

The Statement

2999 words

1

Mayor Bob Green was sitting at his large, solid oak desk, sipping black coffee with one hand and scrolling through twitter with the other. There was a knock at the door.

‘Yes,’ the Mayor said.

The Mayor’s principle advisor, Darren, entered and closed the thick double doors behind him. He was holding a notepad and had a newspaper pinched under his armpit.

‘Morning boss,’ said Darren, ‘do you have a—’

‘Darren,’ the Mayor interrupted, ‘I need more twitter followers. Mayor Cunningham has twice as many as I do.’

‘I think you probably need to tweet more often,’ said Darren.

‘About what? Nothing I tweet gets any likes. People just don’t care.’

‘We announced our dog and cat management plan last week; you could call on people to make sure their pets are registered.’

The Mayor looked over his glasses at Darren for a moment, then looked back at his phone. An uncomfortable silence rose in the room. At sixty, the Mayor did not look good for his age. His large nose was pocked and red, and his swollen, hard belly obscured his belt-line. He wore an unfashionable grey goatie and an equally unfashionable tan suit that was too big for him. After running a newsagency for sixteen years, Bob Green had sold up and invested in two Blockbuster Video franchises at just the wrong time. When they went under, Bob decided to try his hand at local politics, and was completing his second term as Mayor.

Darren spoke first, ‘What I wanted to talk to you about, boss, is a letter to the editor published in today’s *Western Recorder*.’

The Mayor sighed, put his phone on the desk and swivelled in his chair to face Darren. ‘What does it say?’

Without opening the newspaper, Darren paraphrased, ‘It’s from an elderly homeowner on Gladstone Street, Polly Baker. She says there was a lack of consultation before construction started on the redevelopment of the Gladstone Memorial Park, and that with the footpath closed it’s now harder for her to get to her favourite café. She’s formed a residents’ group.’

‘What are they called?’ asked the Mayor.

‘Grandmothers on Gladstone, boss,’ said Darren.

The Mayor winced, then removed his glasses and slowly placed them on his desk, ‘Well, what do we do?’

This is why Darren existed. He was a fixer. A career hack who'd brown-nosed his way to the top of local government, doing anything and everything he could to ingratiate himself with those in power, and those rising through the ranks. Though only twenty-nine, his face had gradually bloated over the five years he'd been a staffer, and with his hair clipped short and combed he already looked like a middle-aged politician.

Darren glanced at his notepad, 'I think we respond assertively, with a statement to local media. We can't allow people to believe there was no consultation here. There were working groups, letter box drops, street corner meetings. We need to destroy the legitimacy of this residents' group before they gain any more traction, boss, the election is only five weeks away.'

Statement from Mayor Bob Green:

"I reject the criticisms from the Grandmothers on Gladstone residents' group about the redevelopment of the Gladstone Memorial Park.

"The accusations made by the group's founder, Polly Baker, are completely unfounded.

"Far from lacking consultation, as incorrectly suggested by Ms Baker, regular consultation was undertaken with residents over 12 months in the lead-up to the commencement of construction.

"Council staff door-knocked local houses with information, and sought feedback on the development plans. There were also letter box drops and street corner meetings.

"If Ms Baker chose not to engage with that process, or to not listen to council staff when they door-knocked the area or spoke at street corner meetings, that is a matter for Ms Baker.

"This project has received broad support in the community, and I ask that Ms Baker also show her support for this important redevelopment."

2

It was 5.45 a.m. and the Mayor lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling fan. Sue, the Mayor's wife, slept beside him.

It was early, even for the Mayor, but he'd had an unsettled night. His opponent in the upcoming election, Clayton Bird, was forty, slim, and had a full head of hair. He was a lawyer who had founded a support service for recently arrived refugees. A left-winger's wet dream. The Mayor was well-known in the community, and popular with his conservative base. But angry grandmothers could change that.

