

CEO victory blows open poisonous culture that silences city



Warrnambool City Council CEO Peter Schneider bore the brunt of a broken WCC culture with his sacking, which was today overturned by the Supreme Court. Image: Gameworld

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

Today's emphatic victory in the Supreme Court by Warrnambool City Council CEO Peter Schneider did more than give him his job back – it has exposed the poisonous culture that tries to silence our city.

This victory exposes a rotten culture of power and entitlement that was allowed to take root and fester in the council for almost two decades.

Mr Schneider, wide-eyed and pink-cheeked off the plane from WA, walked into a culture that thrived on the cruel concept

of “insiders” and “outsiders” and the snivelling, sycophantic silence of those who quickly learned how the game was played, and who chose not to speak up, but to join in.

By joining in, they thought they might have a tiny slice of power too.

How did that work out?

Mr Schneider walked into a joint that had not had seen a staff review in 12 years.

The WCC had become a place of power plays, backroom deals, favours, payback, revenge, circles of influence, pet projects and political aspirations.

In this culture, one councillor who was on council for 16 years, Michael Neoh, was elected Mayor five times.

Peter Hulin, who was on council for a decade, was not allowed to be Mayor, even once.

Insiders and outsiders.

Mr Schneider was an “insider” for about 23 minutes – having been chosen for the job and relocating his family from across the other side of Australia – only to find he wasn’t an insider at all.

He didn’t fit the plan.

When those who thought they held all the power decided he had to go, they gathered, they plotted, and they ripped his voice out.

As Justice Michael McDonald’s judgment said in no uncertain terms today, Mr Schneider was denied the basic right to defend himself.

He was silenced.

Three other members of council, including the Mayor and a former Mayor, tried to ask questions.

The four councillors who believed they had all the power, stayed mute.

Is there any more brutal example of those who are allowed to speak and those who are not?

We have seen this silencing time and again in Warrnambool: where the cliques have gathered to protect their own and the powerless were ignored.

We see it in the ribbons fluttering on the Loud Fence outside St Joseph's church in Lava St.

We saw it during the March4Justice rally on 15 March when sexual abuse survivors spoke for the first time.

We saw it in the battle to save Levy's Beach from the might of the racing industry, where the words of the indigenous elders were lost in the tailwind of Darren Weir's blazing comet.

We are seeing the same silencing take root in Lyndoch Living right now, in real time, where becoming a member or board member is no longer an opportunity open to everyone, but to a select few.

As a result, we have a situation where more than 1000 people have now signed a petition asking Lyndoch simple questions that it refuses to answer.

Insiders and outsiders: that's how Warrnambool used to roll.

Mr Schneider's victory today should send a message to all those who believe the voiceless will stay silent that those days are over.

The days of stepping on heads for personal power – those days are done.

But the cultural clean-out at the council is still not over.

There is an ongoing Local Government Inspectorate investigation that we all hope will provide answers to exactly what happened in the lead up to Mr Schneider's illegal sacking and afterward.

This includes the "free" legal advice provided to then Cr Neoh, and the appointment of Vikki King as Acting CEO who, before the ink was dry on that deal, was also reappointed for another five years as manager of Community Services.

None of Ms King's managerial colleagues signed off on that deal, so it was passed to a subordinate – a casual.

I have always believed that the truth rises and it will, and when it does, it comes with a roar.