

Roadblocks to diversity in local government in New South Wales, Australia: changing narratives and confronting absences in diversity strategies

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Abstract

The 2021 local government elections in New South Wales (NSW), Australia delivered a record 39.5% female representation, up from 31.2% in the previous election. The increased number of women elected to councils can be read as evidence of the success of a diversity strategy centred on encouraging and equipping women, and other under-represented groups, to stand for election. However, without detracting from the value of these initiatives, their capacity to achieve a councillor body reflective of the general population is limited. People of non-European ancestry, particularly women of ‘colour’ remain grossly underrepresented, while the gains in women’s representation will fail to reach gender parity unless the practices that sustain male overrepresentation, particularly by Anglo and other ‘white’ European men, are challenged. This article draws upon qualitative interviews with councillors to offer fresh readings of conventional explanations for a lack of diversity in Australian local government, while also underscoring the importance of addressing issues that are currently neglected in ‘technical’ approaches.

Keywords: NSW, Australia, representation, ethnic and cultural diversity, gender, local government

Introduction

Across Australia, much of local government continues to conform to the ‘male, pale and stale’ stereotype, with ‘white’ men overrepresented among elected councillors. However, in the country’s most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), the results of local government elections in December 2021 give some hope that progress is being made in diversifying councils. Women now comprise 39.5% of councillors elected (44.1% in Greater Sydney, 37.4% in the rest of NSW) (Raue 2022), up from 31.2% in the previous elections (2016/17)¹ (OLG 2019).² There are no all-male councils, and women

¹ Elections for some 20 newly-merged councils were delayed by a year.

² <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/44550> [Accessed 5 January 2022].

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are a majority on a record 27. These improvements in gender equity can be seen as evidence of the success of the Office for Local Government's (OLG) 'Stand for your Community – Diversity Counts' campaign.³ Training, workshops, support networks and online tools developed and delivered by Women for Election,⁴ Politics in Colour and the Australian Local Government Women's Association (NSW) have had a positive impact, as found by this author in research reported elsewhere.⁵ The concurrent agenda to increase representation by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and culturally and linguistically diverse people has seemingly also borne positive, albeit more modest, results, including in non-metropolitan regions. The question is, are current approaches sufficient to ensure continuing progress towards councils that reflect the broader population they are expected to represent?

Celebrating recent gains is justified, yet two notes of caution need to be struck. First, while improvements in gender equity have seen rapid improvement, representation of Australians of non-European ancestry remains at critically low levels. At the federal level, only 4% of members of parliament (MPs) and senators are of non-European ancestry (Soutphommasane 2017). The proportionality index for Asian-Australians is 0.21 (where 1 is perfect representation, i.e. matching the proportion of the population), compared to 0.64 for women (Kwok and Pietsch 2017). Analysis of councils in the previous term (2016–17 to 2021) estimated that 92.46% of councillors in NSW are 'white' (which this paper deploys as a social category that affords privileges and 'social invisibility').⁶ Women of non-European ancestry were grossly underrepresented, comprising only 6.06% of councillors in Greater Sydney in the October prior to the 2021 elections, and a tiny 2.28% across NSW as a whole. While not dismissing the importance of achieving gender equity, success in this regard should not blind us to what has become an increasingly urgent need to increase cultural and ethnic equity in Australian political institutions.⁷

The second note of caution relates to future progress. Improvements in diversity will continue to be incremental if we rely *only* on initiatives to encourage and equip underrepresented groups to contest and win elections. Governments are prone to 'rendering technical' complex political processes as easily narrated and rectified problems with a technical or managerial solution (Ferguson 1990; Li 2007). Encouragement, 'capacity building' and provision of information to target groups are posited as *the*

³ <https://www.olg.nsw.gov.au/public/about-councils/become-a-councillor-section/stand-for-your-community-diversity-counts/> [Accessed 7 January 2022].

⁴ Formerly Women for Election Australia.

⁵ Analysis and writing up of this research is ongoing, but preliminary findings were shared with key stakeholders in a confidential report, available on request from the author.

⁶ That 'white' is a social not biological category is underlined by the shifting classification of who is, and is not, 'white'. For much of Australia's immigration history, southern and eastern European migrants were not considered 'white', but today they (including the author) enjoy social invisibility and privileges on account of being part of 'white'-majority Australia. Report is available here: <https://politicsincolour.com/publications>

⁷ The same could be said of other social categories that are underrepresented; in particular, people living with a disability. Here the literature is even more lacking in Australia, and there are only a handful of studies globally.

solution to their underrepresentation, as these interventions are relatively easy to deliver compared to initiatives that seek to transform structural conditions (Douglas-Jones and Schaffner 2017). Yet there are limitations to candidate training that encourage women (and women of ‘colour’)⁸ to ‘lean in’, including an emphasis on women’s supposed lack of ambition, skills and qualifications, rather than the conditions that enable ‘white’ men to remain overrepresented (Piscopo 2019). Further, training and capacity building place the onus on women and people of ‘colour’ to be the agents of change, asking very little of the ‘white’ men (and in some cases ‘white’ women) who dominate politics.

