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Melbourne's lucky day

06 Apr 2017



By Shane Scanlan

The City of Melbourne has just got lucky with the chance inclusion of Nicholas Frances Gilley as its 11th councillor.

The most-impressive social entrepreneur's "election" to council is an accidental, but fortunate, outcome of a bizarre chain of events, which started before the October council election.

Never really expecting to get elected, Mr Frances Gilley and running mate Brooke Wandin were supposed to contest the deputy and lord mayoral positions and attract votes for former councillor Richard Foster.

However, a simple mistake saw them enter the wrong part of the election, which led to a bitter falling out with Mr Foster and resulted in both Mr Foster and Ms Wandin facing criminal charges over Ms Wandin's enrolment address.

These matters are still before the courts. The authorities are currently working with Ms Wandin on ways to avoid a conviction. By contrast, Mr Foster is pleading not guilty, and the matter is due for further mention in the Melbourne Magistrates Court on July 18.

Ms Wandin was elected to the council (largely on preferences) but was later stripped of the position when it became clear that she was ineligible to stand.

Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) president Justice Greg Garde on March 14 declared Mr Frances Gilley elected in her place. And while he was initially not interested in the position, Mr Frances Gilley said he decided to take up the opportunity to honour his commitment to Ms Wandin (in whom he was "in awe of").

He says he will work towards reforming the electoral process so that indigenous people, such as Ms Wandin, in future can be automatically eligible for election no matter where they live. He calls this "paternal right" and offers the treaty that John Batman signed with the Wurundjeri tribe in 1835 as the basis of his rationale.

Mr Frances Gilley denies this is "idealistic", saying that, in fact, it's a pragmatic ambition because it can be achieved by simply adding a tick-box to candidate enrolment forms for indigenous Australians.

And while this sounds like "pie in the sky", Mr Frances Gilley's track record for getting things done suggests it just might happen.

He's been a CEO since he was 25, has been ordained an Anglican priest and was awarded an

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MBE (Member of the British Empire) for charitable achievements in Britain before coming to Australia in 1998 where he became the executive director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence.

He is on boards, writes books, speaks internationally and is well connected with the World Economic Forum. He is also an environmental player on the world stage.

The thought of his intelligent and passionate contribution to the direction of our city within the council chamber is exhilarating.

“I have skills,” he said modestly, pointing to the obvious areas of homelessness and the environment as where he can contribute most.

And he’s not daunted by his ignorance of local government policies, processes and powers.

“It’s a board position, isn’t it?” he said, explaining that his strategic thinking was the best thing he could contribute and vowing to steer clear of the detail.

“You’ve got to trust the people who do the detail. What I will do will be within the context of that detail,” he said.

“My style is to pose questions such as: ‘would this be a good goal for us?’”

He’s also not embarrassed that he and Ms Wandin’s team attracted only 1534 votes.

“It’s the system, isn’t it? We’ve ended up with a consequence that neither of us expected, but I’m now in the job.”

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