

RATS IN THE RANKS

STUDY GUIDE written by Libby Tudball, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson



Larry Hand

Each year, as part of the democratic process all over Australia, local councillors meet to elect a mayor to lead their council for the next year. **Rats in the Ranks** tells the story of this process in the Leichhardt council area of Sydney in 1994. Every September, the Leichhardt council meets to elect one of their twelve members as the Mayor and another for Deputy Mayor for the following year. The election is rarely a straightforward affair. In 1994, the current mayor, Larry Hand, was popular with the local citizens, but they don't vote for the mayor, the councillors do—and after three years of Larry, some of them were after his job.

In **Rats in the Ranks**, filmmakers Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson trace the story of the struggle for the mayoralty. They had extraordinary access to the councillors who were willing for the story to be filmed in the lead up to the election. Arms are twisted, favours are called in, people are double-crossed, damaging stories are leaked to the media and deals are done. But right up to the vote, no one knows how the numbers will stick and who will walk away from the election as mayor.

The mayor of council is a position which carries heavy responsibilities and the control of large amounts of money and human resources. In Leichhardt the budget for each year exceeds \$40million and there are over 500 council workers. The film shows us what goes on behind the scenes in the battle for the position of mayor.

The film is a real-life drama and fascinating portrait of how politics really work at the local council level. Students will discover who are seen to be the 'Rats in the Ranks' and decide for themselves if they really deserve to be called 'Rats'. They gain a powerful insight into the election process and peoples' desire to be leaders of their communities.

Curriculum links

Rats in the Ranks will have relevance for middle to senior secondary students of Politics, Australian Studies, Studies of Society and Environment, Civics and Citizenship studies, Human Society and its Environment, Media Studies, English and History.

While the film is a study of the Leichhardt council in Sydney, the themes are universal. Some of the activities are designed for students to develop studies of their own or other local councils and make links and comparisons with the story they uncover in **Rats in the Ranks**.

Produced and directed by
Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson

Executive producer Chris Oliver

Year of production 1996

Video duration 97 minutes

A Film Australia National Interest Program/Arundel Films
co-production in association with Channel Four
Television, La Sept Arte and Australian Broadcasting
Corporation.

Background to the making of the film

Why was the film made ?

The filmmakers said they were:

...interested in looking at the political process. Politics is not a polite or genteel business. Political arenas—the jousting grounds of those strong, bold and smart enough to contest their ideas of how we should be governed—are too vital to the health of our democracy to be polite or genteel.

*We chose to make a film about local government because of its greater accessibility in comparison with the state and federal levels. But the principles are the same. The political process is not about sitting back and waiting for things to be handed to you on a platter. **Rats** is a film about getting the numbers. And if you're squeamish about the way it's done, don't single out Leichhardt, because this is universal behaviour. Politicians from all levels of government who've seen this film invariably nod their heads in recognition. In keeping with our fundamental approach to filmmaking, we tried to shed light on how democracy functions. Not how it ought to function... how it actually functions.*

What is the film about ?

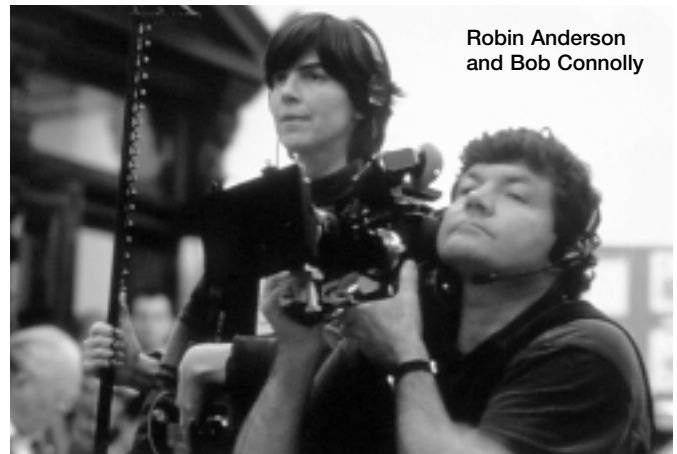
Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson said:

This is not a film about ideological differences, and there's very little mention of policy. There are general and specific reasons for this. Firstly, local government politics in general tends to be less ideologically based than the other tiers. The issues tend to revolve around bricks and mortar, development questions and so on. There's no hard and fast ALP policy on overshadowing!

