time,” she now says drily.

She spent a year at Sancta Sophia College, went to Teachers’ College on a scholarship, graduated one week in May, married young architect (and fellow Sydney graduate) Peter Moore the following week, and after a short stint in Sydney left for the obligatory “year in London” – a year which stretched to five.

Those years left two legacies. Extensive travel through Europe – Italy, Greece and Spain especially, the “pilgrimage to all the Romanesque churches”, developed for her “A real love of the built environment and a sense of how important it is. There was the magic of street life, of small bars, and cafes with families having lunch together. At some level I recognised that this is what I really like.”

The unplanned birth of their first child, Sophie, brought another kind of recognition.

“We were living in a city of 18 million people and really I knew no-one.” But the young first-time mother found that the local council provided supervised playgrounds and well-staffed crèches, something unknown in her home town.

When they returned to Sydney, the difference was glaring. Although Peter had come from Canberra and she from “the leafy North Shore”, neither were drawn to suburbia and bought their first house in Bourke Street, Redfern, quite an adventurous move in the 1970s. It’s just across the lane from where they still live.

The local environment left much to be desired, however, especially for a mother with (by then) two small children.

“There was such a stark contrast with London and its beautiful parks and leafy streets. There were hardly any local parks and the urban environment was bleak and neglected, there was too much traffic.

“What parks there were were all asphalt and barbed wire, and locked up at night. I suppose the option a lot of people took was just to move, but I took up my first petition.”

A local alderman told her they couldn’t replace the park’s asphalt with grass because if they did, “you wouldn’t be able to see the broken glass”.

Moore persisted, however. Apparently always blessed with abundant energy, she organised a baby-sitting group, joined a vegetable co-op and set up the East Redfern Community Concern with the local doctor, the vicar and a group of neighbours meeting in her sitting room.

For three years they tackled local problems such as traffic and pollution and badgered South Sydney Council for more grass and street trees.

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Moore says now, with some truth, that the causes she espouses today are those that began in Redfern in the 1970s – they’re just on a larger scale.

When the council elections for South Sydney came around in 1980, developers were eyeing off Redfern and she and Peter feared that like nearby Randwick, it would be made over with three-storey brick walk-ups. “No-one else put their hand up” for council. Not surprising, perhaps, since it was the time of the infamous bashing of Peter Baldwin.

So, with her husband’s encouragement, Moore’s own hand went up. She already had the basis for her now-formidable network of community support. At that time, ironically, it included one Frank Sartor, then secretary of the South Sydney Resident Action Group. Moore was duly elected.

In one of Sydney’s periodic boundary changes, South Sydney was absorbed into the City where Moore was joined by Sartor, Jack Munday and other independents. The somewhat larrikin council was shut down by the State Government in 1987, just as Moore was poised for a tilt at the Lord Mayoralty. “We were sacked because we were opposing the spaghetti at Darling Harbour and the monorail, so they got rid of us.”

Incensed, Moore stood for the seat of Bligh (now Sydney), where she defeated the sitting Liberal, Michael Yabsley, while Sartor ran unsuccessfully for McKell, which was won by Labor’s Sandra Nori.

Around that time, someone asked her what she’d most like to achieve. She replied that she’d like to be “member for Bligh and Lord Mayor of Sydney”, a dual role that took her another 16 years to realise.

The wait was probably to her benefit. A few weeks ago, as Lord Mayor, Moore was invited to address the Property Council of Australia’s divisional lunch. In 1988, it would have been considered laughable for the heavies of the property industry to bother with a community-based independent, known if at all as an anti-development gadfly. By October 2007, it was a booked-out event, with more than 600 people wanting to hear the Lord Mayor outline her Council’s plans for “Sustainable Sydney 2030”.

The times have been good for Moore. Following the release of Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and the Stern Report, climate change has become the topic. Moore and her team of Independents on Council had put sustainability as a major issue in the 2004 elections and suddenly their cause was everyone’s – including that of business and the property industry.

She has said repeatedly that the community and business are driving the responses to global warming and adds in our interview (in late October) that “now it’s on the Federal election agenda as well. It’s just a pity it was only dragged in at the last moment.”

She often quotes the comment of New York’s Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, at the C40 summit in New York earlier this year, suggesting that a wholehearted response to the challenges of climate change is not inimical to business – rather, it is the only way business will survive.

If the boys at the big end of town haven’t exactly become fervent Moore acolytes, they do listen when she talks on sustainability, on the need for Federal support for the capital cities as drivers of the national economy, and the need for a workable and efficient transport system for Sydney. They’ve turned up to her Sustainable Sydney 2030 round tables, aimed at nutting out a vision for the City over the next generation. And at a recent lunch, she had, among others, Ken Morrison, the Property Council’s NSW Executive Director, speaking on Sydney’s transport needs, and Brendan Crotty from developers Australand, speaking on affordable housing.

Lunching with the devil, indeed! But Moore maintains that these men “get the message” about sustainability, that they understand the old silos of self-interest cannot create a livable and sustainable city, that – in a reversal of the old General Motors adage – what is good for the people of a city is good for business as well.

So where does that leave her residential community? “I still work very, very strongly with the community,” she responds. “It doesn’t have to be either/or. [Radio talk-back host] Alan Jones said to me in an interview not long ago that my time has come because the issues I’ve been talking about for years are now in the forefront of people’s minds.”

