By Rémy Favre

a Member of

**MEG** – Malvern East (Residents) Group

#### **Division 7—Hearings**

97. Tribunal must act fairly

The Tribunal must act fairly and according to the substantial merits of the case in all proceedings.

- 98. General procedure
  - (1) The Tribunal—
  - (a) is bound by the rules of natural justice;

Source: VCAT Act 1998

Natural Justice is about the concept of fairness (...) There are **two primary rules**:

- (...) A person whose interests will be affected by the decision should be given a hearing **before** that decision is made (my emphasis)
- (...) The decision maker must be unbiased. If a person has preconceived opinions, a vested interest or personal involvement in a matter, they should not attempt to settle that matter (my emphasis)

(Source: www.vu/edu.au/library.)

Members of the Tribunal are not subject to direct discipline by other persons, apart from extreme cases where the President believes that there may be grounds for removal of the member from office. This degree of immunity from direct discipline, except in extreme cases, is necessary to maintain the independence of members so that they can, and can be seen to, administer justice independently and impartially.

Section 23(5) of the VCAT Act 1998 essentially provides that a member may only be removed from office if the member:

- has been convicted of an indictable offence ..., or
- has become incapable of performing, or
- has neglected to perform, the duties of office, or
- is unfit to hold office because of misconduct.

(Source: VCAT's Complaint Protocol)

**VCAT MEMBERS ARE** 

UNTOUCHABLE

'Members of the Tribunal are nonetheless accountable by reason of the public nature of their work, the requirement that they give reasons for their decisions and the right given to parties to proceedings to seek the leave of the Supreme Court of Victoria to challenge the decisions if there has been an error of law.

(Source: VCAT's Complaint Protocol)

No external or independent body reviews and assesses the decisions, performance and behaviour of individual members or of VCAT as a whole.

# VCAT MEMBERS ARE UNACCOUNTABLE

## Who applies to the VCAT Planning and Environment list?

In 2004-2005:

Objectors: 29% of all adjudicated cases

Developers: 71% of all adjudicated cases

In 2005 – 2006:

Objectors: 25% of all adjudicated cases

Developers: 75% of all adjudicated cases

#### WHY SUCH IMBALANCE?

(Source: 2004-2006 statistics – VCAT)

#### THE SPIN

'In the case of appeals by permit applicants against a council refusal, some 64% were fully or partly successful, down from 72% the previous year.

'By contrast, in the case of appeals by objectors, some 70% were fully or partly successful, up from 60% the previous year'

VCAT Media Release – 24th August 2005

#### THE REALITY

#### In 2004-2005:

Objectors were successful 14.3% of the time in fully reversing a permit authorisation given by Councils. (73 times out of 510 adjudicated cases).

Developers were successful 53.4% of the time in obtaining a permit following a Council's refusal or delay in granting one. (473 times out of 886 adjudicated cases).

(Source: 2004-2006 statistics – VCAT)

#### THE REALITY

In 2005-2006:

Objectors were successful 8.9% of the time in fully reversing a permit authorisation given by Councils. (39 times out of 437 adjudicated cases).

Developers were successful 56% of the time in obtaining a permit following a Council's refusal or delay in granting one. (543 times out of 970 adjudicated cases).

(Source: 2004-2006 statistics – VCAT)

In 2004-2005, developers were

3.7 times more likely than objecting residents to have it all their way at VCAT.

In 2005-2006, developers did even better: they were

**6.3 times** more likely than objecting residents to win outright at VCAT

Could such blatant bias explain why developers make more use of VCAT than residents?

#### Timely Reminder...

Natural Justice is about the concept of fairness (...)
There are **two primary rules**:

- (...) A person whose interests will be affected by the decision should be given a hearing before that decision is made (my emphasis)
- 2. (...) The decision maker must be unbiased. If a person has **preconceived opinions**, a vested interest or personal involvement in a matter, they should not attempt to settle that matter (my emphasis)

(Source: <a href="https://www.vu/edu.au/library">www.vu/edu.au/library</a>. )

VCAT'S 'NATURAL JUSTICE' COMES MORE NATURALLY TO DEVELOPERS THAN OBJECTING RESIDENTS.

#### Melbourne 2030

Policy 5.2.: Recognise and **protect** cultural identity, neighbourhood character and sense of place

(my emphasis)

... Rescode and other planning requirements will be used to ensure **protection** of existing valued urban and neighbourhood character.

