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COST \$300,000**

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FOR WOLLONGONG**

HE'S GONE



Harrison quits as Mayor

By LISA CARTY

George Harrison resigned as Wollongong's lord mayor yesterday, citing concerns for his family.

The man who was elected as a Labor candidate but became an independent under threat of expulsion said his wife and children had been abused and attacked because of his legal stoush with former business partner Delcie Schipp.

Describing his move as the most difficult decision he had ever had to make, Mr Harrison told a tightly-controlled media conference that he had had "weeks of reflection and soul searching".

His resignation - mandatory after he declared himself bankrupt yesterday morning - means Wollongong's residents will go to the polls on September 14 to elect a new lord mayor.

And, if his successor comes from the ranks of the current councillors,

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DETHRONED: Wollongong Lord Mayor George Harrison announces his resignation at a press conference yesterday.

Picture: ROBERT PEET



WHALE WATCH

NPWS volunteers yesterday counted four whales off Cape Solander, near Kurnell. Three whales were spotted off Green Cape Lighthouse, near Eden.

Would-be lord

Keeping control over the mess

COMMENT
By LISA CARTY

George Harrison swore blind he would fight Delcie Schipp all the way to the High Court.

But in the end he rolled over, primarily to have the satisfaction of jumping before he was pushed.

By putting himself into bankruptcy, rather than letting Mrs Schipp push him into it, Mr Harrison will have more control over his financial demise.

For one thing, he gets to select the trustee who will step in to manage his affairs and sort out the money mess.

His decision yesterday to declare himself bankrupt, and leave public office, represents a significant change in Mr Harrison's attitude to the Schipp saga.

For the first time since their court battles began in the early 1990s, he has shown some clear-headed commonsense.

The downside for the ratepayers of Wollongong, of course, is that the rocky ride will end with a \$300,000 by-election to replace him.

That is a price some will be more than happy to pay to end the horror story that has been George Harrison's time at the top.

Mr Harrison never took the advice of his friends and allies when it came to Mrs Schipp.

Time and time again he was urged to pay up, to put it behind him and get on with his life.

Of course, the more he dug in his heels, the bigger the legal bills, and the bigger the interest he would have to pay her.

His frustrated friends expressed their annoyance at his pig-headedness.

No matter that judge after judge had found in her favour. He maintained that he had been a victim of a miscarriage of justice and there was no way he was going to pay her a red cent.

Earlier this year he told the *Mercury* he had gone too far, and the stakes were too high, to simply change his mind and pay the debt.

Put simply, in the end Mr Harrison did not care what the case cost him. He was not going to pay that woman and that was that.

His refusal to accept reality - that is, that the system had repeatedly declared that she was right and he was wrong - cost him his once-cherished Labor Party membership.

It cost him his legal practice, which he sold after the Law Society refused to renew his practising certificate.

It cost him his reputation.

And yesterday it cost him the lord mayoralty.

But anyone who knows him knows that he has walked away with something he holds very dear.

He did not pay Mrs Schipp a single, solitary cent.

Mayor: media, courts forced me out

FROM PAGE 1

there will be a second by-election in that councillor's ward.

The city's by-election bill, just a year shy of the next council election, is expected to be more than \$300,000.

A bitter Mr Harrison blamed "sections of the media" and the courts, which have repeatedly ordered him to compensate Mrs Schipp, for his demise.

He read a prepared statement before defiantly refusing

to answer questions and scuttling back into his office.

"I must say this decision has very significantly been reached by me out of a concern for the wellbeing of my family," he said.

"As a father and husband I can no longer stand by whilst my wife and children are subjected to personal abuse and attack.

"I feel a lot of pressure has been placed upon my family as a result of the personal litigation brought against me by a former business partner."

Mr Harrison rehashed elements of the courts' decisions about his dealings with Mrs Schipp, saying: "I have pursued this litigation to the end of my financial resources because I believed throughout - and I still believe - that I did not do any wrong."

