

OP GRAND

EXHIBIT No. 163
.....CLERK

Letter to the Editor
Att. Bob Gordon

26th March 2004

Bob, please note I am sad that I had to write this letter. I am dissapointed in your paper's representation of the facts over the last few days.

Hilights:

You wrote I have been "identified as the unofficial chairman" of the "power block"

Not true - I am not official or unofficial chairman of any group of people and I told your reporter that I have met with some candidates only once a few days ago in the capacity of a consultant.

You wrote "On Wednesday he denied involvement in the fund saying I promise on my heart, cross my heart I have not."

Not true - The "I promise on my heart" expression was in answer to a question regarding a meeting with Brian Ray to which I answered honestly that I had not met Brian in probably four years

On Wednesday I answered all questions put to me honestly.

The Facts.

Back on Friday the 26th December your newspaper ran a front page article on a "power block" made up of Wayne Skuthorpe, Don Magin, Guy Jones, Linda Browne Irene Wareing Dr. Karen Coates supported by Peter Young and Dawn Critchlow.

Many members of the Combined Chamber of Commerce of which I was one were worried about their policies and the impact on the future direction of the Gold Coast if they were successful. We discussed at a number of Combined Chamber meetings our involvement in the upcoming Council elections to counter what appeared to be a well funded political machine.

In December I retired from the Robina Chamber Presidency as my business interests were all now at Coolangatta. I had no further involvement in the Combined Chamber decisions.

Once the campaign commenced I was invited to a number of meet-the-candidates meetings. I was personally still worried regarding a radical group of candidates and their association with certain incumbents.

I was approached by a number of my former colleagues and friends to put my name to a Trust to which people from a broad business spectrum could donate to support a counter group of like minded candidates who united would make positive and cohesive decisions for the good of the City.

I was asked because :

- 1) My involvement in the Cities economic development strategies
- 2) My support for Council and the City in representation including the Melbourne-Sydney and the two Canberra trips.
- 3) My business cannot gain from Council decisions even being outside of Council bylaws on Gold Coast Airport property.
- 4) I no longer represented any business group
- 5) I made no personal investment

I was seen to be neutral.

The Trust fund which your paper provocatively called a slush fund was put in place **to diffuse direct donations to candidates, negating the opportunity of implication and influence later. The candidates were not aware of donation sources and the donors had no direct access to candidates**

Even I do not know the amount of dollars received until after the election when I sign off on the Trust books for exposure in line with legislation. I do not sign the cheques.

All of the monies are handled by a legal firm and distributed against invoices submitted by professional and commercial companies involved in the production of printing and media etc.

There are no slush funds provided to any candidate and this implication that I would be involved in such activity I take as a personal slur.

Your editorial asks "Why the secrecy". Well if you had not named two of the people providing donations the candidates would not know the source of funds. (Not even I know all the donors) We wished to keep the funding mechanism as clean as possible to reduce the opportunity of influence. This is still our policy yet we still stand accused.

When we provided this information in detail yesterday your paper decided not to print any of the explanation but only to imply through provocative language and untruths some sinister backroom plotting by so called "developers" some councillors and myself.

All this and not one word for the duration of the campaign on the other secret power block, also it would appear, well funded . But today your paper donates the whole of page seven to the majority of these people to decry and insult our group.

I have many friends who work at the Bulletin and have campaigned alongside the newspaper on many occasions. I have always defended the Bulletin even when colleagues have considered there was one sided reporting. I am sorry that I needed to write this letter when we should be working together but your reporting on this occasion is incorrect and unfair.

Best Regards,

Lionel Barden