(my emphasis)



#### VCAT's 2005 SCORECARD

- In the 2005 calendar year, VCAT decisions favoured developers 63.1% of the time
- Elected Councils' decisions were respected only 37.9% of the time
- Elected Councils' decisions were reversed 53,1% of the time, and varied 9% of the time

IS IT A GOOD LAW, IS IT A GOOD PROCESS THAT ALLOWS

UNELECTED, UNACCOUNTABLE, UNTOUCHABLE

PERSONS TO REVERSE, AT WHIM, THE LEGALLY-MADE DECISIONS OF DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED LOCAL GOVERNMENT – WITHOUT REALISTIC RECOURSE?

Let us not forget that each time a Council refuses to grant a permit to a developer citing e.g.:

Neighbourhood character, excessive bulk and size, adverse impact on nearby residents or environmental detriment to the area, they are acting

## IN OUR NAMES, WITHIN THE LAW AND WITHIN THEIR POWERS.

In whose name is VCAT really acting when it reverses such decisions?

## THE IMPACT OF THIS SCANDALOUS SYSTEM:

- WHITE-ANTING OF THE PLANNING PROCESS AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL.
- BLATANT DENIAL OF NATURAL JUSTICE FOR COUNCILS AND RESIDENTS
- MOCKERY OF THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY BEFORE THE LAW
- UNDERMINING OF THE STANDING OF THE TRIBUNAL AND THE RULE OF LAW IN THE EYES OF THE COMMUNITY

What is required to re-establish public trust:

- 1. The restoration of the Planning Powers of Elected Local Councils.
- 2. A transparent and rigorous Code of Conduct for VCAT Members, enforced through regular external audits.
- 3. Transcripts of hearings to be publicly available without vetting or editing by VCAT Members.
- 4. An independent VCAT Ombudsman to receive and deal with complaints.
- 5. An accessible Appeals Panel

#### IN THE MEANTIME...

- WE MUST KEEP FIGHTING THE VCAT BULLDOZER AND THOSE WHO DRIVE IT
- AND MAKE SURE RESIDENTS COME FIRST WITHIN COUNCILS' PLANNING DEPARTMENTS.

What Follows are Statistics showing outcomes by VCAT Member and by Council for the calendar year 2005.

They expose individual Member bias as well as the bias of the organisation as whole.

They show that winning at VCAT is also a lottery depending on the Member you get.

Justice and fairness have nothing to do with it.

#### **VCAT Exposed**

#### OUTCOMES BY MEMBER IN DESCENDING ORDER OF PRO-DEVELOPER BIAS

VCAT	Member's	Total	Favours	Against	Pro- Developer
Member	Background	Decisions	Developer	Developer	%
Richard Walter	Town Planner	12	11	1	91.7%
Sylvia Mainwaring	Industrial Chemist	54	47	7	87.0%
Michael Read	Town Planner/Architect	29	25	4	86.2%
Jane Monk	Town Planner	18	15	3	83.3%
Vicki Davies	Town Planner	18	14	4	77.8%
Russell Byard	Lawyer	30	23	7	76.7%
Desmond Eccles	Town Planner	77	58	19	75.3%
Richard Horsfall	Lawyer	39	29	10	74.4%
Howard Terril	Engineer	62	46	16	74.2%
Ian Marsden	Town Planner/Economist	32	23	9	71.9%
Gerard Sharkey	Engin./T-Planner/Acc.	81	58	23	71.6%
Jeanette Rickards	Lawyer	41	29	12	70.7%
Megan Carew	Town Planner	40	28	12	70.0%
Peter O'Leary	Town Planner	95	66	29	69.5%
Anthony Quirk	Engineer	40	27	13	67.5%

VCAT	Member's	Total	Favours	Against	Pro- Developer
Member	Background	Decisions	Developer	Developer	%
Philip Martin	Lawyer/Town Planner	51	33	18	64.7%
Sam Cimino	Town Planner	59	38	21	64.4%
Helen Gibson	Lawyer	15	9	6	60.0%
Christina Fong	Town Planner	107	64	43	59.8%
Nicholas Hadjigeorgiou	Town Planner/Engineer	59	35	24	59.3%
Tonia Komesaroff	Lawyer	27	16	11	59.3%
Laurie Hewet	Town Planner	83	49	34	59.0%
Anthony Liston	Town Planner	53	30	23	56.6%
Tracey Bilston-McGillen	Town Planner	33	17	16	51.5%
Margaret Baird	Town Planner	94	43	51	45.7%
John Bennet	Town Planner	73	33	40	45.2%
Mary-Ann Taranto	Town Planner	50	22	28	44.0%
Rachel Naylor	Town Planner	69	24	45	34.8%
Aggregate of 8 other Members with less than 10 decisions	Various	39	22	17	56.48%
VCAT TOTAL		1480	934	546	63.1%