There was an unmistakable slap-slide of shrink-wrapped newspaper colliding with slate verandah. The Mayor sat up slowly, trying not to wake Sue. He enveloped his body in a large, white dressing gown, quietly opened the front door and stepped onto the porch.

‘Morning Bob.’

‘Morning Kev.’ The Mayor could just make out his elderly neighbour in the pre-dawn darkness, watering his shrubs.

‘Going to be a hot one, thought I should give them a drink early.’

‘Good thinking Kev. That’s why your daisies always look better than mine!’

Kev chuckled, ‘Give ‘em hell Bob, you’ve got my vote.’

‘Thanks Kev, I will, don’t you worry about that.’

The Mayor returned to his room, flicked on his reading light and, sitting on the bed, slid the plastic sleeve off the *Western Recorder*.

His skin flushed hot and his scalp tingled. Splashed across the front page was a photo of the Mayor on his feet, leaning forward and scowling. The way his bottom lip was tucked under his front teeth suggested a popular expletive. He recognised the image from a public debate he’d participated in years earlier. Inset at the bottom right of the image was a photo of an elderly women, her hand resting on her portable oxygen tank.

Mayor accuses dying, deaf pensioner of not listening

Mayor Bob Green has lashed out at a hearing impaired, terminally-ill pensioner, in an outburst that could hurt his prospects of re-election in May.

The *Western Recorder* yesterday published a letter to the editor by ninety-four-year-old Polly Baker in which she criticised the council’s flagship redevelopment of the Gladstone Memorial Park, and accused Mayor Green of not consulting with local residents.

Mayor Green responded angrily, issuing a statement yesterday afternoon in which he denied there was a lack of consultation before construction commenced.

“If Ms Baker chose not to engage with that process, or to not listen to council staff when they door-knocked the area or spoke at street corner meetings, that is a matter for Ms Baker,” Mr Green said.

Ms Baker, who is deaf and suffers from emphysema, fought back tears when the *Western Recorder* visited her home yesterday to seek a response to Mayor Green’s attack.

“I just can’t believe he would accuse me – a hearing impaired person – of not listening,” Ms Baker said through an Auslan interpreter.

“What good are street corner meetings to someone like me?”

“I’ve paid my council rates my whole life, so I think I’ve earned the right to express my opinions and the opinions of my neighbours.

“I won’t forgive the Mayor for this, I think he’s just ghastly.”

When contacted late yesterday the Mayor's office said they were not aware Ms Baker was hearing impaired.

iMessage:

What the hell Darren. My office at 7.

I know boss. Outrageous. I've left a message for the editor..

Bit late for that. See you in an hour.

3

Darren looked at his watch. It was 7 a.m. He had been waiting nervously at the closed doors to the Mayor's office for several minutes. He knocked sharply, turned the handle and push the heavy doors open.

The Mayor was hunched forward at his computer, the *Western Recorder* website open on his monitor.

'They're tearing me apart,' the Mayor said, without looking at Darren.

'Pardon, boss.'

'The comments on the story. There's already one hundred and twenty.'

'Only bullies post comments, you shouldn't worry about it.'

'Listen to this, "If that was my gran, I'd teach this prick a lesson,"' the Mayor said, reading from the screen.

"What a dickhead. He might as well quit now he's done." Are they allowed to swear on these things?'

'Sometimes when they get a lot of comments the moderators can't keep up,' said Darren. The Mayor deflated further into his chair.

Darren shifted awkwardly on his feet, 'Boss, I've had a call from Bernie at *The Daily Telegraph*. They want to cover the story.'

The Mayor put his face in his hands.

'It might not be that bad,' said Darren. 'This is our chance to reframe the story in the biggest newspaper in New South Wales. No one reads the *Recorder*, but *everyone* reads the *Telegraph*.'

The Mayor sat up straighter in his chair, 'How do we do that?'

'We show remorse for the comments published today,' said Darren, 'we show compassion for this old duck Polly Baker, and then we re-prosecute the reason we're doing this redevelopment. This story has hurt us among older voters and conservatives generally. Well, what do old people and conservatives love more than anything else?'

