

Mayor says sorry for 'nigger', sex quips

By Joseph Aldridge of the Northern Advocate
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Whangarei Mayor Morris Cutforth has apologised for using the expression 'niggers in the woodpile' during a council meeting. Photo / file

Whangarei Mayor Morris Cutforth has apologised for an off-the-cuff sexual comment about the city's deputy leader and using the expression "niggers in the woodpile".

He says both were the result of spontaneity, political naivete and lapses of judgement.

A joking reference to Deputy Mayor Phil Halse's enthusiasm for developing the Town Basin as "a sexual thing" was Mr Cutforth's first faux pas.

Later, in an interview with a Northern Advocate reporter, Mr Cutforth used the expression "niggers in the woodpile" to describe problems the council had encountered getting bus companies to use the new bus terminal at The Hub.

When asked about his comments, Mr Cutforth said his spontaneous nature sometimes landed him in trouble.

"I am still a bit new to the political world and, being a fairly spontaneous person, sometimes I say things, meaning really well, but they come out in a way I later regret," he said.

"For example, today I was really trying to describe humorously the awesome drive, commitment and passion Phil has brought to the Town Basin project and many others in my absence.

He has done a wonderful job and I am enormously grateful."

Mr Cutforth publicly apologised to Mr Halse at a council function later in the day.

Mr Halse said he was not offended or embarrassed by Mr Cutforth's comment.

"It didn't worry me at all. It's just one of those things people say," he said.

Mr Cutforth said the expression "niggers in the woodpile" had come to mind while he was trying to explain some difficulties the council was having.

It was an old family saying and not something intended to be offensive, he said.

On reflection, he realised that the use of such an "archaic expression" was not appropriate in today's society.

"In a public situation I would never, never use it because I do know that the word nigger is not acceptable."

While Thursday's comments were regrettable, Mr Cutforth said it was not out of character for him to make outrageous comments.

"I've always said outrageous things all my life, thinking that for most of the time it's quite funny," he said.

"Being an auctioneer for 20 years, you get away with blue murder. I can see now that I have to be much more guarded and aware of what I'm saying."

Mr Cutforth said he relied on people knowing he was a "bit of a hard case" who did not mean to offend.

"I don't want to be necessarily outrageous in the sense that I'm rude or upset people or give them the wrong impression.

"The thing is I do realise that the office of mayor does demand a much higher standard. As an auctioneer, you can get away with it. As a mayor, you can't."

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