

Hold your bark back: speaking up is now a crime



Foxy the Fact Checker has joined Barry the Bullshite detector in The Terrier kennel.

Carol Altmann – The Terrier

I want you to meet Foxy. I will tell you more about her at the end of this piece, but we need Foxy, because speaking up is now a crime.

If you raise your voice and shout at a Warrnambool City Council meeting, you face an \$825 fine, or, [to put it into council currency](#), one Pickled Pig dinner, six bottles of shiraz and two creme brûlées.

This is a local law that was designed to protect councillors and staff from aggression or violence toward each other, or from the public. It is now being used to shut people up.

Not all people, mind you, just the Neanderthals, as Cr Michael Neoh likes to call them.

These “Neanderthals” include the everyday people of

Warrnambool who don't wear suits and who have callouses on their hands from physical work, or tired faces from holding down two jobs while raising three kids.

According to Cr Neoh and Cr Kylie Gaston and our CEO Peter Schneider, these people now need to be shut down for shouting, like they did at last Monday night's fiery meeting.

If police need to be called, Cr Gaston is happy to use speed dial.

And yet no police have been called by the WCC for the almost \$4000 in ratepayers' funds that were mis-spent by a former senior manager.

This man was an *actual* Neanderthal, [but he wore a suit](#) and was regarded as a "good bloke" by our Mayor and others while he ripped off ratepayers and bullied a string of council staff mercilessly.

Not a word was raised last Monday night about that Neanderthal's bullying behaviour.

Instead, within hours, the finger was pointed back on the people who have had a gut full of years of waste and not being heard.

The main agitator, ratepayer Ben Blain, who was facing a fine, was loud, no doubt about it, but he was not abusive, or threatening. In fact he was pleading.

Here's a theatrical but accurate transcript of the full exchange. Warning: contains foul language like "sack 'em" and "cheat" and "you have not got your house in order".

Lights up. Agenda Item 5.4: Council decides to increase its carbon footprint by flying 31,000km to and from Mariestad, Sweden, to learn how to reduce its carbon footprint.

Ratepayer Ben leaves his seat, walks to the front of the public gallery, his pants trembling with nerves:

(Cue loud voice....aaaaaaand action!):

"Peter Schneider was the council aware of anyone's involvement? We have sat here and listened to the council try and hide every single cover up that has happened in this place and we are not going to take it anymore.

We are the ratepayers, we are the ones that have voted you in, and you think it is alright to sit here and lie, cheat and steal. Listen to the ratepayers.

What we want is transparency. That is what we want.

How do you think we are going to put up with this?

(Mayor Herbert: Ben, Ben, I have asked you to leave.)

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(Mayor Herbert: Ben, I have asked you to leave.)

Have you? I am not leaving.

(Ratepayer chorus: No! No!)

Sack 'em! Sack em'!

(Ratepayer chrous: Sack 'em! Sack 'em! Sack' em! Sack 'em!)

It is absolutely disgusting. We can't afford to run the city with the rates we've got and then you want more to go to Sweden.

You have not got your house in order. How do you think the ratepayers....

(Mayor Herbert: I have asked you to leave.)

(Ratepayer chorus: Nooooo! Nooooo! Noooooo!)

(Mayor Herbert: Right, councillors, we will adjourn the meeting please.)

(Ratepayer chorus: Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.)

Meeting adjourned for 10 minutes while CEO Schneider spoke quietly with ratepayer who had returned to his seat.

Councillors re-emerge.

Meeting resumes and picks up again at item 5.4.

Meeting rolls on for almost another hour with a few jeers and moans and groans.

Subdued crowd reignited fully by Cr Gaston's speech about The Terrier (aka Fox Terrier News), during which Cr Gaston reveals her preference for media that behaves like a toothless tiger, rather than a blog that bites.

Lights down. We all go home.

This is democracy in action and I am determined to keep fighting for it.

As part of that, and because Cr Gaston said she would like my fact checking to be public, I have hired Foxy the Fact Checker. She works 7.6 hours a week alongside Barry the Bullshite detector and she will have her first outing shortly.

Terrier Tip Jar