

Silencing councillors tightens grip on public right to know

Description



Speaking to journalists will become much harder for Warrnambool City Councillors if a proposed change to its media policy goes ahead. Image: Third Sector.

ANALYSIS – Carol Altmann

The [attempted shaming](#) of three Warrnambool City councillors for speaking to a journalist is yet another step toward shutting off information to the public.

And if you care about freedom of speech and freedom of the media, then the events of the past few days should be very troubling.

First, some background.

Late last week, the agenda for this Tuesday's council meeting was released and contained a report given to chief executive officer **Bruce Anson** from the Local Government Investigations and Compliance Inspectorate following its investigation into the leaking of confidential council documents to *The Age* early last year.

The inspectorate concluded that it could not determine who leaked the documents.

But it did conclude that three councillors – **Brian Kelson**, **Peter Hulin** and **Peter Sycopoulis** – met with a journalist from *The Age* the night before it ran the first of several stories about links between then-Premier **Denis Napthine** and Midfield Meats owner, **Colin McKenna**.

It was not hard to reach this conclusion, because the councillors *told* the inspectorate about this meeting.

After all, it has never been an offence for an elected official to speak to a journalist and it happens every day.

The assumption, of course, is that the three councillors used this meeting to hand over secret documents, but this is wrong.

The Age journalists, **Royce Miller** and **Ben Schneiders**, have issued a statement to say that they were already in possession of the documents before this meeting.

How did they get the documents? Who knows, but in a world dominated by public relations officers and media managers, leaks and whistleblowing are often the only ways that information in the public interest can come to light.



Cr Peter Sycopoulis was one of three councillors being shamed for having met with a journalist from *The Age*.
Image: Warrnambool City Council.

The inspectorate knew the three councillors had done nothing illegal, and it prepared a confidential report naming the three councillors that could only be released with the approval of the CEO, Mr Anson.

Ironically, Mr Anson decided to make this confidential report public, and included it in the agenda. In other words, what is and isn't kept confidential by council is entirely at Mr Anson's discretion.

A [front page headline](#) by *The Standard* followed but, in what I believe is unprecedented for a newspaper, it didn't defend the profession of journalism that relies on research, well-placed sources, whistleblowers and leaks, but instead leapt on the "revelation" that three councillors had met with a journalist, as if *this* was a crime.

[Its sycophantic editorial](#) went even further and defended the former Premier against such "damaging" behaviour, saying that he must "be itching" to ask what was discussed between the councillors and *The Age* journalists.

This is coming from an organisation that knows the trust between a journalist and a source is fundamental to flushing out what those in power don't want you to know, but is in the public interest: like the fact – as reported by *The Age* – Dr Napthine (and our Federal MP **Dan Tehan**) held shares in a racehorse with Mr McKenna.

A compliant newspaper and a media-managed council is a powerful combination in a regional city, and it could soon get even worse.



The public right to know hinges on the ability of journalists to ask questions of sources. Image: Disclose This.

Lost within the story is a recommendation by the inspectorate that the Warrnambool City Council put its boot even harder on the neck of elected members.

It has suggested – and the council will now consider – changing its media policy so that councillors MUST tell the council’s communications manager, Nick Higgins, when they speak to a journalist, about anything.

What right has a government inspectorate got to try and gag elected councillors?

It is an outrageous recommendation and one designed purely to ensure that the only information released to the media (and therefore, to you, the public) is that which suits the council’s chief executive or the mayor of the day, whoever they may be.

This closing down of voices in local government is a growing trend across Australia, and comes as [newsrooms are shrinking](#).

Indeed academic papers* have been written on this increasing secrecy and the restraining of elected members by tightening a council's media policy.

We need to ask ourselves, who does such secrecy benefit? It is certainly not intended to benefit you, the humble ratepayer.

No, it is designed for councils to move more and more information behind closed doors so that decisions can be discussed – and made – by those with power without any “distractions” from the public.

This means decisions, when they are made public, are virtually a fait accompli, such as [the nine-storey apartment block](#) proposed for 1A Liebig St, or the sale of land to Midfield for an [enormous milk processing plant](#).

And it is designed to keep all of the potential “hot spots” under wraps, such as the true state of affairs of [the Fun4Kids festival finances](#), or the declining [patronage at Flagstaff Hill](#), or the actual salary package paid to the [chief executive](#), or who was [invited into the May Races marquee...](#)

We here at *Bluestone Magazine* have already been cut off by the council's media unit: our questions now go unanswered and our requests for interviews with certain council staff are denied.

This is what happens when you don't play by the rules or you refuse to stick to “the message” – but *Bluestone* will keep investigating nonetheless.

Warrnambool should not be distracted by the public shaming of three councillors for talking to the media – this is not the problem. The much more worrying issue is the move to stop councillors talking to journalists at all.

Category

1. Archive

Tags

1. asking questions
2. Brian Kelson
3. confidential
4. freedom of press
5. Local Government Inspectorate
6. media
7. Peter Hulin
8. Peter Sycopoulis
9. public relations
10. speaking out
11. The Age

12. whistleblowers

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