Without under-estimating the political barriers to delivering programmes that challenge the status quo, an additional problem is a lack of knowledge of, and/or unwillingness to confront, uncomfortable truths about the more persistent roadblocks to diversity. While there is a burgeoning literature on women’s political underrepresentation in Australia (Pini 2006; Conroy 2011; Carson et al. 2021; Wilson 2021), less research has examined the underrepresentation of non-European ethnic groups (Maddison 2010; Kwok and Pietsch 2017; Pietsch 2018), less again on the intersections of race and gender in Australian politics (Milione 2019), and none, as far as this author has discovered, in the arena of local government. This paper therefore builds upon previous studies that have foregrounded the ideological and structural conditions that sustain political dominance by majority men in NSW councils (Gray 1991; Pini 2006). Its main contribution is to highlight the discursive practices⁹ that reproduce certain taken for granted ideas around diversity, thereby frustrating attempts to transform local politics. The aim is to offer an alternative perspective on certain enduring issues – the incompatibility between caring responsibilities and women’s ‘fit’ within local political cultures – while also presenting evidence for uncomfortable truths: the need to increase remuneration, address incumbency logjams, and tackle racism.

The next section examines the literature on underrepresentation of women and racialised minorities in politics, with a focus on local government and the Australian context. It asserts a need to focus on the mechanisms perpetuating the overrepresentation of men and ‘white’ Australians. There is then a brief section on methods before the paper presents its empirical material. Subsequent sections interrogate ‘common-sense’ understandings of diversity, seeing how they work to reproduce as much as they explain underrepresentation of women. The paper then raises some uncomfortable truths that are downplayed or ignored altogether in strategies to achieve a more diverse councillor body, before concluding by underlining the research opportunities on these topics in the local government sphere.

⁸ The author uses the term women, and people of ‘colour’, in solidarity with collaborative partners: Women of Colour Australia, and Politics in Colour. The term is not a descriptor, but a recognition of shared experiences by visible-minorities/people of non-European ancestry in Australia.

⁹ Discursive practice is a theory from Foucauldian understandings of knowledge and power, and refers to how practices (including and extending beyond communication with words) produce social worlds.

Identifying the problem as one of overrepresentation

Women's political representation in Australia has increased fastest at the local level of government compared to state or federal parliaments (Conroy 2011; Pini and MacDonald 2011). Nonetheless women remain underrepresented in Australian councils for many of the same reasons they remain a minority in politics more generally. Carson et al.'s (2021) recent study underlines the ongoing salience of the unequal burden of domestic work alongside other responsibilities. Council amalgamations – which NSW implemented just prior to the 2017 elections – have been shown to have had a negative impact on women's representation in Queensland (Conroy 2011) and New Zealand (Drage and Tremaine 2011; McGregor and Webster 2017). Discrimination is rife in local government, including exclusionary practices to “*marginalize and discredit women representatives*” (Pini and McDonald 2011, p. 2). Bullying, harassment, unrealistic workloads and council culture have led to poor retention rates among female councillors in Victoria, which – as Wilson (2021) rightly states – is as important an issue as getting more women to stand in the first place.

Attention to the ways hegemonic masculinities and institutional norms perpetuate the dominance of councils by some men turns the problem of underrepresentation of women into one of the overrepresentation of men (Hughes 2013). Bjarnegård's (2013) seminal study revealed the important role of institutional practices, modes of relationality and processes of democratisation in enabling men's hold over Thai politics. Similarly oriented work has revealed mechanisms that sustain male dominance in Australian politics, through a culture of denial, gendered rules of appointment and advancement, and backlash to efforts to change the status quo (Crawford and Pini 2010; Galea and Chappell 2021). Councils have been shown to be highly gendered institutions, where the ‘standard’ councillor is a white, heterosexual, ‘masculine’ man (Gray 1991; Pini 2006). These studies not only centre the problem of male overrepresentation in studies of Australian politics, but also highlight the active role men play in sustaining male dominance.

The overrepresentation of *particular* men (those that fit hegemonic masculinities) draws attention to the underrepresentation of men positioned further down gender hierarchies (Bjarnegård and Murray 2018). Despite the gravity of the problem, the literature examining the underrepresentation of visible-minorities (who on account of their name, phenotypical features or skin colour are subject to racial categorisation) is relatively less developed. Extant research has revealed that underlying prejudices and discrimination within political parties make it difficult for ethnic minorities to get ahead (Kwok and Pietsch 2017). The professionalisation of parties and the need to demonstrate loyalty disadvantages newcomers, while geographical dispersal means parties have no incentive to include ethnic minorities (Pietsch 2018). Selection processes favour homogeneity, as “*internal candidate selection rules, practices, and subcultures... are distinctively competitive and adversarial*” (Kwok and Pietsch 2017, p. 123). In this way, the ‘political opportunity’ structure (Bird et al. 2010) disadvantages visible-minorities in Australia, as they lack collective strength within an unresponsive political system.

Shifting the orientation of the problem from one of *underrepresentation* of visible-minorities to the *overrepresentation* of ‘white’ Australians is again an important move. Political institutions and spaces are racialised, enabling ‘white’ domination and the exclusion, or rendering as other, of non-‘white’ bodies (Embrick and Moore 2020). Maddison (2010, p. 663) describes Australian parliaments as “*fundamentally white institutions*” with the model politician who can act neutrally and represent all people being a ‘white’ male of a particular age and class. As Puwar’s (2004, p. 8) productive reading of British parliaments demonstrates:

Social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy. There is a connection between bodies and space, which is built, repeated and contested over time. While all can, in theory, enter, it is certain types of bodies that are tacitly designated as being the ‘natural’ occupants of specific positions.

