

Brave few expose corruption

HOW do corrupt operators try to get away with it?

For years in Wollongong, developers obtained special deals through inside connections. Quite a few people knew about it, but there were no major exposures until the public ICAC hearings. Why not?

The first tactic of corruption is cover-up. Deals are done in secret. Corruption flourishes wherever secrecy is the rule.

The antidote to cover-up is exposure. The ICAC hearings combined with extensive media coverage, including investigative reporting, brought shady deals into the sunlight, resulting in community outrage. The State Government and the ALP, caught in the spotlight, felt obliged to take action.

The second tactic of corruption is denigration of critics, especially of honest workers and community members who oppose unprofessional operations. Residents who oppose development operations may be called self-interested. Personal attacks on workers usually take place behind the scenes.

The third tactic of corruption is reinterpreting the facts.

Deals are done in secret.

Corruption flourishes wherever secrecy is the rule.

Brian Martin



Donations to politicians are said to be part of the democratic process. Close relationships are claimed to be inevitable because Wollongong is like a country town. Offerings of money and goods are said to be gifts, not bribes or pay-offs.

Another reinterpretation is to say that the problem is restricted to a few individuals. Removing the bad apples, like a few Labor Party members, supposedly exonerates others in the barrel.

The antidote to twisting the truth is repeated statements that justice must be done and seen to be done, for example that political donations of any sort are ready opportunities for dodgy dealings.

The fourth tactic of

corruption is formal or tacit endorsement by those in power. For years, the system of developer-government dealings has continued with awareness by many leading business and government figures, but precious little action to change it. This tacit approval is a huge barrier to change.

Citizens often expect official bodies to take the initiative in rooting out corruption, but this rarely happens and is not necessarily the best option.

The ICAC investigation was impressive as far as it went, but the Government's response was to sack the council and appoint administrators, disenfranchising the electorate and short-circuiting the cleansing process of exposure.

The fifth tactic of corruption is intimidation and bribery. Wollongong City Council workers who tried to restrain corrupt dealings have suffered threats, harassment and career blockages. Fear of reprisals is why so few resist openly.

On the other hand, those who kept quiet could expect promotions, favours and job opportunities, which constitute a form of bribery.

The antidote to intimidation is resistance. Much of the credit for exposure of corruption should go to individuals, often unnamed or given little recognition, who refuse to go along with dubious operations and who try to name and expose it.

In the Wollongong saga, all the corruption tactics can be observed. Fortunately, there are many courageous individuals who use counter-tactics, including exposing corrupt actions, naming behaviours as corrupt and refusing to be intimidated. Corruption isn't yet rooted out, so these efforts are still needed.

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong.