

Huge campaign donation offered to Robert Doyle for deputy lord mayor role

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Lord mayor Robert Doyle controls five of the 11 positions at Town Hall.

Lord mayor Robert Doyle is being offered a campaign donation of hundreds of thousands of dollars by one of his fellow councillors in return for the deputy lord mayor nomination at Town Hall elections.

Ken Ong, the council's chair of planning, recently increased his sizeable wealth by selling a major stake in a chain of childcare centres he owns with his wife for at least \$9 million.

Cr Ong, a Liberal Party member like Cr Doyle, has told the lord mayor he wants to run as his deputy at elections in October.

In return for the position, Cr Ong said he was willing to offer a large campaign donation - with party members and Town Hall sources saying about \$200,000 had been discussed.

"The offer is not \$200,000 specifically," Cr Ong said. "I am happy to contribute a reasonable amount. It might be less or it might be even more if the campaign demands."

Asked if the offer of a donation to the campaign would be on the condition of being Cr Doyle's deputy, Cr Ong said: "Well, if I'm not the deputy lord mayor, I don't need to contribute."

At the 2012 Melbourne City Council election, Team Doyle raised almost \$400,000 in donations - including \$20,000 from current deputy lord mayor Susan Riley. Another Team Doyle councillor, Beverley Pinder-Mortimer, gave \$30,000.

Many donations to Team Doyle came from property developers, and Cr Doyle and his team

have had to absent themselves from many votes involving donors.

Cr Ong said his offer of a large personal donation would mean this sort of conflict of interest issue would not arise. "There is no law saying I can't put my own money in the hat."

Cr Ong said his deputy lord mayor run had angered Cr Riley, who is understood to want another term. "The current deputy lord mayor is a little bit upset," Cr Ong said.

Contacted about Cr Ong's offer, Cr Riley initially denied any discussions had occurred over the deputy position, saying: "That's news to me."

She then conceded, when told of Cr Ong's open discussion of the donation plan, that she had been told of it. "I thought that was just in jest; I thought it was just gossip talk in the corridor."

The Age sent questions on Sunday to Cr Doyle and his office, but his spokeswoman said the lord mayor was in China and could not be reached for comment.

Cr Doyle is in China with another Melbourne councillor, Kevin Louey, who has deep links to the city's Chinese community and who is active in fundraising for the lord mayor's re-election campaign.



Ken Ong.

Monash University governance expert Ken Coghill is a former state MP and an ex-councillor at Wodonga Council. He recently wrote a [report calling for major electoral reform](#) at Melbourne City Council.

He said the spectre of such large donations gave a terrible impression of how power could be exercised in local government.

"This looks very much like an attempt to buy political power and power should rest equally with all citizens rather than people with money, or people with wealthy backers," Professor Coghill said.

He said local government in Australia should follow the lead set by Britain, which has introduced a spending limit of £740 plus six pence for each elector.

"If that formula were applied to the City of Melbourne, then all that any candidate could spend would be \$17,000," he said.

The lord mayor controls five of the 11 positions at Town Hall and hopes to gain total control of the council by winning a sixth position in what would be his third term in the role.

One councillor said the rising tension over who would be on Cr Doyle's ticket was "starting to cause some issues, and he should resolve it sooner rather than later".

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