Women of ‘colour’, who are both gendered and racialised, are particularly “*marked out as trespassers...circumscribed as being ‘out of place’*” (Puwar 2004, p. 8). Discursive practices reproduce (or can potentially disrupt) the norm that ‘white’ men are the ‘natural occupants’ of the position.

Milione (2019) offers one of the few studies to examine Australian politics through an explicitly intersectional lens. She identifies barriers Indigenous and culturally diverse women face at each stage of their pathway to political office, including structural and cultural factors that make women from diverse backgrounds less likely to run; the systemic barriers to pre-selection in winnable seats; and the lack of support proffered to contesting candidates. Her valuable report can be augmented through attention to how these systemic barriers are reproduced over time. Regrettably under-utilised in studies of gender and race in Australian politics, Gray’s (1991) ethnographic study of Cowra (a rural town in NSW) in the 1980s shows how values and beliefs about the role of the council at that time sustained privileged access to political power by men from certain families. Pini (2006) similarly examines how “*gendered subjectivities, knowledges and definitions are embedded in... local governance... [so that] class, sexuality, cultural background and other subject positions intersect with masculinity/femininity to include or exclude particular people or agendas*” (Pini 2006, p. 406). As these ideological resources are socially produced they can, however, be resisted and transformed.

These studies point to productive ways to reconsider diversity (or lack thereof) in NSW councils. We need to shift the problem from being about the underrepresentation of women and visible-minorities to the overrepresentation of men, particularly ‘white’ men. We need to enquire into the *process* of domination and not only the *consequences* of the state of dominance (Leonardo 2004); that is, identify the practices, norms and subjectivities that sustain masculine dominance and ‘white’ supremacy in local government. Doing so deprives people who are privileged within these systems of their innocence, demanding attention as to how they actively create and reproduce the conditions of their dominance, even if unwittingly (Leonardo 2004). Our narratives that identify the most critical barriers to diversity are also discursive practices that can reproduce, as much as they challenge, the status quo. Highlighting

these discursive practices draws attention to the need for strategies that challenge ideology and ‘common sense’ as a necessary complement to approaches that focus on the impact of – and reforms to – electoral practices (Bargh 2016; Vowles and Hayward 2021) and capacity building (Piscopo 2019).

Methodology

This research examines diversity in NSW local government from the perspectives of councillors. Between January and June 2021, interviews were conducted with 24 councillors (Cr), comprising: 16 women (F) and 9 men (M); 10 visible-minority (VM) and 15 ‘white’ (Wh); 18 Labor party, 4 Greens, 2 Independents and 1 Liberal. Contact was made with all councillors across three councils, and then selectively beyond to interview sufficient numbers of councillors of non-European ancestry (in total, councillors from nine councils were interviewed). Potential participants were approached a maximum of three times, with 35 not responding/unable to participate, for a response rate of 41%. Interviews were conducted in person, via Zoom or phone, some recorded and transcribed, others reconstructed from notes, based on the preferences of the respondents. Interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to 120 minutes, with an average of around 80 minutes. Two were email responses to questions. This main source of data is augmented by observation of council meetings and events, and ethnographic research of the 2021 election campaign including following 11 women aspirants (As). The challenges faced by these aspirants will be explored in future research, and the following analysis touches only briefly on those elections.

The rationale for this research approach was to centre the lived experiences of councillors. Councillors have navigated political terrains to become elected, and have formed a view of what council work entails grounded in experience. Observation of council meetings helped validate claims made in interviews, and provided data on how councils work in practice. The interview strategy allowed respondents considerable leeway to direct the discussion. Councillors’ interpretations were read as valid theories that make sense of their world, but with additional attention to how their theories produced, as much as reflected, the phenomenon they explained. It is not a complete picture; a view of democracy is always a view from ‘somewhere’ (Garrido 2017). Important limitations include the small number of interviewees (although comparable to other research with political elites: see Conroy 2011; Maddison 2010). Interviewing councillors across different positionings enables a multi-dimensional view, yet results in a small number of responses from each positioning (only four visible-minority men councillors (VM/M-Cr) for example). The research is hence exploratory, rather than conclusive, aiming to reveal new lines of thinking and disrupt conventional understandings, but requiring further validation in future studies.

Discursive strategies to limit local government to 'blokey' pursuits

The role of local government has changed significantly in Australia in recent decades, now exceeding its traditional tasks of overseeing roads, rates and rubbish. Cost-shifting from state to local government, and changing demands for services by residents, have shifted the primary tasks of councils from solely 'services to property' to also include 'human services' (Dollery et al. 2008). As gender stereotypes allow women to more convincingly portray the role of 'community representative', the expanded remit of local councils seemingly benefits women electorally (Briggs 2000; Drage and Tremaine 2011). Yet the high numbers of women active in the community is not translating into council seats: "*The odd thing that I have always noticed is that there seem to be more women operating as local community activists than males, but they don't seem to move on to becoming elected councillors either as independents or through a party structure*" (Wh/M-Cr#6). Visible-minority women, particularly first-generation Australians involved in migrant associations, are perceived by some councillors as interested in service to their communities, rather than political power:

There are a lot of Indian[-Australian] women... in [non-representative] positions in council, like they run the domestic violence programmes...but I don't think they are interested in becoming politically active... And I don't know if it is a cultural thing, whether they don't want to do it (Wh/F-Cr#7).

