

Resolution of Council

21 February 2022

Item 3.1

Vale Leon Parmeter Carter OBE

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

I wish to inform Council of the passing of Leon Parmeter Carter OBE, Town Clerk of the City of Sydney from 1974 to his retirement in 1992.

Leon Carter was born on 10 May 1930 at Katoomba, New South Wales, the son of Norman Jack and Vennie Catherine Carter. Apart from a brief period driving a truck when he was young, he spent his whole working life in local government.

He began as a Junior Clerk at Berrigan Shire Council in 1948, where his father had worked as an electrical engineer. Over the following years he moved to other rural councils, each time into a more senior position than the last. By 1954, he held the number three position at Kogarah Council. Five years later he crossed the harbour to become Deputy Town Clerk at Lane Cove, becoming Town Clerk the following year. In 1971, he crossed the harbour again to become a Deputy Town Clerk at Sydney City Council. Three years later, he reached the pinnacle of his career, becoming Town Clerk. He was 44.

Leon arrived at the City three years after the Askin Liberal Government's carve up of the City, with Glebe and Forest Lodge transferred to Leichhardt Council, part of Newtown to Marrickville and Paddington to Woollahra. Paddington South and the remaining area south of Cleveland Street was incorporated as South Sydney Council. These changes ensured that the business oriented Civic Reform Association won a majority on the new smaller City Council.

Commissioning the late George Clark to develop the City's first strategic plan was an early action of the new Council. This plan proposed a more pedestrianised city, including the creation of a car free Martin Place, tree lined boulevards and a heritage floor space scheme among other progressive reforms. Another outcome of the plan was the idea of creating a new civic square opposite Sydney Town Hall. As the Council's most senior official, Leon was responsible for overseeing implementation of the plan and its update in 1976.

In the early 1980s, Leon began the process of purchasing the properties needed to make the civic square idea a reality. It remains an integral part of our Sustainable Sydney 2030 strategy.

I first encountered Leon in early 1982, when the Wran Labor Government reversed much of the 1968 carve up by merging South Sydney Council with the City for political reasons. At the time I had been a South Sydney Alderman for just 15 months.

I remember him as a man who was charming, helpful and "dapper", a word we rarely hear these days. I appreciated his support for my efforts at getting trees planted and streets landscaped.

He also had a reputation for being a great raconteur and having a wicked sense of humour.

These attributes enabled him to serve and manage the 28-member council created by the amalgamation (compared to 10 councillors today). He faced additional challenges after the 1984 Council elections, which resulted in a Council comprising 12 Labor, six Liberals and nine Independents.

Many people wrongly assumed Leon was a conservative, given his demeanour and his appointment by a Civic Reform Lord Mayor. He was the archetypal public servant able to serve both sides of politics and implement their policies. For many years he did not vote in elections to preserve his non-partisan position. In a 1983 interview he explained:

"Whoever gets control here, I will give them my best advice. I give great support to whoever has responsibility for running the city, no matter their party. I don't want to be seen as too close to politicians. I don't want to be seen as a wheeler dealer who plays one against the other."

In the same interview, he was asked what he thought was the most important thing the Council had done during his time as Town Clerk. He nominated the short-lived two per cent voluntary contribution developers made towards affordable housing, describing it as a "great social initiative" that worked – an initiative tragically kyboshed by the State Labor Government when it sacked the Council in 1987. Labor's appointed Commissioners transferred the Council's housing stock to the State Government at no cost. Leon later made it known that he had no part in the decision.

One of the architects of that scheme was the late Tony Reeves, a journalist, who had a reputation as a leftwing firebrand. In 1985, Tony succinctly summed up Leon after admitting he had found his preconceived ideas about him were wrong.

Tony said:

"Leon is the most astute manager of the business of the Council. He is acutely aware of the politics that are played there and manages to carve his way through the political quagmire to keep the business running as smoothly as possible."

It is a view with which I fully concur.

Leon will be remembered as an exemplary public servant, one of Sydney's important identities of the late 20th century and a great liver of life.

I am saddened by his passing and extend my sincere condolences to Ann and his family.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Lord Mayor –

It is resolved that:

- (A) all persons attending this meeting of Council observe one minute's silence to commemorate the life of Leon Parmeter Carter OBE, former Town Clerk of the City of Sydney and his significant contribution to local government and the City of Sydney;
- (B) Council express its condolences to Leon's widow Ann, his daughter Sally and son Charles; and
- (C) the Lord Mayor be requested to convey Council's condolences to Leon's family.

Carried unanimously.

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Note – All those present at the meeting, held remotely, observed a minute's silence as a mark of respect to Leon Parmeter Carter OBE.