

Thank you, Mr Mayor. Here I am again today bringing forward another matter which has previously been very briefly discussed behind the scenes, but which I believe for greater public understanding deserves open discussion irrespective of whether it succeeds – and I do hope we have a discussion today unlike before.

I'll take the Notice of Motion as read, but for the benefit of the public I will briefly explain what I am trying to achieve. This Council spends ratepayer money communicating through print, our website, and social media. But since elected-member columns were legitimately suspended around the 2025 local elections, we have largely stopped hearing the individual voices of elected members through Council-funded channels. I'm particularly thinking of Councillor Kōrero, on a rotating basis, which previously gave each councillor approximately 300 words in the weekly publication *Taupō & Tūrangi News*, and I do appreciate that its circulation is the Taupo town region only. But my motion deliberately goes wider than simply reinstating that column, it is also about recognising the legitimate place of reasonable free expression by elected members to improve democracy in this place.

We should not underestimate the importance of print. There remains a section of our community which does not regularly engage with Council digitally and whom are much more dependent upon face-to-face contact and printed material – and a lot of these older people also happen to more reliably vote. There is also interesting guidance from the Office of the Auditor-General which expressly refers to *Mayoral or Members' columns in Council publications* being suspended during the pre-election period because of electoral advantage. I am not suggesting councillors should be able to publish whatever they like, but think it is significant that the pre-election period as labelled as requiring particular safeguards - the reasonable inference being that there is a place for political or policy commentary in Council communications the rest of the time. We are politicians by definition after all, and only having staff approved messages is not okay.

There is another aspect to this. Around July 2024 I submitted my approximately 300-word Councillor Kōrero contribution dealing with rates and rates capping (that was before it became popular). An editorial staff member denied my contribution on the basis that I was misrepresenting the facts, but even though I could back up my statements the column was still disallowed. I don't raise it now to relitigate, but because it illustrates the problem when Council staff are placed in the position of making editorial judgements about Councillor views. Recognising that a difference of political opinion is not, by itself, a factual error, and I personally think that if an elected member wishes to claim the sky is green then that is on them to justify - but I am not saying we need to go as far as that.

And that brings me to a very recent example.

On 31 July this year, Council's own website published a message from Mayor Funnell concerning local-government reform. In opposing a Western Waikato Unitary Authority he described it as a “*hostile takeover*” and that it would be “*terrible for our community*”. I am not raising this to argue that the Mayor should be prevented from saying those things, and in fact my argument is essentially the opposite. He is an elected representative with a political view on an important political issue, and the community was entitled to hear it. My question is simply:

What makes it appropriate for one elected member, but inappropriate for everybody else?

So to finish, this motion is not asking for an uncontrolled political forum, but if I want to call the sky green then that should clearly attributed to me and not the corporate view of Council - and as per the attached briefing paper it is done elsewhere. It is asking to recognise representative voice, restore the Councillor Kōrero opportunity, and establish fair principles for elected-member contributions to Council-funded communications. It is not fair that for three years some constituents only get to hear the individual views of one elected member namely the Mayor – because that is effectively politics by exclusion. Councils are political organisations by definition, this needs to be recognised as such - and after all ratepayers are paying for it.

I commend the motion to you and look forward to the discussion.