

I'm sticking with skeptic's role

By Tom Belford

HBRC chairman Fenton Wilson was wrong about councillors wearing ties. He is equally wrong in urging me to withdraw from debate over his proposed Ruataniwha dam, alleging "conflict of interest" and "pre-determination".

I have staunchly raised questions about the wisdom behind the dam. Fenton's response is to try to silence me.

Ironically, this is the Fenton who declared his support for the dam during campaign season, as did several other current councillors, and has worked incessantly to promote it.

The same Fenton who, along with councillors Alan Dick and Christine Scott, sat until December as directors of HBRIC, the holding company whose sole mission is to sell the dam.

The same Fenton who voted against my motion at the December HBRC meeting, which attempted to put councillors and the HBRC (as distinct from HBRIC) officially on record as being neutral on the dam until and unless needed analyses were available and public consultation had occurred. Fenton and co couldn't bring themselves to join

me and councillors [Rick] Barker, [Peter] Beaven and [Rex] Graham in declaring their neutrality.

And now, confirming my worst fears, with Fenton's approval HBRC's advocacy has intensified. Materials just released for public consultation on the dam include no mention of the risks and disadvantages the public should understand and consider.

My approach has been clear since day one. Faced with an expensive (\$300 million to build, \$300 million more to use) and environmentally risky proposition, someone should ask the toughest possible questions.

I have embraced that skeptic role. I wasn't elected to be a mere cheerleader for a project of this consequence.

Or as Councillor Graham puts it, "We weren't elected to be mushrooms, kept in the dark."

Well before voters put me on the council, I sat on the dam stakeholders group and asked questions. For that, CHB [District Council's] Peter Butler tried to get me kicked off the group, with its chairman, now-councillor Debbie Hewitt, standing by passively.

I refused to withdraw then and I won't withdraw now.

Subsequently, I helped establish Transparent Hawke's Bay (THB).

Its apparently controversial (to Fenton) mission is to "focus exclusively on open processes, reliable information, and public involvement in councils' decision-making affecting the people of Hawke's Bay."

One of THB's first acts was a

request to delay "call-in" of the dam proposal and Tukituki plan change by the Environment Minister. THB (and others like Ngati Kahungunu) argued the proposal was insufficiently examined at that point, especially in its financial and economic aspects, to set in motion a Board of Inquiry (BOI) process.

THB's request was rejected.

Consequently, last July THB urged the board not to award consents because the requisite analyses were not yet available or vetted. Indeed, we still don't have our "independent" assessment from Deloitte.

In January, I verbally presented to the BOI on behalf of the group. THB did not oppose the dam, but instead urged the BOI to take our concerns about ratepayer risk and benefits into account before making its decision.

Fenton Wilson seeks to question my integrity and make an issue out of my involvement in THB (and A Better Hawke's Bay, for that matter), as if I were intending to deceive the people of Hawke's Bay. In fact, my official candidate's profile, delivered to 37,000 voters, explicitly noted that I "co-founded community groups like A Better Hawke's Bay and Transparent Hawke's Bay."

I've reviewed the guidance available from the Auditor-General regarding non-monetary conflicts of interest and impartiality. The precedents cited do not require councillors to be intellectual eunuchs or blank slates. They recognise councillors will bring points of view and past

associations to the council table. All that is expected is that councillors act with an open mind.

My mind is open. What I have done is ask questions and challenge assumptions, in hopes that my fellow councillors might open theirs as well. To suggest that councillors Wilson, Hewitt, Dick and Scott do not bring a point of view to the table on issues like the dam, amalgamation and rescuing railroads is ludicrous, as any review of the public record will confirm.

I will not be deterred from participating in HBRC deliberations on the dam. I will persist in doing exactly what I was elected to do... ask questions and demand that they be answered. And eventually I'll weigh all views and evidence and cast my vote.

In deference to Fenton's strange conception of "transparency", I have resigned as a member of THB. Reluctantly, because I fervently believe in its mission and I see no conflict.

I resign only because I want no confusion in his mind or anyone else's between the views I express on the dam as a councillor and any views THB might express on the matter going forward.

I'm not going away, Fenton. And I'm not a mushroom.

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■ Business and civic leaders, organisers, experts in their field and interest groups can contribute opinions. Email: editor@hbtoday.co.nz



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