Women are seen to have found their 'place' in issue-based community action, considered more effective or compatible with feminine subjectivities and gendered familial responsibilities.

The reasons women feel more comfortable, and effective, in community-based action, while feeling 'out of place' (Puwar 2004) and unable to get things done on council, needs interrogation, with attention placed on the practices and strategies that reproduce local government as a masculine domain. Gray (1991, p. 44) found that the ideology that NSW councils should "*operate much like management committees*" that "*attract no glamour*" helped sustain the position of a 'white' masculine elite that oversaw council activities in a responsible manner. In contemporary times, the idea that councillors foremost manage services to property persists: "*In the past, councils were perhaps seen as being about men's business: rates, rubbish, buildings, but actually this is only a part of what councils do. Nonetheless the perception is there... It is seen as a very blokey thing*" (Wh/M-Cr#19). The very pressures that expanded councils' roles have also allowed a return to a discourse of 'back to basics' based on (masculine) managerialism rather than (feminine) care. Additional responsibilities devolved from state to local level are unfunded, leading to financial pressure for councils (Dollery et al. 2008). Discursive struggles arise over what the priorities and role of council should be in 'cash-strapped' times, allowing the reassertion of ideologies of managerialism and fiscal responsibility over community and human services (see also Conroy 2011).

Observation of council meetings shows how a 'back to basics' discourse is articulated in ways that serve to reaffirm the 'white' man as the somatic norm and limit the scope of council activities. In Cumberland

council, the annual budget for grants to community organisations was slashed from \$400,000 to \$50,000, while the budgets for information systems, marketing and communications remained in the millions. Multiple attempts to increase support for community services have been debated within this council both along political party lines and in ways that intersect with gender and race. As women and visible-minority councillors speak of the importance of funding groups providing services to migrants and low-socio-economic households, other councillors question their financial competence. One male councillor said in debate: *“By virtue of a very analytic understanding of our financial affairs we are in a grave financial position”*, and described the call to restore the community grants as *“a stunt in financial instability”* that will detract from the core of services that the council provides.¹⁰ In making these claims, the councillor discursively posits community-based action and provision of human services as non-core, if not outside the remit of a council altogether.

The ‘back to basics’ discourse in this same council has also legitimised the reduction in council committees to only those required under the Local Government Act. Consultation demanded by one side of politics is frequently cited by the other as obstructionist, thereby reaffirming the *“technical bias in the agenda of local politics”* (Gray 1991, p. 78) that seeks *“smooth and efficient organisation”* (p. 76) rather than community responsiveness. Beyond its discursive effects, the material impacts are a loss of opportunities for political apprenticeship. One councillor explained how they had successfully diversified the ethnic make-up of their local party branches, but could not translate this into a more diverse council:

We have to try to encourage branch members to have more confidence speaking up... and invite them into various processes where they can learn the skills... If somebody was passionate about an issue, they could join a council committee and build relationships and confidence. But the current [council] leadership has closed most of these committees now (Wh/F-Cr#23).

Through obscuring the compatibilities between community, care and council work, and denying opportunities for political apprenticeship to women and visible-minorities, the status quo is maintained.

Notwithstanding the real financial difficulties that councils face, often contestations over what councils should do, or should prioritise, are ideological battles. As one councillor said: *“One thing that always gets banged on about is ‘roads, rates and rubbish’... That’s an ideological statement, a very narrow view of what local government can be”* (VM/M-Cr#14). As an ideology, or common-sense position, ‘back to basics’, ‘ratepayer value’ and ‘managerialism’ can be, and routinely are, challenged (Crehan 2016). These are not only struggles for what councils should do, but also who a councillor should be. In short, enquiry into why women, particularly women of ‘colour’, do not translate their community

¹⁰ Cumberland City Council meeting on 16 June 2021. The power balance has now shifted in this council, with many of these policies in a slow process of being reversed.

activism and volunteer activities into political ambition, needs to be considered alongside practices that diminish the complementarities between these two domains.

An alternative perspective to care and council work

Women's unequal share of household labour is a factor in their political underrepresentation at each level of government. Carson et al.'s (2021) recent study of Victorian councils found that despite women achieving a record 43.8% representation in the 2020 elections, there is a 'missing cohort' of women under the age of 45. Analysis of the electoral data show that women do not have a problem with electability (see also Carson et al. 2019), rather many women are not stepping forward due to 'role strain': caring responsibilities alongside paid work and often volunteer activities. The councillors in this study also spoke of the decision to delay candidacy until children were relatively independent, and/or elderly relatives no longer needed care. Women in particular are more likely to put political ambitions on hold until, in the words of one councillor, she could leave the kids at home "*without killing each other*" (Wh/F-Cr#4). Managing a busy household remains a barrier for many women, and some men.

Some councillors regretted delaying running for council: "*I wish I started early, but I didn't. I was starting towards the end of my career*" (Wh/F-Cr#17). The costs include shortened political careers:

For many years, I wanted to be on council but I just couldn't see myself being able to give the time that I felt that job would require... I bided my time for many years until our children were at the end of their high school years... On a personal level, I do regret that because I see how other people have gone on to other parts of politics and done other things... I see that I'm doing a good job and [think] what I could have achieved if I'd done this earlier... (Wh/F-Cr#12).

