

BEST HOPE IS TO REPLACE COUNCIL

IT'S time for the governing body of the University of Tasmania, the secretive UTAS Council, to take responsibility for its decisions and resign.

Although vice-chancellor Professor Rufus Black is the public face of UTAS, in reality all the big decisions are made behind the scenes by the UTAS Council which plays the role of board of directors and oversees the management led by the vice-chancellor.

The UTAS Council operates behind closed doors, never revealing its deliberations, not even those that have implications for the wider community like the decision to relocate from Sandy Bay to the CBD. It still refuses to disclose what information and options were before it, in April 2019, when it made that momentous decision.

In 2021, the UTAS Council would have approved the controversial Sandy Bay rezoning application which it has now had to abandon, wasting the \$3m spent on it.

The UTAS Council would also have had to approve the spending this year of around \$1m on its failed "Vote Yes" campaign for the Hobart municipality elector poll.

University chancellors, like the leader of the UTAS Council Alison Watkins, normally keep a very low profile. The council would have no doubt agonised before it took the unprecedented step of having Ms Watkins front the "Vote Yes" campaign in an attempt to overcome concerns about the vice-chancellor's credibility with some members of the public.

When vice-chancellor Black made it clear this month that neither the 74 per cent elector poll vote against relocation nor the loud calls by both the Premier and the Hobart City Council for genuine consultation would cause a rethink or any genuine consultation, he would no doubt have had the imprimatur of the council.

This sorry history should be enough to cause the UTAS Council to quit, but there is so much more to add to the scales.

The council is responsible for UTAS management, which vice-chancellor Black heads.

Widespread community and staff complaints about UTAS management have led to a parliamentary inquiry and some of the authors of the 149

submissions to the inquiry, including many senior academics, will soon give evidence at December public hearings.

Internal UTAS staff surveys, some reported in The Mercury, have confirmed deep dissatisfaction with management. Sadly many of the academic staff at the prestigious UTAS Law School have already left.

Apparently deaf to all this, the council has generously rewarded the vice-chancellor with an indefinite reappointment.

Thirty years ago the UTAS Council was a balanced and erudite group of 24 members featuring strong academic representation and even some members of state parliament to keep a watchful eye.

Over the years legislative amendments have gradually eliminated many of these places, reducing the council to only 13 members, including the vice-chancellor himself. Any possibility of robust scrutiny of management is undermined by the fact that the council is allowed to “appoint” up to six of its own members. The practical result is a governing council heavily representing the very management it is supposed to be governing.

In a real sense UTAS management controls its own governance, a structural defect which may help explain how the university today finds itself in conflict with its academic staff, with its students and with the community which created it.

Tasmania is unique as the only state or territory with only one university.

The best hope of saving the University of Tasmania is to replace its current council.

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