



The people have spoken but what did they mean?

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democracy di-'mä-kr&-sE noun

1 b : a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.

Remember one thing about democracy. We can have anything we want and at the same time, we always end up with exactly what we deserve.

Edward Albee

Our democratic system of government means that all voices are heard during an election campaign and this is particularly true at a local government level. Inevitably, campaigning and the opportunity to make a real difference will bring out not only the best and brightest but also those with a specific cause or, in some cases, obsession, which will be magnified in importance if they are successfully elected.

Local councils provide an excellent opportunity for individuals wanting change or reform to seek office and actually have an impact on how things are done.

More often than not, this means highly skilled and charismatic individuals are brought forward to the benefit of both the council and its ratepayers. Sometimes, however, the opposite is true and someone with an axe to grind or a specific issue to gnaw away at is elected, skewing people's perception of the council and what it stands for.

In order to get elected, these candidates may end up misrepresenting council views and actions because of previous frustrations experienced in dealings with them.

How can a local council cope when an axe grinder is elected? For example, if a vocal campaigner against a recent rate rise is elected to council, that person is going to continue to voice their objections at council meetings and in the community.

Rates are a particularly emotive issue as ratepayers tend to hear the word 'rise' and nothing else, not taking the time to understand the whys and wherefores that have led to this difficult decision.

At one level it is good for the community to elect someone representing their specific interest as it reflects an issue of concern to a wide number of ratepayers, however, the one-eyed nature of arguments on issues of great passion can often cause misperceptions of council's motivations and actions as well as augment the relative importance of the issue in relation to other issues before the council.

Some council decisions are not easy but are necessary and rate rises are an excellent example of this.

While good leadership will take a community through these issues, allowing for reasoned debate and acceptance of good, clear arguments, it is the long standing reputation of the council that is the main determinant of what perceptions of the organisation will be when the dust has settled.

In other words, while an individual or group may seek to achieve office over a particular issue, which may or may not have been properly represented in the community, it is the reputation of council that will determine whether or not short term political expediency wins over a more considered policy outcome.

And, it is in such times, that council will need to heavily rely on the goodwill built up in the community in order to ensure it achieves its outcomes.

So for example, if as a result of the next round of local government elections, a council finds an anti-rate increase campaigner elected to office, the success of council in continuing with its policy of a rate rise will depend on the goodwill generated in the community.

Without any goodwill and ground swell of support for the anti-rate rise campaigner council will be faced with either modifying its policy in the future or attempting to explain the need for an increase in rates to the newly elected member (who now has a mandate based on low rates).

Either outcome is difficult to deliver on, however if prior to the elections, council has done everything within its powers to articulate why rates are increasing, the likelihood of somebody being elected on such a platform are significantly diminished, as while many in the community will sympathise with the position, they will also be informed enough to understand that charges do have to increase, if only to cope with inflation.

The bottom line is protect your reputation, communicate your message, don't take the community for granted and when the tough times arrive, they will be a lot easier to deal with than if you sit back and do nothing at all.