

There has to be a forest somewhere

It seems inevitable when dealing with local politics to eventually lose sight of the forest among the trees — to lose the wider view and focus down until the trivial becomes the burning issue.

It's a phenomena not limited to any one party — the councillors are guilty, the council watchers, the media and the public.

In defence of the council — its politicians and staff — there is often an attempt to take the broader picture, but then councillors are also notorious for spending 20 minutes discussing road names then approving hundreds of thousands worth of infrastructure tenders without comment.

When it comes to a perceived slight or criticism, council response can be a torrent of outrage way beyond what most would consider a normal reaction.

Brushing off criticism or laughing off a slight may be the likely human response, but it's not one institutions like a council tend to employ.

Instead the trivial becomes the tremendous.

Perhaps the easiest example of the downscaling view is illustrated by the council watchers.

This is a small group who attend most open council meetings and observe from the public gallery.

Members of that group have highlighted the issue of sewage overflows into the harbour and deserve much credit for the heightened attention being paid in this area.

A year or so ago they were largely responsible for changes in animal disposal at the city pound and for focussing attention on canine issues around the district.

They've kept a close eye on the development of the 'multi-sports' stadium and more.

But the burning issue at the moment is whether they should stand when the Mayor enters the chambers at the start of full council meetings.

The seated 'watchers' got a serve from one of the councillors the other week for their lack of respect — not necessarily toward the Mayor himself, but toward the institution of local government.

Various letters to the editor and gnashing of teeth followed and the 'watchers' now stand as a group and leave the chambers when the Mayor enters and return when everyone is seated.

Okay, step back a bit here.

We're talking about standing or sitting.

From the editor's desk

with Kris von Keisenberg



This isn't a multi-million dollar issue, it's not about public health, it's not about cultural desecration of the harbour or any kind of economic, environmental or social impact on the district — it's about — nothing.

No one's blameless here.

It could be argued that there is so little of import discussed openly in public council meetings that when a councillor does speak articulately and with passion (on 'respect' in this case) it becomes notable no matter what the import of the subject may be.

From the media point of view the journalists are paid to write stories and if the only story available is about standing or sitting then so be it.

Should people be expected to stand when the Mayor formally enters the chambers?

It's a simple issue, easily understood, the kind of thing anyone can have an opinion about. Very much like discussing the weather and about as relevant.

There is likely always going to be a conflict between what the players consider important and what everyone else considers important.

Or maybe it's just that 'important' and 'interesting' are not necessarily the thing.

Having said that there comes a point where celebrity gossip, trivia tattle and knee jerk reactions become a waste of energy.

Earlier this month the Government gave a surprise, unsolicited (as far as is publicly known) \$2.5m toward the Okara Stadium. The design had been finalised, the tenders signed, the financing arranged and construction begun.

There was no point in adding \$2.5 million to the project, especially when the Government is slashing other public works and borrowing money from overseas just to keep the country operating.

No one seems to have discussed that.

The most passionate speech in the council chambers last week was a defence of the Mayor and lambasting of the media over a story about whether correct procedure was followed during the awarding of a roadworks tender some months ago.

Anyone seen our forest?