*In the United States and in Britain, local government entities cover a much broader range of responsibilities than they do in Australia. In the USA, for example, municipalities and counties are involved in education, policing, housing and other social issues. Consequently the political and ideological divides are clearly defined. In Australia most questions of social and economic governance—education, health, welfare, housing, police, etc—are the responsibility of state and federal governments. That's why there's very little discussion of policy in **Rats**. Councillors tend to vote according to their conscience on most issues except those to do with leadership ballots like the mayoral election, when they are supposed to unite behind the party or faction leader.*

It's not clear from the film, but the twelve councillors had been together for a number of years. They knew each other's political positions very well, along with their general attitudes towards the various issues affecting the municipality. In fact there was very little ideological difference between the twelve. Most were ALP or ex ALP. The mayoral election was primarily about suitability, not policy. [It was a question of]...who was most suited to the job? Larry had been there three years and was clearly the most popular with the electorate.

The film explores the lead up and outcomes of the battle.



Before watching the film

Do some research to develop your understanding of local councils and investigate these questions:

- What is the role of local councils in the community?
- How does the role of local councils differ from the federal and state governments?
- Make a list of examples of the services provided by your local council and explain what your council does. Try to include examples which refer to the services, including provision of parks and gardens, facilities for different age groups of people, involvement in community clubs and organisations, health facilities, law enforcement etc.
- How are local councils elected and for how long?
- How are mayors elected and for what period?
- How important are party politics in local councils?
- Who becomes involved in local councils and why?
- Why are women better represented in local politics than at the state and federal level?

Resources

You could use your library, the internet, local newspapers and your own local council for information. Invite a local councillor or an electoral officer to speak to your class. Each state also has an electoral education office which students can visit to learn about the electoral process at all levels.

Construct a description of the Leichhardt area using street directories, demographic information, census data and other library sources. Build on this description after watching the film. Look particularly at streetscapes, evidence of entertainment, community activities and facilities etc.

Did you know?

It is an Australian Labor Party tradition that members of the party should vote along party lines. After the party has decided on a policy, 'party discipline' expects all members to vote with the party or face possible suspension or even expulsion from the party. These facts will be important for you to understand some of the events in the film.

Activities to develop understanding of Rats in the Ranks

Develop a profile of the councillors during the lead up to the election:

- Divide your class into small groups to follow the progress of each councillor as you watch **Rats in the Ranks**. As a group, share your notes and ideas after watching the film.

LARRY HAND was Mayor of Leichhardt from 1994 to 1997. In his first two years as mayor he was elected unopposed. He says in the film that 'the great satisfaction of being an elected representative is to support things that benefit the community'.

After watching the film, talk about and record what new insights you have about the role of the mayor to include in your profile. You could include answers to these questions:

- How does Larry interact with local citizens?
- What do you see him doing in the community?
- Who does he visit?
- What are his links with the wider world?
- Who does he leak information to and why?
- Why is he particularly worried about the ALP group of councillors nominating a mayoral candidate?
- What tactics does he use to try to win the support of his fellow councillors and to monitor who is likely to give him their vote?

Look at the following statements, which could be part of a profile on Larry Hand. Decide whether you agree or disagree with each statement. If you disagree, rewrite the statements so that it is accurate in your view.

Larry wants to be mayor because he loves the job and the involvement with the local community.

Larry wants to be mayor because he loves to control the council his way and simply wants power.

It doesn't matter if other interested councillors wanted to be mayor. Larry is popular with the local community and therefore should continue.

