

# The showman of local government

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Tomakin, site of the notorious Tomaga Sewerage Scheme.

By **ROGER FRYER**

**I**T'S A FAIR BET that when Warren Hutchings finally cleared the Moruya River bar there were a few people watching who breathed a sigh of relief.

The former Eurobodalla Shire councillor, his wife Amira and crewman Len Ryan hit the open sea in their sloop, the *Senang*, on July 18, ending possibly one of the longest, deepest and most scandal-ridden sagas in the history of local government.

From the time 12 years ago when Hutchings and his second wife Judy drove up to their newly purchased bush block near Moruya in a Rolls Royce, he has never been out of the news. And he has never stopped thumbing his nose at the powers-that-be in Eurobodalla Shire Council either.

Hutchings grew up near Moruya, his family part of the struggle-town community of Congo. After various adventures he settled in Melbourne and carved out an extremely successful photography business. In the late '70s he dropped out, sold his business and bought a factory to provide an income from the rent, then returned to his home town to go "back to the land".

He built a genuine wattle and daub pioneer hut, filled it with expensive antique furniture and, on Judy's insistence, an electric dishwasher — incongruous in the bush setting, but her only reminder of their former days of affluence.

Chook-pen built and vegies in, the irrepressible former sky-diving instructor needed more action to soak up his considerable energies. He threw himself into local community activities — reorganising the agricultural society show into making its first profit in years, and helping start the local FM community radio station, Radio EAR, amongst other things.

Then the NSW local government elections of 1983 came along. Eurobodalla Shire had been governed for two years by a state government appointed administrator after the council had been sacked en masse. Hutchings joined the "Rate-watchers" ticket, along with other concerned prominent members of the community, and was voted in on a tide of anti-corruption sentiment.

Hutchings took his popular vote as a mandate for reform, and adopted a fervently anti-wholesale-development stance.

"What do you want? More bricks and concrete," he asked. His devoted constituents answered with a firm "No!".

## Entrenched interests

**BUT HE** didn't account for the entrenched interests of the development lobby, and became frustrated at his failure to focus council attentions on community welfare issues. His attitudes and style particularly aggravated the man the new council elected as president, retired Commodore Jeff Britten.

The commodore, a Ratewatcher also, soon revealed himself as a skilled power broker, and quickly consolidated his position with important local interests, falling out immediately with the anti-development and anti-corruption lobby.

Hutchings and the other anti-wholesale-development councillors were effectively locked out, and found it difficult to participate in the real behind-the-scenes decision-making.

Then along came the now infamous Tomaga sewerage scheme.

In keeping with its long-held policy of servicing the scattered communities of the shire, the council went ahead with plans to sewer a number of coastal areas and build a treatment plant at Tomakin. Because of the predicted rates hike to pay for the scheme, Hutchings led a community revolt against the plans, based on a survey of the residents of Tomakin which purported to show their opposition.

Because he had no power in council meetings, he was forced to resort to other ways of making himself heard and, on one memorable council meeting day, filled the council chambers to overflowing with outraged Tomakin residents. The fact that the meeting was not discussing the sewerage scheme, but proposed funding for the community radio station, was forgotten in the excitement of the moment.

Without the numbers, however, Hutchings had no real way of preventing the scheme going ahead. Midway through the project it was revealed by Hutchings, who seemed to have an inside source of information, that the contractors were having trouble. A cost blow-out was feared.

Hutchings smelt a rat and combed the whole project for problems, which he revealed one by one.

The cost blow-out grew, and so did Hutchings' efforts to embarrass the council staff over their part in the design and implementation of the project. A number of investigations were held, and a mountain of paper dealing with the problems grew, but no one seemed to be able to get to the bottom of the whole fiasco.

In the end, the sewerage scheme was built, the community had no choice but to accept the costs, and Hutchings' stocks with council staff were reduced to an all-time low. He was now the hero of disaffected minority groups throughout the shire as well as the large anti-development lobby.

It was during council discussion of an unapproved dwelling, however, that Hutchings made a fatal mistake. Council

had no right to condemn alternative dwellings on isolated rural holdings, Hutchings claimed, pointing out that he, too, lived in an unapproved mud hut.

## Complaint lodged

THAT WAS enough for the opposing forces to move in on him. A complaint was lodged with council staff which placed them in an unprecedented position of having to act against one of their own elected councillors.

From there, the debate centred on Hutchings himself as he struggled to prevent demolition of his own home, although council staff maintained they were doing everything they could to avoid this sticky end.

A master showman who once had his own TV show in Melbourne, Hutchings made the most of the dispute to focus media attention on the council and staff activities. His marriage failed and many dismayed supporters left him as the bitter battle moved toward court proceedings.

