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A Doyle majority – what will it mean?

06 Apr 2017



By former Cr Stephen Mayne

Now that the City of Melbourne election results have been finalised by VCAT President Greg Garde, what will it mean for governance at city hall?

The return of former deputy lord mayor Susan Riley as the vital sixth member of Team Doyle, along with the election of non-Doyle Liberal Party member Philip Le Liu, means we have the most right wing or pro-business council for many years.

If you label all members of Team Doyle as part of the right – and Deputy Lord Mayor Arron Wood along with former Labor Party state secretary Nick Reece both have solid progressive credentials – then you are talking a comfortable 7-4 majority.

The five-person Team Doyle faction did meet regularly in the last council, but they couldn't make any decisions without securing an additional vote. This time, they will potentially have complete control over council decisions within their team meeting.

Cr Jackie Watts, a Labor Party member and persistent Doyle critic, will gain little traction in the new council and has already been the subject of at least one formal complaint to state government oversight bodies.

However, just because we have a business-backed and Liberal-led council, don't expect an immediate move on the 17 per cent loading that business pays above the level of rates paid by residents. That set-and-forget differential has been in place for more than two decades and won't be changed, largely because business has not complained.

Similarly, even if debt blows out delivering the \$300 million-plus Queen Victoria Market precinct redevelopment, you'll never see a Doyle-controlled council asking for an exemption from rate capping.

That said, Cr Doyle is very conscious of the fact he rules over most of Adam Bandt's federal seat of Melbourne, long recognised as the most left wing federal seat in the country. The Lord Mayor jokes about being in a Green-Liberal Coalition and is very proud of being the spiritual leader of the so-called "Hamer Liberals" – the progressive, moderate group who look after the environment and embrace minorities whilst also keeping the budget balanced.

The Lord Mayor is unlikely to alienate the two Greens on council, Rohan Leppert and Cathy Oke, given they are both impressive individuals who have worked constructively with him in the past.

But he will no doubt be tempted to use some of his new-found power and the biggest risk relates to the conga line of rent-seekers who will ask for favourable treatment.

News Corp provided the worst example in the last council when it prevailed on the Lord Mayor to dish out almost \$300,000 of ratepayer cash to assist with their Good Friday Appeal. It was a dud investment which wasn't repeated, but there will be many others seeking favours, such as James Packer's Crown Resorts with its plan to build the biggest building in the southern hemisphere on the Queensbridge Hotel site.

The controversial removal of QVM trader Michael Caiafa, after serving for almost 150 days, will raise legitimacy questions about the Lord Mayor's majority.

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Why did it happen? No legitimately elected councillor or politician in Australia has ever been removed from office mid-term by the same electoral authority which declared them elected in the first place.

The VEC is meant to be a sober independent authority which responds to events as necessary – not an interventionist litigant triggering unprecedented electoral outcomes with major political implications.

As *Southbank Local News* has previously reported, the Lord Mayor and Electoral Commissioner Warwick Gately had two telephone conversations during the Brooke Wandin imbroglio. What did they talk about?

As a party to the proceedings who followed all submissions before Magistrate Michael Smith at the Municipal Electoral Tribunal and before Justice Garde at the VCAT appeal, I did not see or hear any convincing argument supporting the VEC position.

In my opinion, Magistrate Smith got it right and the VEC should never have appealed. Given that the VEC had declared Brooke Wandin elected, there should have been a vacancy declared and a countback which elected her running mate Nicholas Frances Gilley, who only received 14 primary votes.

But no, the VEC persisted with an alternative argument of assuming Ms Wandin had withdrawn before the election, when she hadn't.

The VEC approach didn't stop Brooke Wandin's tainted votes being used to elect her running mate, and it had the additional impact of delivering a Doyle majority (which the clear majority of voters did not want) and removing a serving councillor who scored the fourth highest vote with 7.78 per cent.

This is a travesty of democracy which, assuming no successful appeal, will effectively martyr Michael Caiafa and further boost the already powerful political movement opposing council's QVM redevelopment plans.

Don't be surprised if all this plays out at the 2018 state election as Planning Minister Dick Wynne, a critic of council's QVM plans, desperately tries to fend off a Green challenge in his seat of Richmond.

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[April 2017](#)
[March 2017](#)
[February 2017](#)
[December 2016/January 2017](#)
[November 2016](#)
[October 2016](#)
[September 2016](#)
[August 2016](#)
[July 2016](#)
[June 2016](#)
[May 2016](#)
[April 2016](#)
[March 2016](#)
[February 2016](#)
[December 2015/January 2016](#)
[November 2015](#)
[October 2015](#)
[September 2015](#)
[August 2015](#)
[July 2015](#)
[June 2015](#)
[May 2015](#)
[April 2015](#)
[March 2015](#)
[February 2015](#)
[Dec/Jan 2014-15](#)
[November 2014](#)
[October 2014](#)
[September 2014](#)
[August 2014](#)
[July 2014](#)
[June 2014](#)
[May 2014](#)

[April 2014](#)
[March 2014](#)
[February 2014](#)
[December 2013/January 2014](#)
[November 2013](#)
[October 2013](#)
[September 2013](#)
[August 2013](#)
[July 2013](#)
[June 2013](#)
[May 2013](#)
[April 2013](#)
[March 2013](#)
[February 2013](#)
[January 2013](#)
[December 2012](#)
[November 2012](#)
[October 2012](#)
[September 2012](#)
[August 2012](#)
[July 2012](#)
[June 2012](#)
[May 2012](#)
[April 2012](#)
[March 2012](#)
[February 2012](#)
[December 2011](#)
[November 2011](#)
[October 2011](#)
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