

## INTERVIEW WITH STEVE COOPER (VLGA) - 2/10/2020

**Connection Matters Radio (CMR):** As we draw ever closer to the Victorian local government elections, which close on 24th of October, just three weeks away, there are still elements of confusion around the election process, including fairness as it relates to non-incumbent candidates. Today, joining me on Connection Matters Radio is Steve Cooper, a 40-plus year veteran of local government and currently holding the position of Chief of Staff at the Victorian Local Governance Association.

Steve is well recognised as an authority on Victorian local government. Steve, welcome to the program.

**Steve Cooper:** Thanks Charles. Good to talk.

**CMR:** Steve, why is it, do you think that the government didn't wait until after the coronavirus to hold the local government elections here in Victoria?

**Steve:** Charles, I'm sure the minister gave it some fairly serious thought. I think there's a few reasons.

There's certainly a power for the minister to extend or to defer the conduct of an election. And that presumably proposed that that could happen if there was a disaster. But I think some of the issues were if the election was deferred for say three, six or even 12 months, is there any certainty that the coronavirus situation would have eased in that time? What happens if you wait and we're still in the same situation? So I think it was always going to be slightly fraught having the election now, but there were other legal layers of complexity as well. So ultimately the minister needed to

make a call and that's what happened.

**CMR:** Well, the result of that is that obviously we don't have polling booths going to be set up on the 24th of October. Instead it will be a statewide postal vote. Can you give us an explanation of how the elections are going to be run and when we might expect results?

**Steve:** Sure. Interestingly, Charles, the decision to go with a postal vote had already been made in a pre-COVID environment. One of the changes to the Local Government Act was to give the minister rather than individual councils that decision making power as to how the election would be conducted, whether it would be postal or attendance voting. So that had already been locked in and probably was one of the factors that influenced the minister's decision to proceed. It would have been far more difficult with attendance voting.

I think possibly the bigger implication has been that COVID has impacted on the ability of councillors and candidates or candidates including those who are councillors to campaign in the normal ways. Pressing the flesh, kissing babies, all of that sort of thing is obviously out in the current environment. And what we've seen is more of a social media type campaign, really governed by some guidelines that the Chief Health Officer has released and apply to how candidates can do their campaigning.

**CMR:** When, though, do you expect we might get results from the elections, given the elections themselves or the postal voting period is going over several weeks, I believe?

**Steve:** Yeah, sure. Charles. So what will happen is about a week into October, so maybe about the 7th, 8th, 9th of October, people should receive their ballot papers in the mail. The official election date is the 24th of October and what the VEC have said is, they will consider votes received late but there needs to be evidence including a declaration that they were posted before that polling date of the 24th of October. I think also the Electoral Commission are mindful that the post for a whole variety of reasons is a bit slower than it normally would be. And the Electoral Commissioner has set a target date of around the 13th of November, so three weeks after the conduct of the election, for the declaration of those polls.

**CMR:** So the 24th of October is essentially the cutoff date for sending off of the votes.

**Steve:** Actually it's the 23rd, so the day before. They should be in the mail prior to the polling day. The weird thing is not a lot happens on polling day because of the fact that it's a postal vote and so people need to have them in the mail by close of business on the 23rd of October, is the best advice I could provide.

**CMR:** So as soon as people get their forms, if they've already made their mind up, the advice is to get them off as soon as possible.

**Steve:** Absolutely. And they'll see the arrangements that are on the form for the casting of the ballot. What happens is that electors need to put some information on their envelope to demonstrate who they are. And it's a

written version of what we currently describe when we do attendance voting. So the Electrical Commission need to know who the vote's come from.

**CMR:** The question arising from that though, Steve is, there's obviously going to be concern about identifying the vote itself and aligning that vote with the person. How is the VEC going to bring that about?

**Steve:** This is always a concern for people with a postal ballot, but if you think about it from the other end, what has to happen is that the Electoral Commission need to confirm that the vote comes from a person who's authorised to vote before it gets counted in the pile.

So what happens is the envelope comes in, the part of the envelope that identifies the voter is put in one pile, so the roll can be checked off. And then the vote, which is at that point de-identified, the rest of the envelope, goes into the other pile with all of the other votes that are received.

So the people doing the counting have no way of knowing the way that a particular individual counted. And anyone who does tamper with a vote, that is the most egregious or serious of offenses in relation to the conduct of an election.

**CMR:** You touched just a minute or two ago on the fact that the electioneering processes or activities of candidates has been severely restricted due to the coronavirus social restrictions. What advantage do you think this is going to hold for incumbent councillors?

**Steve:** I think there's no doubt Charles, that there is something to be said for being known in the community, and certainly incumbent councils have the opportunity to be known and recognised. That said, there's also the fact that councils deal with contentious issues.

And in fact, the other thing that existing councillors will have to manage is the fact

that they've had to deal with issues and make decisions that aren't universally popular. So I think the flip side to that then is that there is a number of candidates who have been out there campaigning early and working on getting themselves known.

**CMR:** Steve, before we let you go, the last question is that as we vote for local councillors, what should we be looking for in the candidates themselves?

**Steve:** Charles, one of the things that we haven't really touched on in this conversation is the fact that we've got a new Local Government Act 2020 and it has really raised the bar for councillors in terms of requiring them to be a bit more strategic rather than politicking, I suppose. The conduct bar has raised the role of the mayor in terms of leading the organisation and leading that strategies change.

And we've seen a bit of a trend probably over the last 10 years of the attributes of an ideal councillor being more clearly defined. So for me, I'd be looking at the sort of things that are in the Local Government Act, that councillors need to be the sort of people that, it's almost stating the obvious, can comply with the law who are not short termists, who think longterm and about the implications of their decisions, that are able to genuinely engage right across the community, in particularly strategic decision making, who are collaborators internally and externally, probably financial skills.

Councillors are required to take into account statewide plans and it's really important that councils are able to be transparent in their decisions. And we've seen some activity from the integrity agencies of where that's gone wrong and there's been an absence of transparency that's really cost communities. So that collaboration, transparency, due process is really important.

**CMR:** Steve cooper, Chief of Staff for the

Victorian Local Governance Association, thanks so much indeed for coming on to Connection Matters Radio.

**Steve:** Always good to talk, Charles. Thanks.

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