Indeed, it’s been fascinating to watch the trajectory of Moore’s press coverage from the (somewhat manufactured, you’d have to think) outrage when she first proposed her candidacy for Lord

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Mayor to the generally positive coverage she now receives. Even the “two jobs” sniping has gone away.

As she has pointed out, there was no criticism of Bob Carr being Premier and Arts Minister, or Morris Iemma being Premier and Minister for State Development, Minister for Citizenship and member for Lakemba. Nor was there criticism in the past of Ted Mack (one of her political heroes) being MP and Mayor of North Sydney, or of Harry Jensen and Pat Hills, both former Lord Mayors and members of Parliament.

The rules, it seems, are still slightly different for women. Especially an independent woman who romped home in the 2004 council elections with 43 per cent of the primary vote.

But she has also won plenty of popular support, notably with her recent call to amend the liquor laws to allow for small Melbourne-style bars in the city. Australian Hotels Association boss John Thorpe put his foot firmly in it when he scoffed that Sydneysiders “don’t want to sit in a hole, drinking chardonnay and reading a book”.

Moore didn’t have to lift a finger: letters columns and talkback were filled by irate people who wanted to do just that; websites and petitions got going; there was a glorious chardonnay-sipping, book-reading protest outside State Parliament.

In a flurry of “Me-Too”, the Iemma Government did a volte face in November and came down in favour of the Moore Chardonnay Bill (as it is popularly known). The pub industry may not take it lying down, however, so screw caps are not yet being cracked.

“What we’re doing are the sort of things that people want their city to be about. We’re about creating a better pedestrian and cycling environment, a city where it’s a pleasure for people to walk. We’re focusing on the urban environment and green spaces, on building a sense of community and a vibrant creative life.”

Her energy is remarkable. Parliamentary duties aside, she works long days at Council, then turns up at night and on weekends for the community consultations that are one of her great strengths.

Some, like Sydney University lecturer in Government, (and former Lismore City Councillor) Dr Lyn Carson, would like to see her take it further, and introduce the kind of “citizen juries” that West Australia’s Planning Minister has instituted.

Under this system, people chosen at random are gathered to debate development proposals, provided with expert advice, and left to come to a decision (which government isn’t obliged to accept). Public meetings, Dr Carson argues, only attract “the usual suspects” or those with an axe to grind. “Clover seems to me



With former President Bill Clinton in New York



Community concerns, community fun

to have considerable integrity and doesn't seem to run meetings as a mere PR exercise, but I'd like to see her take it that step further."

But, Dr Carson adds, "I think she's doing bloody well! I've got a lot of respect for any Independent who takes a position and leads."

For now, her most passionate leadership cause is the environment and climate change. The City's environment management plan sets ambitious targets to reduce and offset 100 per cent of all greenhouse emissions generated by council's own operations by next year.

By 2020, they plan that a quarter of electricity across the Local Government Area will come from renewable sources and that 20 per cent of all short trips in the City will be made by bicycle.

By 2014, they plan to reduce residential waste going to landfill by 66 per cent.

Water saving initiatives planned or already in place save the equivalent of 50 Olympic swimming pools a year and the City fleet (including the Lord Mayoral Prius) has been reduced by 30 per cent and is now carbon neutral.

The statistics go on and Moore practises what she preaches, joining a "bike bus" at least once a week to ride from Redfern to Town Hall and buying green power for home.

Sustainable Sydney 2030 is founded on the principles of a "green" economy, but it encompasses all areas of city life. It envisages, for instance, a "knowledge precinct" already in evidence around Broadway/Ultimo, with Sydney University, UTS, the ABC, the Powerhouse and Notre Dame University as the big magnets but with space for creative, "start-up" industries.

A key challenge will be maintaining affordability in a city ever more sorely pressed for space.

"This is a really big issue, and one we need to work with other tiers of government to resolve. We have to have affordable housing for students, nurses, police, teachers and arts workers, and it's critical that issue is addressed," she says.

She is keen to work with the universities on fostering the "knowledge precinct" but affordability is even more pressing. Perhaps, she says, the millions in super funds that are being invested overseas could go here. In London, she points out, "Ken Livingstone is making 50 per cent of development affordable housing – but he has close support from Westminster."

It's unlikely the current State Government would come at any such proposal emanating from Lord Mayor Moore. But through the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors – a 40-year-old grouping that managed to make no impact at all until recently – she and other Mayors have lobbied the Federal Government for a "partnership" for Australia's capitals. The response was encouraging and she is a firm believer in partnerships to achieve much-needed changes in Sydney.

At present, she argues, "we are so over-governed in Australia and the disjunction between Federal, State and local is not serving the community. I think two tiers – Federal and regional – would be far more effective. But until that happens, then we must make a concerted effort to work co-operatively."

It's a theme she hammers tirelessly – cooperation with the Feds, with the State, with business and the community. She will stand again for Lord Mayor next September. In the unlikely event that she loses, she reckons she would be philosophical.

"I think you need to seize opportunities in life and I work hard at good government. But it's important to leave elections in the hands of the people. If I can think that I've done as much as I could, and I couldn't do more, then I'm fairly philosophical about the outcome."

That said, it's always possible that the State would pounce once more on the City, and then what? "One does have the four o'clock wake-ups," she admits. "But I say again, you've got to be philosophical. I get up in the morning and walk the dogs with Peter in Centennial Park. It's one of my sanity things."

Then Peter gives her a handful of vitamins, and she heads off to Town Hall for another day's work. ■



With Cllr. John McInerney and pedal pushers