

EDITORIAL

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Ratepayer spectator in game of power

Why the fuss over the infamous McKinlay Douglas report commissioned by the region's three district councils?

Stop your Average Joe in the street and ask them what it is and why they should care, and they may not bother to reply. Yet it has excited council watchers and politicians alike for several reasons. It proposes that a single unitary authority for Northland, or two based on Whangarei and Far North district boundaries, are the best options for local governance. This is a massive departure from the existing system.

Neither the Far North or Whangarei mayor have been shy about the fact they are not Northland Regional Council fans. In the other corner, the Dargaville District Council and the NRC are not enamoured with the report and probably have not been since Far North mayor Wayne Brown freely acknowledged that some strong direction had been given to the report's authors in terms of what the report should recommend. Now, a letter leaked to the *Northern Advocate* indicates that there has been direct correspondence between the authors and the "comissionees", to make sure they get their spin right in terms of selling the report to nay-sayers.

Surprising? Not really, given the personalities involved. And the fact that said personalities were upfront early on that they expected the report to reflect their preferences. However, the report — which has cost thousands of ratepayer dollars — has now effectively been rendered useless. It has no integrity and is nothing more than an expensive reference that the parties involved have colluded on to make sure it says what they want. Ratepayers have been asked for their view, it is difficult to see how they will embrace it now.

Northland ratepayers should be presented with an independent report with clear options enabling them to make an informed choice. Unfortunately, such a thing does not exist. The future of Northland's local government looks set to be determined by a power game in which ratepayers risk being reduced to duped spectators.

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