This councillor regretted the advice she gave to a woman aspirant with a young baby that she should wait: "*Maybe I shouldn't have done that because that could have affected her future success.*" Short tenures – when women enter politics late and hence have truncated careers – has been proven not to be a significant problem at the federal level in Australia (Joshi and Och 2021). Yet the available evidence (Carson et al. 2021) suggests that women councillors often enter politics late, potentially affecting the pipeline to higher levels of government (Allen 2013).¹¹

Other councillors suggest that incompatibilities between motherhood and council have been overemphasised. One female councillor gets frustrated that more women do not step forward: "*Many CALD¹² women do have family responsibilities, and are married with children. What they do not realise is that the council offers childcare... And it is not a full-time job. They do not know these things. So, there are a lot of misconceptions*" (VM/F-Cr#5). Aspirant support groups also challenge the idea that women with small children cannot fulfil the role of councillor. Caring allowances and the ability to remotely attend council meetings (thanks in large part to COVID-19) are cited as reasons young mothers

¹¹ The OLG (2017) diversity report provides statistics by gender and age but unfortunately not by both.

¹² Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD).

should not be deterred. One candidate notes on her public Facebook page: *“Women, of all ages and family situations, belong on council and with support like childcare and flexible meeting options, there are even more reasons why women like me can, and should, run.”* Not only is being a mother and councillor manageable, according to these women it is also critical that they have a place at the table.

Further, becoming a councillor can help redress the career sacrifices that many women make throughout their life-cycle. One aspirant (Wh/F-As#7) said that council was a way to translate her experience advocating for children and parents in the community into recognised professional skills valued in the job-market. Having taken several years out of the workforce, she sold the idea of running for council to her husband by saying: *“This should hopefully help me get a job.”* Councils provide professional development opportunities that can bolster the CVs of women seeking to re-enter the workforce. Another aspirant at the end of her career had given up re-entering the workforce after caring for elderly parents: *“People look at this woman in her 50s, I am supposedly non-functioning”* (Wh/F-As#10). For her, the most important motivation to become a councillor is the recognition, and to be able to use her skills and regain respect. Within gendered life-cycles, becoming a councillor may help re-entry into the workforce or new beginnings after active motherhood (see also Jakimow and Pragati 2021).

Motherhood and ideal models of womanhood are, however, used as a weapon to deter women or frustrate their political ambitions. Several aspirants said that they had received unsolicited ‘advice’ from sitting councillors as to how difficult it would be to juggle caring responsibility and council work. While some such comments may be well-meaning (such as Cr#12 above), others seemed less so, and were accompanied by misleading advice about the costs of campaigning and rules of eligibility. For other candidates, their status as mothers was used against them in pre-selection: *“I stood up at my branch meeting, and I gave a very powerful speech... people stood up afterwards and applauded. And then the first question was, are you sure you will be able to participate when you have two children? How many other children are you planning on having?”* (VM/F-Cr#20). That the questioner was a man from a refugee background added to her frustration: *“People in the ethnic community will ask things such as how many more children will you be having, and this just gives white men leverage to block our pre-selection.”* These challenges speak to the way patriarchy intersects with white-supremacy in ways that magnify the underrepresentation of women of ‘colour’.

Once elected, the supposed incompatibility of ‘motherhood’ and council work is a much-used weapon to make women, especially women of ‘colour’, feel ‘out of place’. The aforementioned councillor (VM/F-Cr#20) was attacked in her first council meeting, with one councillor offering the following argument against a provision of childcare allowance: *“By putting your hand up to run on council, one should be aware of circumstances in their life, and things that may inhibit or impinge their ability to*

carry that out effectively".¹³ The message was barely veiled: that people – read women – with childcare responsibilities had no place on council. The attacks have continued throughout her tenure, including a public investigation of her claims for caring allowance (no wrongdoing was found). She is not alone. In Victoria and NSW, women ('white' and visible-minorities) have been bullied out of claiming caring allowances due to the ammunition it provides their political adversaries.

While there is truth that juggling council work and caring responsibilities is a factor in women's underrepresentation on council, the *discourse* of this incompatibility is perhaps just as effective as its materiality in maintaining council as a masculine space. The reproduction of this supposed 'common sense', both as idea and as material fact, helps to sustain council as a masculine domain and men as the somatic norm in council chambers. Therefore, while provisions such as caring allowances and remote attendance of meetings are necessary, it is equally necessary to disrupt discourses of the incompatibility of motherhood and council work, and promote narratives underlining the complementarity of a councillor position with gendered life-cycles. A further important move can be to re-cast the problem itself, from a problem of women not having time for council, to a problem of them not being paid adequately for it.

Confronting the impact of low councillor remuneration on diversity

The following question was put to the former Minister for Local Government NSW, Shelley Hancock MP, in a forum for women aspirants organised by Women for Election:

*Are there any plans to increase [councillor] payment? As the breadwinner for my family I'm not really in a position to reduce my income and I also feel that this type of work should be remunerated appropriately. This is a possible barrier to many women wanting to run for local council.*¹⁴

Notwithstanding the minister's exceptional efforts to increase diversity on NSW councils, her response on this occasion was to evade the issue: "*You can make it what you want, put in the hours you want. You can go to every committee, answer every email and reach out to the constituency, or you can choose to balance council work with your job*". Councillor remuneration is kept separate to government strategy to increase the diversity of NSW councils, yet many councillors said it was a central consideration.