'You're telling the story Darren.'

‘Anzac Day, boss. The redevelopment of the park includes a new Anzac memorial as its centrepiece. We should announce we will fast-track the redevelopment so that it’s complete in time for an Anzac Day dawn service to be held in the park.’

The Mayor looked revived, ‘Make it happen.’

To: bernieh@dailylegraph.com.au

From: darrens@council.gov.au

Subject: Grandmothers on Gladstone

Hi Bernie, good to chat earlier. Please find the response below attributable to Mayor Bob Green.

Cheers, Darren.

“I was not aware Ms Baker was hearing impaired or that she suffers from emphysema, and I apologise for any offence my comments caused.

“I care for my own elderly parents and the wellbeing of elderly residents within the council area has always been front of mind for me in the role of Mayor.

“We embarked on this redevelopment to beautify the existing park, but also to unveil a new Anzac memorial, which will be located at the centre of the park.

“What I can announce today is that the council will allocate additional funds to fast-track construction and complete the redevelopment in time for Anzac Day, so that a dawn service ceremony can be held in the park.

“I hope Ms Baker accepts my apology, and that in the spirit of Anzac Day and out of respect for those who made the ultimate sacrifice at Gallipoli, and in all wars since that time, we are able to move forward from this misunderstanding in unity.”

4

Though she wasn’t fully awake yet, Sue was aware that Bob wasn’t in bed, and that the shower in the ensuite had been running for what seemed like a long time. She turned on the bed lamp and sat up. There was steam leaking out of the sides of the door to their bathroom.

‘Honey?’ said Sue with soft concern.

‘What,’ Bob shot back.

It was then that Sue noticed the broadsheet newspaper on Bob’s side of the bed, open to page two. There was a large photo of a young man in a slouch hat, his chest covered in war medals. In the

bottom right corner, much smaller, was a photo of Bob looking uncomfortable and staring straight at whoever took the photo.

Pensioner to Mayor: my husband would have boxed your ears

The public stoush between local Mayor Bob Green and an elderly constituent has escalated, with ninety-four-year-old Polly Baker slamming the Mayor for attempting to use Anzac Day to win support for the controversial redevelopment of the Gladstone Memorial Park.

The altercation kicked off on Tuesday, with Ms Baker criticising Mayor Green for not consulting with residents before starting construction on the redevelopment, which has disrupted local businesses and angered nearby residents. The Mayor hit back, accusing Ms Baker, who is hearing impaired, of choosing “not to listen” to council officials when they contacted homeowners.

In an attempt to diffuse the situation, Mayor Green yesterday told *The Daily Telegraph* he would make funds available to fast-track the redevelopment so the park can host an Anzac Day dawn service later this month.

“I hope Ms Baker accepts my apology, and that in the spirit of Anzac Day and out of respect for those who made the ultimate sacrifice at Gallipoli, and in all wars since that time, we are able to move forward from this misunderstanding in unity,” Mr Green said.

Ms Baker rejected the Mayor’s olive branch, however, accusing him of attempting to use Anzac Day for political gain.

“My husband left his young family and travelled to Darwin and then Papua,” Ms Baker said.

“Morris would have been horrified that this man would use Anzac Day and the memory of fallen soldiers to hoodwink the community.

“I have a message for Mayor Green: my husband would have boxed your ears if he were still alive.”

5

By the time the Mayor turned off the shower his hands were white and wrinkled. He ironed only the front of his shirt, dressed slowly and forgot to drink the coffee Sue had made him.

As he walked down the front drive to his car, the Mayor briefly made eye contact with Kev, who’d been watering his daisies. Kev shut off the tap and went back inside, without saying hello.

In his office, the Mayor was considering whether to read through his fifty-four twitter notifications, when there was a knock on the door.

‘If that’s Darren, you can keep your advice to yourself!’

‘Sorry boss, it’s important,’ Darren yelled as politely as he could, before opening the doors.