### VCAT Exposed

#### OUTCOMES BY MEMBER IN DESCENDING ORDER OF CONTEMPT FOR COUNCIL DECISIONS

VCAT	Member's	Total	Council  Decision  Set Aside/	Council Decision Changed/	Council Decision Affirmed/	Democracy Contempt Index
Member	Background	Decisions	Reversed	Varied	Confirmed	%
Jane Monk	Town Planner	18	14	2	2	88.9%
Sylvia Mainwaring	Industrial Chemist	54	39	6	9	83.3%
Michael Read	Town Planner/Architect	29	23	1	5	82.8%
Peter O'Leary	Town Planner	95	56	19	20	78.9%
Richard Walter	Town Planner	12	8	1	3	75.0%
Desmond Eccles	Town Planner	77	51	6	20	74.0%
Nicholas Hadjigeorgiou	Town Planner/Engineer	59	32	11	16	72.9%
Anthony Quirk	Engineer	40	25	4	11	72.5%
lan Marsden	Town Planner/Economist	32	21	2	9	71.9%
Gerard Sharkey	Engin./T-Planner/Acc.	81	47	10	24	70.4%
Sam Cimino	Town Planner	59	36	5	18	69.5%
Richard Horsfall	Lawyer	39	23	4	12	69.2%
Jeanette Rickards	Lawyer	41	24	4	13	68.3%

Laurie Hewet	Town Planner	83	39	17	27	67.5%
Tonia Komesaroff	Lawyer	27	16	2	9	66.7%
Russell Byard	Lawyer	30	19	0	11	63.3%
Anthony Liston	Town Planner	53	28	5	20	62.3%
Tracey Bilston-McGillen	Town Planner	33	14	5	14	57.6%
Vicki Davies	Town Planner	18	10	0	8	55.6%
Rachel Naylor	Town Planner	69	26	10	33	52.2%
Philip Martin	Lawyer/Town Planner	51	26	0	25	51.0%
Christina Fong	Town Planner	107	51	3	53	50.5%
Megan Carew	Town Planner	40	20	0	20	50.0%
Howard Terril	Engineer	62	29	0	33	46.8%
John Bennet	Town Planner	73	31	3	39	46.6%
Mary-Ann Taranto	Town Planner	50	19	4	27	46.0%
Margaret Baird	Town Planner	94	36	5	53	43.6%
Helen Gibson	Lawyer	15	4	0	11	26.7%
Aggregate of 8 other Members with less than 10 decisions	Various	39	19	4	16	58.9%
TOTAL VCAT		1480	786	133	561	62.1%

Council	Total Decisions	Council Decision Affirmed /Confirmed	Council Decision Set Aside /Reversed	Council Decision Changed/ Varied	Democracy Contempt Index	Decision Favours Developer	Decision Against Developer	Pro-Developer %
Alpine	1	0	0	1	100.0%	1	0	100.0%
Ballarat	10	2	5	3	80.0%	5	5	50.0%
Banyule	76	24	47	5	68.4%	48	28	63.2%
Bass Coast	23	7	11	5	69.6%	12	11	52.2%
Baw Baw	4	1	2	1	75.0%	1	3	25.0%
Bayside	60	21	34	5	65.0%	39	21	65.0%
Benalla Rural	3	2	1	0	33.3%	1	2	33.3%
Boroondara	128	46	74	8	64.1%	90	38	70.3%
Brimbank	9	3	5	1	66.7%	6	3	66.7%
Campaspe	3	1	1	1	66.7%	1	2	33.3%
Cardinia	14	9	5	0	35.7%	5	9	35.7%
Casey	29	12	16	1	58.6%	15	14	51.7%
Colac-Otway	7	3	2	2	57.1%	3	4	42.9%
Corangamite	3	1	1	1	66.7%	1	2	33.3%
Dandenong	1	0	1	0	100.0%	1	0	100.0%

Council	Total Decisions	Council Decision Affirmed /Confirmed	Council Decision Set Aside /Reversed	Council Decision Changed/ Varied	Democracy Contempt Index	Decision Favours Developer	Decision Against Developer	Pro-Developer %
Darebin	45	28	16	1	37.8%	31	14	68.9%
East Gippsland	6	5	0	1	16.7%	1	5	16.7%
Frankston	32	7	22	3	78.1%	24	8	75.0%
Gannawarra	1	1	0	0	0.0%	0	1	0.0%
Glen Eira	41	13	22	6	68.3%	27	14	65.9%
Glen Iris	2	0	0	2	100.0%	2	0	100.0%
Glenelg	2	1	1	0	50.0%	1	1	50.0%
Golden Plains	4	3	1	0	25.0%	2	2	50.0%
Greater Bendigo	7	7	0	0	0.0%	5	2	71.4%
Greater Dandenong	17	6	10	1	64.7%	12	5	70.6%
Greater Geelong	59	21	35	3	64.4%	38	21	64.4%
Greater Shepparton	11	7	3	1	36.4%	4	7	36.4%
Hepburn	13	5	7	1	61.5%	8	5	61.5%
Hobsons Bay	41	10	27	4	75.6%	28	13	68.3%
Hume	7	1	5	1	85.7%	2	5	28.6%