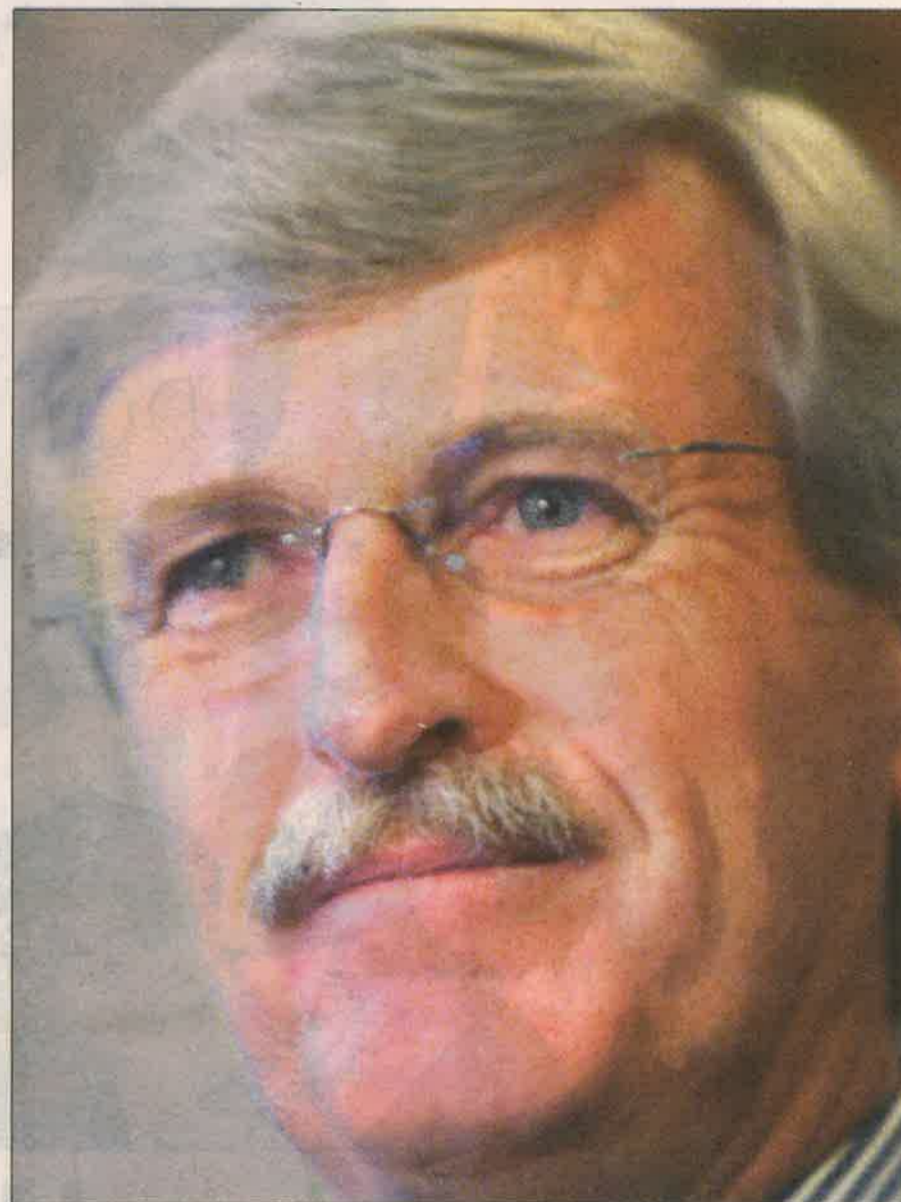
He attacked courts for various judgments, including that given to a man who sued Waverley Council after a surf injury left him in a wheelchair.

Mr Harrison said Wollongong City Council was a better organisation for his efforts.

"Through my initiatives I feel council is now more accountable and customer-focused than at any time in the past," he said.

"Strategies have been and are being implemented in a number of key areas including urban and environmental planning, development processing, waste disposal, information technology, education and tourism."

Deputy Lord Mayor Alex Darling will assume the functions of the lord mayor until a replacement is elected.