The importance of remuneration in the preliminary research led the author to conduct a survey of all NSW councillors (389 responses), the full results of which are presented elsewhere.¹⁵ The focus here is the impact of low pay and high workloads on who can become a councillor. The complexity of the role, which requires understanding of changing legislation and knowledge of operational and strategic

¹³ Cumberland City Council meeting 8 October 2017.

¹⁴ <https://wfea.org.au/women-for-election-in-conversation-with-the-hon-shelley-hancock-mp-24-february-2021/> [Accessed 7 January 2022].

¹⁵ Report available here: <https://politicsincolour.com/publications>

matters, all while being responsive to constituents, has increased the demands on councillors, leading to workloads in excess of 40 hours a week for some.¹⁶ Councillors frequently described their work as ‘full-time’ for part-time pay, and outlined the financial sacrifices they bore in order to undertake their council activities to a satisfactory level. This juggling is intensified for councillors with significant caring responsibilities. As one councillor said, women’s underrepresentation “*reflects the demands on women in employment and also looking after the family, which together does not leave a lot of room for council*” (Wh/M-Cr#19). ‘Role-strain’ of juggling family, paid employment and council work more accurately captures the reason for the missing cohort in councils (Carson et al. 2021). One answer to the enduring problem of women’s underrepresentation is then to increase councillor pay so that women (and men) do not need to balance it with full-time employment.

The impact of low remuneration on who can become a councillor is evident in interviews with aspirants. A single parent on income support said: “*It is a big concern... If you've got an independent source of wealth, it's not going to bother you at all... I don't know how many people they've had on my local council who are on income support*” (VM/F-As#9 aspirant). Another aspirant delayed running for council until she could cut her working hours: “*Yes, [councillor remuneration] is too low. That is why I refused to contest [from number one] last time... Unless you already are financially settled, and financially secure, you cannot*” (VM/F-As#8). The aspirant quoted above who sought to re-enter the workforce after a career break responded thus to the question of whether low remuneration was a disincentive to contest: “*Definitely my husband thinks so... If they want to attract people who have the skills, then comparing across the sectors, you need to pay them appropriately*” (Wh/F-As#7). Increasing pay is not the only answer, as many women will still be reluctant to interrupt career progression in order to take on a councillor role (Carson et al. 2021). Nonetheless, councillor remuneration must be considered in any serious discussion of gender equity in NSW councils.

While the impact on women’s underrepresentation seems clear, there are also impacts for men without an independent source of income, and for cultural and ethnic diversity. Being a councillor “*is not a full-time job, and this puts a lot of people off*”, as migrant families are often aspirational and want their children to have decent jobs (VM/M-Cr#3). Another councillor spoke of the difficulty in getting people to nominate for positions, even when they are actively trying to run a more diverse party ticket: “*I think the elephant in the room... it's part-time, the pay is non-existent... unless you're retired, you have to have another job*” (VM/M-Cr#14). Poor remuneration, tied to the low value placed on local government, makes it hard to sell running for council: “*This is a classic example of why people don't*

¹⁶ According to Local Government NSW (the state association of councils), councillors spent an average of 45.6 hours per week on their role in 2019, up from 21.9 hours in 2006 (LGNSW 2019, p. 9). The author’s survey revealed that a slim majority of councillors work less than 20 hours a week, but would do more if they could fit in council work alongside other paid employment.

want to get involved when there is no respect, when there is no dignity in what you're doing" (VM/M-Cr#16).

In addition to considering how low remuneration is an impediment to some groups becoming councillors, it is pertinent to ask who it serves. As early as the 1980s, paying councillors a small honorarium for substantial work was a means for political elites to maintain their dominance of councils. Gray (1991, p. 53) observed that serving on Cowra council "*demand[s] substantial personal resources. Participants are required to perform a demanding task in their own time*", suiting farmers, business-people and professionals. Several councillors saw low pay as a historical legacy, when city councils primarily operated to protect the interests of businesses. One said: "*It is a legacy structure... a hangover from 100 years ago when your rights as an elector are tied to land... it's effectively the weight of the business owner*", who paid rates and had political power (VM/M-Cr#14). For another, low pay and lack of superannuation was "*because it has always been men, who had jobs... and were quite often businessmen*" (Wh/F-Cr#7). While more women are now in business, and local government has itself diversified, remuneration has not changed. As a consequence, poor remuneration inhibits further diversification and enables the continued dominance of a male business elite (see also Briggs 2000; Drage and Tremaine 2011; Bonneau 2018).

Addressing inertia and incumbency logjams

Another factor in the slow progress of diversifying councils that has received relatively less attention is the incumbency effect. Thrasher et al. (2013) found that current councillors in London, who tend to be older 'white' men, create a 'logjam', resulting in Black, Asian and other ethnic minority (BAME) men and women competing for the few seats that open up in any one election cycle. Such logjams are also seemingly a factor on NSW councils. One councillor spoke of the difficulty of challenging a male incumbent: "*In preselection we try to get women in and try to move on senior men who have been around for a very long time and who behave very badly when they don't get up... they implode if they... do not get preselected*" (Wh/F-Cr#8). After one nasty preselection battle, the incumbent retained the number one spot on the ticket, and as a consequence, "*We just lost a whole lot of women.*" The unpleasantness of removing stubborn incumbents deters people from trying: "*I wouldn't underestimate just the power of incumbency. There are councillors who I have wanted to move on, who just are not up to the job, but the level of effort in order to do that is so difficult... Most council tickets are uncontested*" (VM/M-Cr#14). While preselection is a valid focus for research on political diversity, the lack of political contest also requires attention at the local level.

