

From Iraq to Nobbys discussion is needed

Democracy demands that we talk to each other, writes **Griff Foley**.

DISCUSSION is a pillar of democratic society. It is integral to working and social life and to the development and implementation of public policy.

Because of the size and complexity of modern society, discussion of important public questions is becoming increasingly difficult.

Failure to discuss and resolve issues affects us all. Think of any major international question: the Iraq war, climate change, the oil crisis, the food crisis. All of these can only be settled through rational discussion between stakeholders.

Inability to discuss and resolve issues also affects us closer to home. In Newcastle, derelict buildings like the Newcastle Post Office and Merewether Surf House are testimony to people's failure to discuss and resolve development and heritage conflicts.

Why is this so? Why, in a city like Newcastle, with its strong community ethos, is it so hard for interest groups and decision-makers to talk matters through and make decisions?

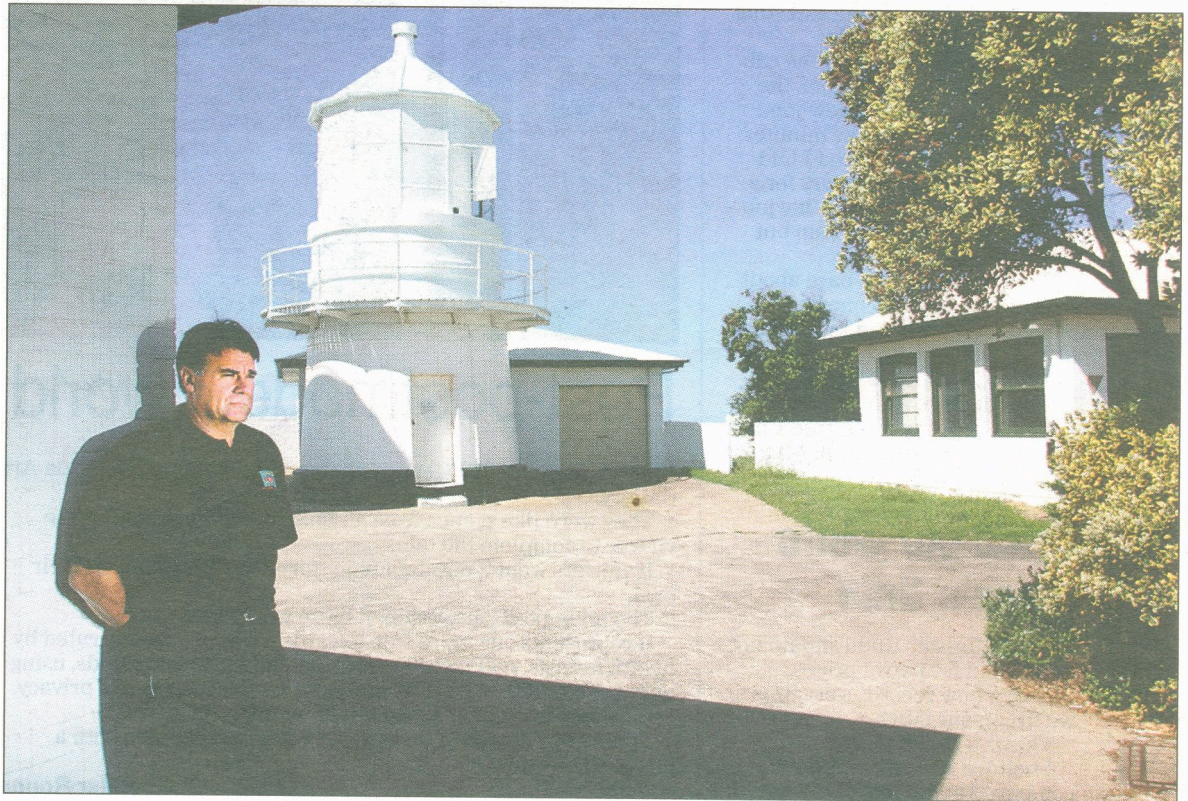
One reason is that the people involved argue rather than discuss or negotiate. When people argue, rationality and goodwill evaporate. Opponents become entrenched in their positions and an umpire has to adjudicate.

This is what has just happened with Nobbys, where development and heritage proponents could not resolve their differences and a federal minister has ruled against the current development application.

Umpires regulate games; they keep the play moving. They do not help opposing teams to resolve deep differences of interest and values. In the case of Nobbys, Peter Garrett has only suspended play.

Sooner or later there will be another development application. This will be opposed; there will be another argument; an umpire will settle it.

In modern cities, this process of argument, adjudication and settlement happens daily as development applications are processed. This process is flawed.



SHINING A LIGHT: Nobbys development proponent restaurateur Neil Slater at the lighthouse.

Those who can bring the most pressure to bear tend to win.

Cumulatively, decisions reached in this way create an anarchic patchwork of developments, undermining attempts at systematic urban planning and design and doing lasting damage to the aesthetics and amenity of cities. This process also creates lasting animosities that make rational discussion and decision-making on future developments even more difficult.

If development issues like Nobbys are going to be satisfactorily settled we have to find a better method. We in fact already have one, and have had for thousands of years. It is called democratic discussion.

To work, democratic discussion requires certain conditions. First, the people involved must have sound and unbiased information on which to base their judgements and decisions.

Second, as they use this information, discussion participants must stick to certain rules. They must be truthful; they must be orderly; they must respect others; they must give everyone involved the time to make

their case; and they must be reasonable (able to listen to and genuinely consider other opinions).

We all often break these rules: in families, in classrooms, in workplaces, in Parliament, on talk-back radio. In breaking them we create conflict and confusion, reinforce prejudices and sabotage effective policy development and sound decision-making.

And so it has often been with urban development in Newcastle, whether it is neighbours arguing over an extension, or a businessman locking horns with conservationists over an iconic site like Nobbys.

In all these cases the opponents would have had a far better chance of reaching a mutually satisfactory conclusion if they had sat down together and talked the issue through, applying the rules of discussion.

In our market economy, development pressures are not going to ease. There will always be issues that divide us.

In Newcastle we have a choice. Developers and conservationists can continue to fight each other and

to rely on umpires to settle their differences. Or they can discuss their differences and reach mutually acceptable compromises.

In the latter case neither side will get everything they want.

But they will get more than they do by arguing themselves to a standstill. And most importantly, the community will benefit.

Not everyone interested in a development issue can participate in discussion of it. In the case of Nobbys, it would make sense for one of our local politicians to arrange a discussion between the current development proponent, Neil Slater, and a community representative with expertise in urban planning and design.

By doing this Newcastle would begin to build a more constructive way of dealing with development disputes.

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