FAREWELL WISH: Wollongong City Council general manager Rod Oxley: "It's unfortunate we have seen this happen but life has to go on." Picture: ROBERT PEET

Oxley calls it a sad day

They had some celebrated stoushes but when George Harrison quit, Rod Oxley said it was a sad day for Wollongong.

The council's general manager, speaking just three days after Mr Harrison apologised for calling him a liar, said he wished the former lord mayor well.

"Everyone will see this isn't the best thing that could have happened to a city of our size," Mr Oxley

said of Mr Harrison's departure.

"It's unfortunate we have seen this happen but life has to go on."

Mr Harrison's personal affairs may well have distracted him from his council duties, Mr Oxley said.

"Our personal clashes were based around professional issues," he said.

"There is no secret to the fact that some of the

actions George took I wasn't happy with but I put those behind me and I have the responsibility of managing a very large organisation."

Mr Oxley said he was not aware of the harassment and abuse Mrs Harrison and her children had allegedly suffered.

He said city services would be unaffected by the loss of the lord mayor.

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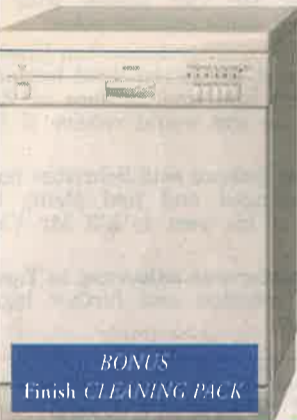
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mayors play hard to get

By LISA CARTY

Former NSW Premier Nick Greiner, one-time steelworks boss George Edgar, Member for Wollongong Colin Markham ... these men are among those nominated by others as possible starters in the lord mayoral race.

Their response?

Mr Greiner's wife Kathryn laughed uproariously, saying there was no way they would inflict that on the peaceful neighbourhood of Otford where the couple have a home.

Mr Edgar won't be a starter if his wife Judy has a say. She is passionately opposed to any such suggestion.

Mr Markham laughed, and used an old Australian expression which made it clear that rumours about his candidacy were wrong, wrong, wrong.

Solicitor Mark McDonald dismissed it out of hand, as did Illawarra Business Chamber head Terry Wetherall.

The most likely candidate - Active Community Team leader Councillor Dave Martin - is in darkest Africa on a private holiday and will not be back in Australia until mid-October.

He lost to Mr Harrison last time and it seems time is against him now, unless he decides to cut short his journey.

His lieutenant Kerrie Christian has said no, and the ACT's third councillor Trevor Mott said: "It will be an Active Community Team decision. I am ruling nothing in or out."

Labor favourite Janice Kershaw said she would consult her colleagues and branch members before making an announcement.

It is understood she might seek preselection for the state seat of Wollongong. Being lord mayor would lift her profile, but if she won the seat she would resign from council at the next council general election in September 2003.

Cr Kershaw said Mr Harrison was always passionate about making Wollongong a better place.

"However his inexperience and personal issues were forever causing him problems," she said.

Cr Vicky King, who also



ON THE WAY OUT: George and Vania Harrison leave Deputy Lord Mayor Alex Darling's house yesterday after informing him of Cr Harrison's decision to resign.

Picture: ROBERT PEET

plans to consult her family, colleagues and branch members, said the elevation of George Harrison to lord mayor was the best possible endorsement for tough anti-branch stacking rules.

He had stacked his way into the job and Wollongong now had deep scars which would take a long time to heal, she said.

"Whoever is the next lord mayor must have the ability to bring everyone together and to heal," Cr King said.

"We don't need more of this subjective destructive garbage that has gone on for three years."

Cr Ian Hunt said he would do the same as his Labor colleagues.

"It's not in the party's best

interests to have a mad scramble on day one," he said.

Mr Harrison's reign had been "immensely disappointing".

"It's not been a particularly pleasant experience in comparison with the previous term of council," Cr Hunt said.

"... things not really connected to council have tended to get in the way of the business of council."

Griffiths: blame the Labor Party

By LISA CARTY

The Labor Party was fairly and squarely to blame for Wollongong's turbulent civic leadership, according to independent Councillor Carolyn Griffiths.