Some incumbents leverage their skills, knowledge and acumen to increase diversity in their area, while others are content to work only towards their own re-election. In multi-member wards in councils where

parties run tickets, the number one candidate for major parties is almost assured of election.¹⁷ Their job, according to one councillor, “*is to actually get enough votes to pull the number two in*” (Wh/F-Cr#17), although some lack the incentive to do so. When this councillor contested as number two, the number one candidate “*barely campaigned*”, and she had to wait until the next election to become councillor. Other number one candidates are openly hostile to their running mate. One male candidate with a record of sexist and Islamophobic comments actively undermined the campaign of his number two candidate, a Muslim woman. She was elected, just, and he soon after left the party. But there are more positive examples. For example, in one council in the 2017 election, a major party positioned first-time candidates, both visible-minority men, as number two on the ticket in two wards. The highly effective incumbents positioned as number one worked hard to get them elected, and elevated the visible-minority men to number one position to contest in 2021. Councils can hence be diversified through careful succession planning and active campaigning to get candidates further down the ticket elected. As the majority of councillors are ‘white’ men, the failure to tackle incumbency is to perpetuate their overrepresentation in councils.

Party branches have also remained stagnant, but often the consequences in terms of a lack of diversity are blamed on underrepresented groups. People with a *migrant background* are considered as having a poor perception of politics based on early life experiences (VM/F-Cr#20), as lacking in political astuteness (VM/F-Cr#5), lacking the sense of frustration or desire to change things (VM/M-Cr#3), or not having the requisite English language skills (Wh/M-Cr#13). As a general explanation for the underrepresentation of visible-minorities these reasons are insufficient at best. Research shows that migrants are likely to be more highly educated relative to the general population (Kwok and Pietsch 2017) and that civic engagement is highest among young people from multicultural backgrounds.¹⁸ First-generation Chinese-Australians with poor English participate in political activities *more* frequently than other groups (Sheppard et al. 2020). For some visible-minority councillors and aspirants, family values have inspired them to enter politics: “*I come from a family that has... a long history making contributions to government... So standing up and being a strong voice for residents is not new for me*” (VM/F-As#8). While not all visible-minorities have the resources and motivation to enter politics, to assume their underrepresentation is on account of insufficient interest ignores the large number who do.

¹⁷ In many councils (including all in Greater Sydney), the local government area is divided into wards, with a varying number of members elected from each ward. Where parties run tickets, they are almost guaranteed winning at least one seat if there are three or more members elected from each ward.

¹⁸ <https://www.sydney.edu.au/news-opinion/news/2021/09/02/civic-engagement-strongest-in-young-from-culturally-diverse-fami.html> [Accessed 8 September 2021].

Read differently, political parties have failed to capitalise on diverse political cultures to develop opportunities for richer political engagement for all Australians. The fixed structure of party branches does little to entice new participants, perpetuating the dominance of established groups:

We've got a template for our branch meetings and we're expected to meet those requirements. Most of the old blokes that come... there is an expectation that you'll do things in a certain way... The reason the branch structures are retained is so that men can maintain their power [over] the factions... (Wh/F-Cr#12).

Another councillor spoke of the vast potential of people in ethnic associations who may come to one branch meeting, but then do not feel it offers them anything: *"Sometimes people are not welcomed and sometimes the meetings are monotonous. You go there and you talk about things that half the people don't understand... because they have not come from that background"* (VM/M-Cr#16). Migrants bring to Australia their own rich political cultures. Rather than see these as deviations from (and thereby inferior to) the Australian 'norm', embracing the multiplicity of cultures may enable more dynamic and inclusive forms of political participation (Zappala 1998).

'White' women and visible-minority men get ahead at the cost of visible-minority women

Crucially, these political institutions are sites for the learning and inhabiting of privileges associated with 'whiteness' and for racial discrimination. Their lack of dynamism is hence a concern in addressing diversity into the future. Only two (out of 15) white respondents in this research mentioned racism as a potential barrier to descriptive representation, whereas eight (out of nine) respondents of non-European ancestry did. Visible-minority councillors reported that they are often not considered Australian, even when born and raised in the area they represent. Practices in branches and councils also marked some Australian citizens as 'other'. Two councillors noted that alcohol was a core part of the culture of Australian politics; their decision not to drink alcohol was remarked upon by others (VM/F-Cr#20; VM/F-Cr#21). Several councillors shared experiences of either being subject to or witnessing explicitly racist comments and behaviours in student politics, in branches or on councils. Political opportunities were closed off early in their careers as they did not have 'the right face'.

Racial discrimination within parties may lead to alternative strategies by marginalised groups to access political opportunities. Voting blocs based on ethnic and clan lines have emerged in the United Kingdom (Hussain 2021), while in Australia 'branch-stacking' is a common accusation levelled against 'ethnic' communities. Notwithstanding the tendency for visible-minorities to be more often accused of branch-stacking for practices which when adopted by 'white' members are viewed as simply building membership, these behaviours are perhaps also an understandable response to the challenges they face navigating party opportunity structures heavily weighted in favour of 'white' men. These tactics have seemingly also been met with counter-tactics, including proactively recruiting 'white' women. According to the rumour mill in one local government area, a former mayor told a journalist that he

held a drive to encourage more women to stand for election “*to piss off the Lebanese, as they do not like to see women in positions of power*”.