Finally, retrospective approval was granted by an assessor at a hearing of the Land and Environment Court in Moruya, provided the building was brought up to certain standards.

By this time, the shire presidency had changed hands, and another former Rate-watcher, Narooma schoolteacher John Burbidge, was elected to the position. He attempted to tame the relentless Hutchings but was no match for the now seasoned performer. At the first meeting he chaired as president, Burbidge attempted to enforce classroom discipline.

His cool was lost in the attempt, and he abandoned the meeting, prompting a local newspaper the next day to run a banner heading, "Council meeting aborted".

It was always a numbers game in the council meetings, with Hutchings, popular Narooma councillor Neville Gough and former council town planner Jack Home forming a more or less united opposition

to the main players, and using any method they could to delay proceedings or upset the applecart.

The resignation of pro-development councillor, Bill Gowthorpe, allowed disgruntled former Rate-watcher voters a second chance in a by-election, and they voted in the quietly-spoken Richard Roberts, bringing the council power equation up to 5 (pro-development) to 4 (anti-wholesale). Roberts seemed to expend most of his energy, however, in an attempt to win the newly-created state seat of Bega. He ran as an Independent, but lost to pro-logging Liberal Russel Smith.

The last months of the council were a shambles, during which the Fraud Squad was called to investigate, newspapers were threatened with defamation action, and editors were allegedly offered bribes to publish pro-council staff press releases.

Long-standing pro-development councillor and ex-shire president Ken Mackay finally sold up his interests and moved to the Gold Coast in disgust at the quagmire the shire had become for developers. He did not resign from council, however, and a funny story did the rounds of Moruya which claimed he was angry because he had bought a season off-peak airline ticket to fly to council meetings in Moruya from his new home, 1500km away.

Unfortunately for him, so the story goes, meeting dates were changed, rendering his cheap tickets useless.

The giant, red faced, short-back-and-sides Mackay seemed the embodiment of capitalism to greenies who watched the meetings with interest. He would be seen belching and loosening his oversize trouser belt a notch as he returned to the meeting room following the councillors' sumptuous, free lunches.

Mackay had developed ear trouble and finally became nearly stone deaf. He had great difficulty following the proceedings of meetings, and, as newly deaf people often do, talked in an extremely loud voice in order to hear his own words.

“What did he say?” he would turn to the councillor next to him who would whisper something back in his ear. “Oh, it all sounds like bullshit to me,” he would thunder back, thinking no-one else could hear him. The public in the gallery rolled in the aisles.

Hutchings finally resigned in a fit of pique in the last week of that council’s term, but threatened to continue his fight as a private citizen, prompting one newspaper to write a story headed, “Hutchings out ... but won’t lie down”.

After retiring from active politics he quietened down for a while, selling his bush block and mud hut. Then he announced he was going to fulfil a long-term ambition and sail around the world. He bought an old sloop and set about re-fitting it. To do this, he moored the yacht to the Moruya town wharf and lived on board. Before long he had become a regular sight at that end of town, with his old car parked next to the wharf, supplies and materials stacked along the jetty, and a

constant stream of visitors coming and going.

## Commanding presence

IT WASN’T long before someone complained of the noise, which necessitated a visit from the council wharfinger, erstwhile ordinance officer Howard Nelson, a softly spoken ex-policeman with a commanding presence. Before you knew it, the issue had blown up into another full-scale council-Hutchings bashing episode, reaching major newspapers as far away as Brisbane.

It turned out there was an old council by-law for this very situation, and Hutchings was required to moor the yacht offshore and ply to the wharf in a dinghy. He could use the wharf for supplying and re-victualling the yacht, but only for a few minutes out of every hour. Hutchings claimed he was being victimised because of his anti-corruption campaign, but complied and quietly continued re-fitting the sloop.

Things have gone on like this for the last 12 months as the brawl quietly simmered down. Warren Hutchings married again, and he and his Philippine-born third wife, Amira, finally braved the treacherous Moruya River bar and hit the high seas, intending to take in the Whitsunday Islands their way to Bali, and from there “we haven’t decided yet”.

As he set sail and departed one could imagine the relieved developers saluting him with raised glasses of champagne ... but you can bet they did not wish him a speedy return.

Postscript: The Senang damaged itself on The Batemans Bay bar while avoiding some foul weather, and is hove to for repairs. At last report the Hutchings crew have not left the shire yet!

*\* The author was editor of the Bay Post newspaper during the critical years of the last Eurobodalla Shire Council, and witnessed much of the power play in council meetings.*