

MAYORALTY RACE: THE *COURIER MAIL*'S UNUSUAL HOSTILITY

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The *Courier Mail* typically has supported conservative forces and those attentive to the needs of the local business community. This has usually meant supporting anti-ALP candidates in most contests. Their editorial endorsement for the LNP is usually a foregone conclusion.

This time around, the newspaper seemingly regards the ALP candidate as someone with superior knowledge about the business world, especially its international dimension, and a fresh approach to Brisbane's problems. As a result, its reporters have been allowed to give fulsome praise when good things happen in the Harding camp, to emphasise the unexpectedly close nature of the contest and to give unstinting damnation when bad things happen in the Quirk camp.

And there have been a series of bad things to report, often confirmed by consequential shifts in polling results. The sexual innuendos which led to the withdrawal of a candidate in a marginal Council seat may have been typical of the poor candidate vetting process on both sides of state parliament, but it reeks of poor preparation for an election with the sort of fixed schedule denied state political tacticians. (This did not excuse the hypocritical commentary from an ALP party official despite the ALP having a demonstrably poor record themselves.)

More significantly, Quirk himself has proven a weak campaigner, visibly shaken by the unexpectedness of the challenge. The challenge has included the publicity given to the dubious, but not apparently illegal, relationship between Quirk and a property developer. The developer in question not only provided a financial donation to Quirk, but also loaned vehicles for the Quirk campaign. The media publicised Council decisions on selling off property to the donor in question without public tender, and the matter was referred to the Crime and Corruption Commission.¹ Being cleared by the anti-corruption authority came late in the campaign and the CCC decision offered a sting in the tail about the need for greater transparency in Council decision-making and reports on receipts of donations.

Then, on Thursday 17 March, the *Courier Mail*'s Daryl Passmore reported:

One of Brisbane's most controversial inner-city developments has been approved while the city council is in caretaker mood ahead of this weekend's elections, infuriating local residents.... Dr Evans (president of a local activist group) said the company had effectively dodged the requirement to prepare a master-plan by submitting multiple applications – including one for the whole site and one approved last week just for stage one – including two 15-storey towers totally 342 apartments.

This sort of dodgy dealings carried echoes of the Newman government's breach of the same convention, a parallel which Quirk would have been keen to avoid.

The *Courier Mail* has focused on this avoidance of accountability, having remarked earlier how Quirk had postponed until the last possible moment any engagement with his main opponent in face-to-face debate. Under new generous rules for absentee voting, the Friday morning forum will

¹ Willacy M, [Brisbane City Council's deal to sell parkland to LNP donor referred to Crime and Corruption Commission](#). ABC, 3.3.16

have occurred after a significant percentage of the population have already exercised their choice. It was hard to deny the comments from the ALP side that Quirk was running scared. Again, there was a striking parallel with the Newman era.

In earlier events on-line and in front of smaller audience, Quirk had shown why he wanted to hide his limitations. Here's how the *Courier Mail* reported an on-line event :

It was meant to be a debate about the big issues, but a fair chunk of time was spent debating the typing. This week Quest Community newspapers hosted six of the seven Brisbane City Council Lord Mayoral hopefuls for an on-line forum. The only problem was some chose to have help in answering the questions... It caught a couple of candidates by surprise when a member of the Lord Mayor's media staff started typing answers dictated by the incumbent.²

Harding himself would not have been surprised, having noted at previous 'live' engagements in front of smaller or unseen radio audiences, that the Lord Mayor spoke only by reading from notes, presumably prepared by others, rather than showing the confidence of speaking off-the-cuff.

On Thursday 17 March the *Courier Mail* ran a two-page spread with the central article by Matthew Killoran under the ribbon heading: 'LNP continues damage control as Quirk tries to rise above the scandal that could see him plummet at the polling booths'. This damage control required using legal loopholes to avoid the appearance being given in their campaign literature of continuing to support the dumped candidate for Tennyson,

Friday was a similar tale of woe for Quirk on the news pages. Page one was mainly concerned with state parliamentary affairs but had a couple of column inches under the headline "Hot Rod Rockets to Lead." Inside, with the same layout as the previous day, mainly written by the same reporter, the headline was 'Last Ditch Pitch'.

A cynical explanation might be that the *Courier Mail* wanted to ensure a high enough turnout to energise LNP voters, fearful of the same sort of unexpected outcome at state level which removed an incumbent in the last state election. This can be the only reason for the inconsistency between the actual news and the opinions expressed in the Friday editorial which confirmed the predictable conservative line required of editors by Murdoch orthodoxy.

But even the editorial writer had problems in ignoring the facts of Harding's strong campaign. The author acknowledged that 'Harding has displayed plenty of energy and passion backed by a strong intellect honed over years of experience in the private sector' and he admitted that Quirk 'may have been rattled by a nude photo scandal that saw the departure of a key candidate'.

The editorial's concluding sentence was predictable but hardly a ringing endorsement: 'With due deference to Mr Harding, who we would hope continues to contribute to public life in Queensland, Cr Quirk has the track record that demonstrates that he can'.

² *Courier Mail*, 17.3.16.