

Local government

Forced amalgamations no guarantee of success

■ Harvey Grennan

Like NSW, the Tasmanian government has a policy of no forced council amalgamations. Eighteen months after an independent panel produced the so-called "Munro report" recommending a merger of five councils into a single Hobart mega-council, it is considered a dead duck.

The "Munro" in the report is Jude Munro, a member of the Independent Local Government Review Panel which last week recommended mega-councils for the cities of Sydney, Parramatta and Liverpool. Ms Munro once managed a mega-council, Brisbane, which is the biggest council in the country, a job that pays better than the Prime Minister's.

Historically, few council mergers are voluntary like when Con-

cord and Drummoyne became Canada Bay in 2000. In 1994, then premier Jeff Kennett sacked every council in Victoria and slashed the number of councils by nearly two-thirds. South Australia followed in 1997 with voluntary mergers but it was "do it or else" from the govern-

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ment. Queensland and the Northern Territory forced through mergers in 2008 and Western Australia has them in train. There were forced amalgamations in NSW in 2004 including Sydney and South Sydney councils but small councils like Strathfield, Hunters Hill and

Ashfield were left alone. Part of the Hurstville CBD remains in the Kogarah council area.

"At the end of the day, there have been very few successful amalgamations in Australia that haven't been led or dictated by a central authority," says the lord mayor of Hobart, Damon Thomas. Kennett agreed last week that a voluntary system of mergers would not work.

The head of the NSW panel, Graham Sansom, has not always been a fan of mega-councils. "What's happened elsewhere is so variable that it's hard to draw any definite conclusions," Professor Sansom told the *Herald* in 2001. Brian Dollery, the director of the Centre for Local Government at the University of New England, says extravagant claims of benefits from council mergers have never been achieved.



Mix: Part of Hurstville's CBD is in the Kogarah council area. Photo: Jane Dyson