Council	Total Decisions	Council Decision Affirmed /Confirmed	Council Decision Set Aside /Reversed	Council Decision Changed/ Varied	Democracy Contempt Index	Decision Favours Developer	Decision Against Developer	Pro-Developer %
Indigo	6	3	2	1	50.0%	1	5	16.7%
Kingston	30	9	18	3	70.0%	21	9	70.0%
Knox	35	11	24	0	68.6%	24	11	68.6%
La Trobe	5	3	0	2	40.0%	1	4	20.0%
Loddon	2	1	1	0	50.0%	2	0	100.0%
Macedon Ranges	25	5	19	1	80.0%	20	5	80.0%
Mannigham	36	17	15	4	52.8%	20	16	55.6%
Mansfield	1	0	0	1	100.0%	0	1	0.0%
Maribyrnong	22	15	7	0	31.8%	11	11	50.0%
Maroondah	31	9	22	0	71.0%	22	9	71.0%
Melbourne	21	9	9	3	57.1%	14	7	66.7%
Melton	13	4	9	0	69.2%	9	4	69.2%
Mildura	4	1	3	0	75.0%	2	2	50.0%
Mildura Rural	5	1	3	1	80.0%	2	3	40.0%
Mitchell	7	5	1	1	28.6%	4	3	57.1%

Council	Total Decisions	Council Decision Affirmed /Confirmed	Council Decision Set Aside /Reversed	Council Decision Changed/ Varied	Democracy Contempt Index	Decision Favours Developer	Decision Against Developer	Pro-Developer %
Moira	5	3	2	0	40.0%	2	3	40.0%
Monash	61	22	37	2	63.9%	44	17	72.1%
Moonee Valley	70	14	54	2	80.0%	54	16	77.1%
Moorabool	11	7	4	0	36.4%	5	6	45.5%
Moreland	39	16	17	6	59.0%	22	17	56.4%
Mornington Peninsula	52	23	24	5	55.8%	35	17	67.3%
Mount Alexander	6	3	3	0	50.0%	4	2	66.7%
Murrindindi	9	3	4	2	66.7%	2	7	22.2%
Nillumbik	27	12	11	4	55.6%	14	13	51.9%
Northern Grampians	3	1	1	1	66.7%	1	2	33.3%
Port Phillip	36	11	20	5	69.4%	28	8	77.8%
Pyrenees	1	1	0	0	0.0%	1	0	100.0%
Queenscliffe Borough	3	2	1	0	33.3%	1	2	33.3%
South Gippsland	6	2	2	2	66.7%	1	5	16.7%
Southern Grampians	1	0	1	0	100.0%	1	0	100.0%

Council	Total Decisions	Council Decision Affirmed /Confirmed	Council Decision Set Aside /Reversed	Council Decision Changed/ Varied	Democracy Contempt Index	Decision Favours Developer	Decision Against Developer	Pro-Developer %
Stonnington	58	28	25	5	51.7%	35	23	60.3%
Strathbogie	3	2	1	0	33.3%	2	1	66.7%
Surf Coast	17	5	11	1	70.6%	6	11	35.3%
Towong	1	0	0	1	100.0%	0	1	0.0%
Wangaratta Rural	1	1	0	0	0.0%	0	1	0.0%
Warrnambool	4	3	0	1	25.0%	1	3	25.0%
Wellington	4	2	0	2	50.0%	2	2	50.0%
West Wimmera	1	0	0	1	100.0%	0	1	0.0%
Whitehorse	41	15	24	2	63.4%	27	14	65.9%
Whittlesea	20	6	13	1	70.0%	16	4	80.0%
Wodonga	3	1	1	1	66.7%	2	1	66.7%
Wyndham	6	3	1	2	50.0%	1	5	16.7%
Yarra	60	25	25	10	58.3%	39	21	65.0%
Yarra Ranges	28	10	16	2	64.3%	20	8	71.4%
Yarriambiack	1	0	1	0	100.0%	1	0	100.0%
Total VCAT	1480	561	786	133	62.1%	934	546	63.1%

