



THE POLITICS OF PERSUASION

The Building Australia Party is a new player on the political landscape. Its founder and leader Ray Brown has had over 30 years in building and design – a hands-on experience of the industry that has convinced him of the need for sweeping change.

A broad cross-section of people from the building and design industries recently pledged their support for a new political party. In May 2010 the Building Australia Party, with a formidable foundation membership of more than 950 people, was registered to stand for state and federal elections.

Ray Brown, a former councillor and deputy mayor of the Hills Shire Council in north-west Sydney, is the party's founder and its driving force.

With over 30 years' experience as a building designer and builder, and the owner of Regency Design Centre at Baulkham Hills, he knows only too well the complexities and inconsistencies that bedevil the industry. He believes that a tangle of regulatory controls stifles innovation and lumps an unnecessary cost on the industry and consumers.

"There are too many bureaucrats involved," he says, stressing that his criticism isn't of individual people but of process. "It jeopardises the smooth transition of things through government.

"The building industry is the foundation on which state and federal economics are built. Because we are fundamental to the running of the economy we should have some say in government thinking."

Hence the Building Australia Party.

"A few of us got together and decided enough is enough," Brown says. "The built environment does not currently have a voice or representation in government. I am endeavouring to change this."

ELECTORAL APPEAL

Ray Brown is a quietly spoken man, white-haired and dapper, who carries his 63 years well.

But if he seems modest – "it's a party rather than an individual," he insists – there's a hint of steel beneath the surface.

"I have experience of political life to a minor degree," he says. "When I went into council and became deputy mayor I thought that I was going to conquer the world for our industry. But then I realised that there are 12 councillors and that in order to get anything through I had to have six of those councillors on my side. It wasn't me as an individual that was going to make the difference."

While the Building Australia Party is a new kid on the block, Brown is savvy enough to know that its electoral appeal needs to extend beyond the confines of the industry.

"We need to talk to all and sundry, maintain what we're trying to achieve, and appeal to people's sensitivities and common sense.

Rather than politics, we need to make decisions 'because of' – we need to work the commonsense value so building-related businesses and consumers benefit.

"We're seeking support from everyone," he says. "Those in the building industry, those associated with the built environment and those who now would like an alternative party choice in the political arena.

"Volatile employment levels in the building

THE BUILDING AUSTRALIA PARTY OBJECTIVES

- Make housing more affordable
- Harmonise infrastructure levies throughout the state
- Establish an industry-based workers compensation scheme
- Reduce unnecessary planning delays which increase building costs
- Make council codes the rules – if plans comply, then approval is granted
- Harmonise DCPs, LEPs and council submissions across the whole of the state
- Bring back common sense into government at all levels, local, state and federal
- Simplify home owners warranty insurance so it is understood by all parties involved
- Encourage government to establish viable traineeships and apprenticeships for our youth
- Make licensing and registration a recognition of skills, not just a form of consumer protection
- Reduce needless overregulation through the establishment of an independent building commission.

industry – the unemployment level is 5.4 per cent – climate control and the high cost of housing can be attributed to the poor and unhealthy over-regulation of our building industry. Whatever happened to affordable housing?"

BACK TO COMMON SENSE

The problem Ray Brown hears more and more is that people are unable to afford to buy their own house.

"I'm okay, I've got my house, but my children are struggling to find a house that they can afford," he says. "It is one of the key issues. If we can get construction going pretty well, if there's a lot more saleability, that means there's a lot more competition in the market.

"Fundamentally, we need to look at the building blocks in the process and try and make those as economical as possible.

"Can we minimise the level of documentation that we have to put into council? Infrastructure levies? Development levies? We should look at all those things individually and see whether or not

we can prune them down. Government is saying that they are keeping up with the releasing of land. But some of the developers are saying that the land releases are not in good areas. They haven't got shopping centres and transport nodes and that sort of thing. So it's a furphy to say that land is available.

"We need to look at regional centres and at the infrastructure that's available and ask where government is investing, in what facilities, why and who is paying for it.

"It's a combination of things. There's not one fix. We need to get back to the economics and the common sense of it all rather than playing politics and spending money for political outcomes as opposed to investing in the industry and the present and future economy. I think there's been too much of that in the past."

DO IT ONCE, DO IT WELL

The Building Australia Party will run for the senate in the upcoming federal election and will stand for the state upper house next year.

"The purpose is to see if we can get the balance of power in order to have the key votes to get one or the other party elected," Brown says. "That's when we would put our policies on the table and say: this is what we need to achieve.

"Our objective really says what the party stands for. If ever there was an opportunity for us to achieve a position to affect what governments do, it is now. But this is long term.

"We are not looking at things through rose-coloured glasses to think that we're certain to get elected at the federal or the state elections this time. This is a long-term plan, we want to do it properly."

Asked whether he has left his run a little late in life, he shakes his head.

"I think it comes back to my time in Rotary where the motto was 'Do it once, do it well, build a better Australia.' That stuck in my mind all those years.

"So why am I doing it? Because I'm still pushing myself to make a difference. Building Australia is the vehicle to make that difference.

"If Building Australia can get this up and is able to get someone elected, I can pull back from it.

"Younger people can come in who also have fire in their belly to make the building industry and housing more sustainable and economically viable."

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Ray Brown is a man with a mission: "I'm still pushing myself to make a difference."

TAKING CARE OF THE DETAIL

■ Ray Brown is convinced that the problems that afflict the building industry are caused by many individual steps along the way.

■ Housing affordability is contingent upon scrutinising and containing costs within all those items that are the "building blocks" within the developing process, from the raw land product right through to the finished article, whether it be for individual houses, multi-unit housing estates or multi-storey apartment buildings.

■ "We would set about looking at all those building blocks to find out how we can harmonise them and make them work more effectively," Brown says. "And

we'd take a lot of the wasted costs out of the bureaucratic processes."

■ The building blocks need to be crucially analysed for baseline cost improvement. His list is long and includes: land suitability, population growth expectations, decentralisation to major rural regional centres, infrastructure levies, council planning bottlenecks, needless duplication and overregulation, transparency of government building contracts, increased greenfield land supply, infill development to maximise on available infrastructure, alternative worker comp arrangements, review of licence fee allocation and expenditure, onsite dispute resolution and planning strategies for the growing and aging population.

■ Otherwise, Ray Brown insists, the blockages and impediments to a sustainable industry and affordable housing are here to stay.