Where branches become increasingly dominated by particular ethnic groups, there may be a *negative* impact on the representation of visible-minority women. In the United Kingdom, Muslim women claimed that they had been bullied by Muslim men within the party who blocked their preselection (Hussain 2021). In this study’s interviews, some Muslim women councillors also reported being mobilised against to prevent them attaining a party ticket, and being bullied if they were successful: “*I have had to sit through and endure three-hour meetings when they are calling me names. If I do what they say, then it is okay. But if I do not, then they are very abusive in these meetings*” (VM/F-Cr#5). Other visible-minority women said they were considered: “*... too dangerous. ‘She’s a threat, because she’ll stop us from having any say because she’s quite articulate and she’ll be able to cut through the leadership’. They will do whatever they can, and they did, to stop me from being elected*” (VM/F-Cr#22). The evidence shows that women generally face hostility in local government, in branches and in councils (Carson et al 2021; Wilson 2021), but this hostility seems especially harsh for visible-minority women.

Women of ‘colour’ are also often overlooked in favour of ‘white’ women. One party member shared that she had given up trying to get a ticket for the upcoming elections as she was being asked to cede space to ‘white’ women and not challenge ‘white’ women incumbents. At the same time, she also faced challenges from CALD men:

CALD women face opposition from the men from their communities, who complain that women would take seats from them, and that first they will get in, and then CALD women can be supported... As a CALD woman, you have to wait until you are 50 or 60 years old before they will consider putting you forward as a candidate (VM/F).

This woman had to wait behind white women and CALD men before it would be ‘her turn’. For other women, their religion played a larger role. “*Women of colour are always overlooked. And this is particularly the case for women who happen to be Muslim. People are suspicious of us... Even some of my closest allies... are suspicious of how much of a Muslim I am, you can see from the kinds of things they ask*” (VM/F-Cr#20). This councillor was actively trying to increase the number of women preselected at number one in her area, but admitted that this was an easier task when the woman is ‘white’. This underlines the need to be attentive to how the *increased* representation of ‘white’ women and visible-minority men may be related to *continued* underrepresentation of women of ‘colour’ (Muroki and Cowley 2019).

The need for more complex narratives and approaches

Addressing social problems requires an understanding of the complexities and underlying conditions in which they arise. There is a temptation to ‘render technical’ (Li 2007) complex problems in order to be able to offer solutions that we feel equipped to deliver, rather than deal with the more radical change

that is required (Ferguson 1990). These insights come from the field of development studies, but are usefully applied to the societal response to a lack of diversity in local government. It is easier to build awareness among aspirants of the potential to achieve community outcomes through a council than it is to challenge the discursive practices that limit local government to ‘roads, rates and rubbish’. Highlighting the availability of caring allowance is easier than communicating more complex narratives of the compatibility of motherhood and council work. Insisting that council work can be part-time is easier than convincing the general public that councillors should be paid fairly for their labour. Asking aspirants to put their hand up for preselection contests is easier than telling established incumbents to cede space. Identifying deficiencies in the underrepresented population or highlighting their lack of familiarity with Australian political culture is easier than changing institutions to reflect and benefit from diverse political cultures.

Addressing the trickier underlying causes of the overrepresentation of ‘white’ men in NSW councils requires attention to ideologies and discourses (Gray 1991; Tickell and Peck 1996; Pini 2006). The emphasis on encouraging, motivating and equipping people from underrepresented groups is *one* important approach. Nonetheless, relying entirely on capacity building and efforts to get women and visible-minorities to ‘lean in’ risks perpetuating the idea that it is underrepresented groups that need to change, rather than looking at the gendered (and racialised) nature of candidate emergence (Piscopo and Kenny 2020). We need to account for, and transform, the institutional and cultural context in which different people can emerge as a candidate, and have equal opportunity to succeed. Practices and subjectivities tend to reproduce these contexts iteratively, yet they can be disrupted. So-called ‘common sense’ takes ideological work to *sustain*, and hence is always subject to contestation (Crehan 2016).

Local government is an excellent site to contribute to the understanding of gender, race and its intersections in Australian politics. As multiple positions are available within local government, we can build a larger evidence base of the diverse experiences of women-of-‘colour’ candidates and elected representatives, overcoming the problem studies at higher levels face of a dearth of possible respondents (Holman 2017). Further, the sheer number of councils allows for analysis that goes beyond simple factors that explain over- and underrepresentation, to consider how different practices emerge across various institutional cultures, even as formal rules are uniform (Pini and McDonald 2011). Travelling across NSW, watching countless council meetings and interacting with aspirants and councillors from different local government areas, the diversity of political and institutional cultures is evident. Some are hostile to anybody that does not fit the somatic norm of a ‘white man’; others are seemingly spaces in which all bodies fit, and where aspirants feel they have an equal opportunity to achieve their political ambitions. Examining the different practices, processes and mechanisms that shape these councils anew is a research opportunity: one that the steady but still too slow progress in diversifying NSW councils demands we take up.

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