‘Let me guess,’ said the Mayor, ‘the New York Times and the BBC are following the story?’

‘Well, no,’ said Darren, ‘but there is some interest from the TVs.’

‘Which TVs?’

‘All the commercials, and the ABC.’

‘Tell them no comment.’

‘That might not be a good idea, boss.’

‘And what would be a good idea, Darren? Please, tell me all your good ideas.’

Ignoring the sarcasm, Darren continued, ‘I have some information, boss.’

The Mayor stared blankly at Darren.

‘A very reliable source has told me Polly Baker is an opposition plant, boss. If that’s true, and we expose it, the election is ours.’

‘Who is your source?’ Asked the Mayor.

‘I can’t say, boss. But I trust this person one hundred per cent. We should agree to talk to the TVs and call her out.’

‘It’s too risky, Darren,’ said the Mayor, his tone less combative now.

‘Boss, journalists are telling me Grandmothers on Gladstone has organised nursing home residents to protest at the council chambers today. Clayton Bird is going to speak at the rally. This is going to be a story whether we like it or not. If we don’t talk to the TVs they’ll murder us. If we do talk to them and play nice again Polly Baker will twist it round, and they’ll murder us. Attack is the only option left.’

‘And what if it’s not true? She’ll sue me. I could lose my house.’

‘That’s easy boss, attach a caveat to everything you say. Allegedly this, allegedly that... if these rumours are correct... that sought of thing.’

Chanel 7 bulletin

Presenter: “Mayor Bob Green has made what appears to be a desperate accusation designed to save his political skin. In a bizarre media conference, the Mayor claimed outspoken community activist Polly Baker, who has criticised the Mayor over the redevelopment of a local park, could be an opposition plant, and even suggested she was using a fake name.

“The accusation comes as Polly Baker and the Mayor’s opponent in the upcoming election, Clayton Bird, led a protest outside the council today, with dozens of nursing home residents in attendance, some against the orders of their doctors.”

Mayor: “Ms Baker, if that is indeed her name, must explain what relationship she may or may not have with Clayton Bird, if indeed that relationship exists, which is may.”

Presenter: In a dramatic twist Ms Baker then held her own media conference at the rally, flanked by dozens of elderly supporters. With the assistance of an Auslan interpreter, Ms Baker presented proof the Mayor had got it wrong.

Ms Baker: “With God as my witness, my name is my name, and far from being associated with Mr Bird, I am actually a life-long member of the Mayor’s Conservative Party. I’ve got my birth certificate and membership card here to prove it.”

Presenter: “The spectacular backfire is expected to have destroyed any chance Mayor Green has of being re-elected in May.”

Unpopular Mayor trounced at polls

Local Mayor Bob Green has been resoundingly defeated by his opponent, Mayor-elect Clayton Bird, in Council elections held yesterday.

Things turned sour for the former Mayor when a local resident, Polly Baker, launched a campaign against the redevelopment of the Gladstone Memorial Park, claiming Mr Green hadn’t consulted with residents.

In the first of a string of shocking political decisions, the former Mayor accused Ms Baker, who is deaf, of not listening, then attempted to use Anzac Day to coerce Ms Baker into supporting the project.

With public sentiment turning against him, Mr Green then called a media conference and suggested Ms Baker was an opposition stooge who could be using a fake name. Both claims were proved wrong by Ms Baker.

Political newcomer Clayton Bird will be sworn-in this week. Mr Bird is expected to make a number of new appointments, however in an unprecedented move has chosen to retain principle advisor to the former Mayor, Darren Smith.

Mayor-elect Bird told *The Daily Telegraph* that Mr Smith had no role in the former Mayor’s altercation with Polly Baker, and had in fact repeatedly advised the former Mayor to take alternative courses of action.

“Everyone in this community knows how desperately change was needed,” said Mayor-elect Bird.

“But a degree of continuity is also important, particularly when managing relationships with stakeholders within the community, so I’m excited Darren has agreed to stay on in his role.”