And the party should also cop the flak over the impending \$300,000 by-election bill, she said.

Wishing Mr Harrison and his wife Vania all the best, Cr Griffiths said: "It's been a colourful and bumpy ride - certainly it's never been boring."

"The Labor Party has to share any criticism that is directed at George because the financial and legal issues that have contributed to this were well known to them at the time

he was preselected.

"The party knew he came with a lot of baggage."

The Active Community Team's (ACT) Councillor Kerrie Christian agreed.

"We saw this coming three years ago - it's a pity the ALP didn't see it this way when they preselected him," she said.

"However, in a way it's a relief. Now we've got to move on."

Cr Christian said the ACT would meet within a week to plan for the lord mayoral by-election.

She insisted she would not be a candidate.

"I am not standing. I have a career within BHP Steel. I am not a candidate."

Asked how she would describe Mr Harrison, Cr Christian said: "Mercurial".

"I think his heart is in the right place most of the time, but he really needed to have spent four years as a councillor, and sorted out his legal and financial hassles, before he threw his hat in the ring."

"If he had been patient it might have been a different story."

Member for Wollongong Colin Markham, a long-time Harrison critic, said Labor had been hugely damaged.

He said Mr Harrison should have resigned from council when he resigned from the party last December.

People voted for him because he was the Labor candidate and

then felt their vote was wasted when he stayed on as an independent, Mr Markham said.

"How could this region rely on the leadership of a person who was walking wounded and seen by the vast majority of people in this town as a fraud for staying on even after he resigned from the Labor Party?" Mr Markham asked.

"The ongoing sagas have created an air of cynicism, to put it mildly, and the city has not been able to move forward."

"It was just a matter of time before he resigned from the position and I am absolutely glad to see the back of him."

The new lord mayor needed to be someone with vision who could put the ship back on an even keel, he said.

History best judge of the very nearly-man

Wollongong has had more than its fair share of "colourful" lord mayors.

But George Harrison is the first to resign mid-term and the first to put his city to the trouble of a \$300,000 by-election.

Yesterday's resignation, which came after he voluntarily went into bankruptcy, followed repeated declarations that he would not be forced from office.

In May 2000, just nine months into his four-year term, he vowed he would not be pushed into bankruptcy and out of public life.

At that stage he described his financial position as not bad, saying he was not "extremely wealthy" but would not "cry poor" either.

He said there was no way he would be bankrupt, despite his former barrister's dire predictions to the NSW Supreme Court.

The then-lord mayor told the *Mercury* that although it had been put to him that bankruptcy

VINCE'S VIEW



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could be an easy option he would never agree to it.

"I feel very confident in my ability to survive," he said. "I won't go into bankruptcy. I have not contemplated it in the wildest backbone of my mind."

At that stage, despite his woes, Cr Harrison was hoping for two terms at the top.

"I like to think I will be able to spend at least two terms as lord mayor of the city because I can't believe that I can accomplish in a short period of four years all that I want to accomplish," he said.

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ILLAWARRA MERCURY

Harrison his own worst enemy

ONE of the most disastrous episodes in recent Labor history ended yesterday with the resignation of Wollongong Lord Mayor George Harrison.

The Labor Party knew full well that he was embroiled in a messy legal battle with a former business partner when it decided he would be its lord mayoral candidate at the 1999 election.

Many people held great fears about his ability to do the job.

Labor ditched him when the pressure mounted. He resigned from the party under threat of expulsion last December.

That was the time for him to do the right thing and resign as lord mayor.

But in typical Harrison fashion he stayed put, thumbing his nose at the city which had, perhaps misguidedly, backed him.

Now the city faces the prospect of not just one, but two by-elections in the wake of his decision.

Some will say the by-elections' estimated \$300,000 cost is money well spent to put the traumatic Harrison era in the past.

Others will say he should have hung on until January 1 and spared the city the extra cost. After that date, an acting lord mayor could have been appointed from the ranks of the existing councillors.

If Mr Harrison is looking for people to blame he should look in the mirror, for he was his own worst enemy.