The Australian Labor Party faction

In the first meeting of the ALP Caucus we see in the film, Councillor Evan Jones argues that the members of his party group should be united in putting up a candidate.

- Why is Kate Butler so furious about the procedures in the meeting?
- Explain why there is conflict in the ALP group of councillors?
- Why did they decide to pull the name of the mayoral candidate out of a hat?

KATE BUTLER clearly has a desire to be mayor. In 1994 she was deputy mayor and Larry had said that it would be her turn next time. She is clearly very anxious about the election. The filmmakers said that:

She had been on the council for nearly a decade and

was first on the ALP ticket at the previous council elections. This meant that she was the senior ALP councillor and therefore by rights the ALP's mayoral candidate. But Macindo, a first-term councillor, decided that he had a better chance because he and Evan had lined up the votes of the two crucial independents, Harry Sidaway and Bob Heffernan. The other ingredient in the brew was Evan Jones' clear hostility towards Kate. He simply didn't like her. Macindo wasn't too keen on her either. It is quite obvious that in politics, as in every other human activity, personal likes and dislikes play a very important role.

It's also clear that although Kate and Larry belong to different political groups, Kate and Trevor Snape have more in common with Larry than with Evan and Macindo. They see each other socially, for example. Larry used to belong to the ALP, and it's obvious that they also see eye-to-eye ideologically.

After Kate is elected as deputy mayor, she makes a short but passionate speech to the council and visitors in the council chambers. She says:

Tonight has been the culmination of an incredible mayoral campaign... I hope and am sure that we can put all this behind us... [we need to be] progressive and act in the best interests of all the residents... some have called me a 'rat', but I deny that... I will always do as my conscience dictates...

- What evidence is there in the film to show us that Kate wants to be mayor?
- Why do you think that Kate does not want to vote for Neil?
- Why do you think she did not fight harder for her own cause as a mayoral candidate?
- Suggest reasons for her final vote.
- What could be the consequences for her after she does not vote for Neil McIndoe?
- How would you describe the relationship between Larry and Kate?

TREVOR SNAPE is the secretary of the ALP Caucus. At first he seems to support Kate as mayor.

- Why does he support Kate?
- Who does he finally vote for?

NEIL MCINDOE is a member and the chairman of the ALP faction. He expresses strong interest in the position of mayor and is pleased when his name is drawn out of the hat.

- How do we know that Trevor and Kate don't support Neil?
- What evidence do we have that other councillors do not favour Neil for the position?

EVAN JONES seems to be particularly concerned about keeping to ALP procedures and creating the best opportunity for the ALP to have the mayoral position.

* What is his opinion of Kate at various times in the process?

• Evan says: 'They just can't break this umbilical cord to Larry Hand. He's got control of these two'. Who was he referring to? What did he mean? Do you think he was right?

• What evidence do we have to suggest that he sees Kate as a 'rat'?

• Evan often appears to be aggravated during the filming. Why do you think he was upset?

The three independents

KATH HACKING was previously part of the group of community independents along with Larry Hand. She broke with the group after a series of disagreements. Kath decides to run as mayor.

• Why does Larry see her decision as 'an act of treachery' and call her 'a dirty rotten traitor'?

• What insights does the film give us about Kath's view of Larry?

• Why do you think the ALP faction want to nominate her as deputy mayor if Neil McIndoe was to be elected successfully?

NICK ORIGLASS is an independent and an old ex-Trotskyite.

• Find out what kinds of political views a person with this background would hold.

BOB HEFFERNAN is an independent who is also an ex ALP member.

• What insights does the film provide into his views and who he supports?

The three community independents

There are two other community independents in addition to Larry Hand.

SUE STOCK wants to run for the position of deputy mayor. She says that she is on various committees including the Department of Planning, a land management group and Greening Australia. She said she 'goes along to all these meetings with besuited men and I think I need a little more status'.

• How can you explain why she then agreed not to stand for the position and to vote for Larry?

• Do you think that she agreed to step aside in favour of Kate to ensure Larry's re-election?

