

# Election votes express a community's views

## ■ Mike Mansell explores voting in elections

Local council elections this year will occur in early October.

Many would say it's the only moment in time the electorate has the real opportunity to express itself politically.

The decision to vote for a series of candidates, local, regional and health governance, is, for the majority, a bewildering one. It becomes in effect an unwitting act of civic duty carried out imperfectly rather than by considered and judicious thinking.

Do we personally know the individual standing for office? Have we closely followed their recent performance, in the case of existing councillors? Have we heard, first hand, their ambitions for the next term of council? Have we directed

them a question and received a reasonable answer?

If you can honestly tick just one out of those four basic questions, you are obviously a partly informed voter. Unfortunately the majority of the 50 per cent who take the trouble to vote in local government elections have no more than a passing knowledge of the name of the candidates they are going to give their vote to, when faced by the voting paper.

It probably doesn't help to know that Plato, as far back as the 4th century B.C., is attributed with the statement "Those too smart to engage in politics are punished by being governed by those who are dumber".

Far from perfect, as the system

would appear, the electorate has come up with a partial solution over the years.

For the lack of a better term, it could be referred to as the "Tolerance Factor" leadership vote. Given the compliant (friends of the mayor) nature of councils that come about on a fairly regular cycle, the public focuses on the quality of the mayoral leadership, or lack of it. They weigh the council performance in respect of issue resolution and levels of controversial noise generated by questionable decision-making. At the ballot box the electorate then expresses its satisfaction or displeasure with the total council by reinstalling the leader or dismissing them.

Whangarei and Northland voters have shown over the last four or five elections that they have been clearly for or against incumbent mayors rather than a holus-bolus dumping of the lower profile ward representatives.

In essence, the public have become increasingly aware of the executive power exercised by elected mayors. In many respects this is in similar mode to that of Sir Robert Muldoon, who was an acknowledged executive autocrat of the first order. The fact that the man or woman at the top sets the district agenda and then sells or bullies the projects through the seemingly democratic channels, is a little more apparent now than it was twenty years ago.

In a move almost unprecedented in local politics, Mr Semenoff has given the Whangarei district eight

months' formal notice of his intention to stand again as Mayor of the District. He is clearly inviting, by issuing that notice, a public assessment of his performance over the last two and a half years.

In true political style, he will also no doubt spend both time and money telling the electorate of his achievements whilst in office and at the same time refuting the existence of any serious problems that confront him and his well trained council.

The rumbblings from Forum North in respect of past and present performance and the obvious connection with the upcoming election are at odds with past pre-election noises the hype is incredibly early and the portents are that a lot more artillery fire is coming our way before October.

Critics take cover!