There was a solution to his crisis and that was to pay his former partner the money that was owed.

But his stubborn refusal to submit to the decisions of the judicial system has cost him almost everything.

And it has cost Wollongong plenty.

Mr Harrison had some compelling and appealing qualities.

But in the end he cost himself the top job and inflicted huge pain on the city he says he loves, by his refusal to accept reality.

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FORUM

Protecting your biggest investment

Building a home has always been a significant investment, yet there is more consumer protection in making other purchases, which is where a Govt inquiry comes in.

OVER the past four months I have had the responsibility of chairing a Joint Select Committee of both Houses of the NSW Parliament. The committee had Labor Party, Liberal Party, National Party and independent members and has made 55 unanimous recommendations to radically overhaul the Home Building Regulation system in NSW.

The Inquiry into the Quality of Buildings was conducted against the background that home owners and individuals and groups from all sectors of the building industry have expressed concerns about the current state of home building in NSW. Complaints from a variety of sources have indicated that the current system is inefficient, not coordinated and has resulted in hardships for home buyers as well as for building practitioners.

The committee received more than 200 submissions from all sectors involved in the residential building chain and has taken substantial evidence from individual home owners, based on their own experiences. This forms the basis for the case studies detailed in the report and puts a human face to the issues addressed.

The building regulation system should rely on three core pillars. These are responsibility, accountability and liability. Adherence to these pillars should be a major priority in regulating the most costly and significant investment most families will ever make, namely a home. Yet, there is more consumer protection afforded in the purchase of other consumer items, such as a defective motor vehicle, where greater standards of responsibility and accountability and public

By DAVID CAMPBELL,
Member for Keira.



liability apply for rectification and redress.

The greatest form of consumer protection is prevention and getting the right outcome at the beginning. For most people, there are only minor inconveniences. However, as the case studies documented in the report demonstrate, this inquiry highlights examples of system failure with drastic and sometimes devastating impacts on people's property values, peace of mind and even their own safety. The overwhelming message is that the building regime is complex, messy and poorly understood by building practitioners as well as consumers. The lack of consistent definitions about what constitutes quality from the point of view of building codes and the certification process and the general lack of professional rigour in the system, disadvantages potential home buyers and leads to a reduction in consumer confidence.

The complicated avenues for consumer complaints and dispute resolution further erode consumer confidence and undermine the building industry generally. When problems occur under the current arrangements, consumers and building practitioners become involved in a protracted and difficult process of resolving their differences. The lack of streamlined procedures for quick resolution contributes to costs and further aggravation for all. It is therefore in the interests of both consumers and good builders to ensure that bad practitioners are driven out of the industry and do not continue to challenge claims and manipulate the dispute process.

The committee has made 55 recommendations to improve the system and current arrangements and importantly to provide greater consumer protection. It is essential that everyone involved in the building process is clear about their professional and personal responsibilities; that there are transparent checks and balances in the system, and that there is the ability to solve problems, as they arise, in an efficient and fair manner.

The committee has recommended that building inspectors and certifiers - whether they are employed by the local council or privately - should have the same accreditation, should both be routinely and systematically audited, should have continuing professional development and should have some liability when a home is badly built. This recommendation broadens the net of accountability and liability and is aimed at making sure the "checkers" actually check, on site, the work of builders.

There is also a recommendation for Mandatory On Site Critical Stage inspections by the Certifying Authority so that the inspector actually goes on site and looks at the work rather than relying on paper checks by the person who did the work.

These are two recommended changes aimed at prevention rather than cure.

Because no-one can ever guarantee a system which will deliver 100 per cent perfect buildings every time, there are also recommendations about the cure stage, such as suggesting a dispute resolution procedure where all parties meet on site to use common sense to work out an early solution rather than relying on conflicting reports from experts in a semi-legal tribunal hearing.

While recognising that there are many components involved in getting the system to work seamlessly, the major recommendations made in this report should simplify the overall operation of the industry and ensure that the various players communicate more effectively.

The entire report and recommendations can be found on the NSW Parliament web site, www.parliament.nsw.gov.au