CHRISTINE O'BRIEN is a conservation consultant.

• What do you find out about her in the film?

• What reasons can you suggest for the fact that she is not a key focus in the film?

The Liberal Party

HARRY SIDAWAY is the sole member of the Liberal party on the council.

The lead up to the election

Write a short story that explains what happens in the last two days before the election including the meetings in Larry's office? Comment on what happens one hour before the council election meeting. Who are the people

who gather together in the mayor's office just before the election? Why is Larry still very worried?

At the election meeting

There are a large number of people who have come to watch the meeting. Why?

The General Manager of the Council conducts the election of mayor. The voting is decided by a show of hands, and the person nominated who receives the lowest number of votes is excluded. This continues until the last vote.

The nominations are:

• Larry Hand—nominated by Christine O'Brien (six votes in the first round)

• Noel McIndoe—nominated by Evan Jones (three votes in the first round, four in the second)

• Kath Hacking—nominated herself (two votes before she was excluded)

The nominations for deputy Mayor are:

• Kath Hacking (who receives three votes)

• Kate Butler (who receives nine votes)

Media studies

These activities could be either individual, pairs, small group work or whole class discussion.

• How would you describe the genre or style of this film?

• Are the filmmakers trying to produce a film to entertain with **Rats in the Ranks**, or could you describe some other purpose?

• What messages are conveyed in the film?

• What techniques have the filmmakers used to create effects and atmosphere? You could talk about this in reference to the film as a whole or by looking at individual scenes.

• What impact does the film have on you as you watch it?



- In what ways are your reactions influenced by the fact that this film is a documentary of a real situation and not a fictional story?
- What kinds of audiences would appreciate this film?
- What can you learn about contemporary society at the time from a study of **Rats in the Ranks**?
- Write a synopsis of what happens in the film.
- Whose point of view is being presented in the film?
- Does the film have a particular visual style? For example, are there close-ups used for a particular effect, or wide shots? Do certain characters dominate? Is the camera still or does it move?
- Watch segments closely more than once and then write close studies of each extract. In these you could comment on the action in the section, characters, the settings chosen, themes, film techniques, camerawork, music and editing.
- Write other dialogues which could have occurred in the lead up to the election. Produce and present these scenes in your classroom. Try to include the points of view of other councillors who are not so prominent in **Rats in the Ranks**.
- Listen to the music which is in the background and which links different scenes. What atmosphere do the different tracks create? How would you describe the music that has been selected?
- Devise further possible scenes in the films. Write them and then develop performances. You will need to develop the script, scenes, setting, roles of actors, thoughts about how you are going to shoot the film etc.

Is Cheryl Kernot a 'Rat in the Ranks'?

In October 1997, Cheryl Kernot resigned as the leader of the Democrats and member of the Senate in the federal government. Her decision was made so that she could become a member of the Australian Labor Party and stand for pre-selection in the lead up to the next federal election. Cheryl Kernot claimed that as a Democrat in the Senate, she could not actively oppose the Liberal government and their policies. She believed that she needed to stand for a House of Representatives seat to be really engaged in policy making.

In a class discussion talk about the Kernot decision:

- By her actions, did she become a 'Rat in the Ranks'?
- Who would have been more likely to call her a 'Rat'?
- What was the ALP's reaction to her shift in party loyalties?
- Some commentators claim that she really made the decision because of a desire for greater power. What do you think?
- Develop a profile on Cheryl Kernot which traces her career in politics.
- Using current newspaper reports, update your profile to find out her current position and popularity.

Drawing some conclusions

Power games

'The struggle for leadership in Leichhardt council is common at all levels of politics.' In a class discussion talk about this idea, drawing examples from other elections. Think about the reasons why jostling for positions would occur?

- Find out more about the length of terms for mayors in your local council. How often do people stand more than once?
- What are the qualities that make a 'good' mayor?
- Why do you think Larry Hand won?

This study guide was written for ATOM by Libby Tudball, Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson.

For further information

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