

THE AUSTRALIAN

City of Sydney climate debate a microcosm of political decline

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By **CHRIS KENNY**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR (NATIONAL AFFAIRS)5:20PM JUNE 26, 2019 •  297 COMMENTS

In the noodle nation of Australia's national debate many different people and issues intersect in the vexed area of freedom of speech and civil discussion. This is a space where people, issues and organisations as diverse as [Israel Folau](#), same-sex marriage, Rugby Australia, climate change, [Clover Moore](#), Anglican Church, netball, [ANZ](#), Liberal Councillor Craig Chung, border protection and Gillian Triggs all have a role.

In short though, the cross-currents demonstrate one clear point. We have lost the knack for a respectful and robust public debate.

We have shrunk from a lively public square as a clearing house for the issues of the day into darkened silos of hate-filled barbs, cultivated on social media and thrown into a new public debate that doesn't so much seek to win contests over ideas but to shout down, silence and demonise opponents.

A little example of how sad this has become played out this week in [the Sydney City Council where a motion was passed declaring a climate emergency in the NSW capital](#). The Sydney councillors happily took to the Town Hall steps displaying a "climate emergency" banner and waving flags — apparently sharing their delight about drawing attention to our impending doom.

The motion they passed was nonsensical and alarmist. It accused a federal government committed to the Paris climate targets of presiding over a "climate disaster" and warned of heatwaves and rising sea levels creating chaos in the Pacific as it declared an official "climate emergency" in concert with other activist groups and organisations worldwide.

A Liberal Party councillor, Craig Chung, pointed out how ludicrous the motion was and tried to amend it. When his amendments were rejected, he voted for the motion regardless. On Sky

News' *The Kenny Report* yesterday I asked him why.

“The language is absurd, this was the fundamentalist Clover (Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore) at her best, using alarmist language and warning us that the world is going to end,” Chung said.

“The reality is that I’m a Liberal councillor in the city of Sydney, the majority of the seats are taken up by the Clover climate fundamentalists and while the language that she uses is completely alarmist and is completely catastrophising what is going on, some of the contents of that motion are things that we really need to address, and if I want to sit at the table, if I want to be there taking part in the policy debate, I’ve got to get a seat at the table.”

This seemed worrying; Chung knew the motion was ill-founded but went along it all the same. It sounded like he was dragooned into it. It seemed inappropriate for him to support a motion he knew was nonsensical just to fit in.

“This Left group, they love to preach the idea of free speech and being inclusive,” Chung explained, “but I tell you what the moment you don’t get involved in their motions and the moment you cut yourself out, you get called all sorts of names, last night I was called a flat-earther and a coal lugger despite the fact I do think we need to take some action.

“The gallery was full of people, Clover supporters, all of these people who were absolutely jeering me and cheering Clover. I moved an amendment, that was absolutely jeered by the gallery there, an amendment that took out the language of the warnings and catastrophising and moved an amendment that said we need to do this and we need to do it rationally and calmly. But that was voted down unanimously.

“We’re not talking just about the Clover Moore people, we are talking about the Labor Left rump that are there as well, these are people who absolutely don’t want to hear from anybody else.”

Chung should be strong enough to stand up to this sort of political grandstanding and argue and vote for what he believes is right. But however courageous or timid he might be, it can be no excuse for his opponents.

“That’s the way the city of Sydney runs, that’s the way Clover Moore runs business there, this is a closed shop for Clover Moore. This is about her preaching to her choir, about getting a headline, but actually offering no solutions,” Chung said.

So this councillor voted for a motion that condemns the federal government for doing nothing (something Chung knows is false) and spreads alarmist fearmongering (something Chung abhors).

“I know that some people will criticise me for (supporting the motion) but at the same time, if I don't do that I'm never going to get a seat at the table, I'm just going to have slogans thrown at me and abuse thrown at me, I need to be able to stay at that table to maintain a rational debate.”

Nobody should give in to bullies, it only encourages them. But I fear this pointless debate in Sydney's Town Hall tells us much about the deterioration of our national political discussion.

*(I am yet to hear Clover Moore's version of events but look forward to doing so.)

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Commentator, author and former political adviser, Chris Kenny also hosts *The Kenny Report* Monday-Friday 5pm, and *Kenny on Media* Mondays at 8pm on Sky News. He takes an unashamedly rationalist app... [Read more](#)



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