

## Future directions?

There has been a fair amount of comment recently – most of it sadly misinformed – about a possible “new direction” for Stop the Stadium. Various agendas have been put forward, based mostly on pure hot air. STS is in a mood for vengeance, according to one local pundit. (Wrong, of course). Or, in an alternative view, STS is said to be tilting at windmills. (Well, no, we’re not. Not unless you think that council extravagance, incompetence, and contempt for the electorate can be classified somehow as windmills).

Local-body politics has always attracted a fair smattering of semi-employed third-raters. It’s a fundamentally boring business, and few people of real ability can be bothered with the tedium of wrestling interminably with sewage, dog-poop, and parking-meters. They leave it to the also-rans, and those peculiar people who enjoy this kind of thing. And most of the time it doesn’t matter. The sewage is collected somehow, the dog-doo ditto, and people learn to live with (or circumvent) the moronic parking laws.

But now and again – and increasingly since being allocated the powers of “general competence” – our elected representatives run amok and threaten the basic wellbeing of the communities they are theoretically supposed to serve. Thus it has been with the stadium – a disastrous project that will limit Dunedin’s options for a long time into the future. This stadium, beyond the hoopla and trumped-up fake excitement of its opening, can only survive as a tawdry plastic warehouse, feeding on subsidy, sucking millions from our pockets every year, until, mercifully, it sinks in the mud, or is swamped by the rising sea.

The stadium, let us remember, was originally proposed as an untrammelled gift to the city – to be paid for with private money. (“Not a penny of ratepayer’s funds”: “no ratepayer liability”). But there is no private money – not now, and probably not ever. All risks and costs are now to fall on the ratepayers – all inflations, hidden expenditures, miscalculations, interest blowouts - plus punitive subsidies forever. This is what our councillors have wrought, in their adamant denial of every attempt at reasoned opposition.

These councillors are fully culpable. They have ignored the most massive protests in Dunedin’s living memory. They have reneged on their own repeated promises, solemnly-set conditions, and so-called “lines in the sand”. They have refused, even, to consider the people’s formal submissions – their legal right – before scuttling off to sign away our communal civic future. They have, in sum, forfeited all public allegiance and broken the basic compact that underlies a democratic society.

Dunedin is a very small city, caught in the grip of a global recession. We are losing industry and jobs, and now we have been handicapped, quite needlessly, with an enormous burden of debt. This stadium (and so much else) has been foisted on us by a group of councillors oblivious to any voice of prudence or restraint, and we will have to cope, as best we can, with their legacy of spendthrift arrogance. Our rates are set to increase ad infinitum, while the profits formerly provided by our council-operated enterprises have been hijacked to prop up the stadium. We are financially exposed, as never before, due to the actions of our so-called representatives.

The damage that these people have done will be with us for generations. We can't fix that: no-one can. But within a year there will be fresh elections, and then, at least, we can put an end to an extraordinary interlude of civic irresponsibility. There is no other rational course to take, because Dunedin cannot afford the luxury of a DCC or an ORC addicted to the accumulation of debt. If we care for the future of our city we must not miss this one opportunity to change the composition of both our local bodies.

There is a year to bring this about, and the "new direction" of STS – if our membership agrees - will simply be to push for the election of competent, responsible people to the City and Regional Councils. Many others, no doubt, will seek the same goals, and achieving them should not be very difficult – eighty percent of Dunedin people, after all, finally repudiated the stadium, and if that 80% translates into votes it is curtains for the current crew.

We are convinced that Dunedin, despite the blunders of the past few years, can still retrieve its fortunes and once again look to its real possibilities and prospects. But it won't happen merely by hoping. It will be up to all of us, in due course, to make our decisions very carefully. We will have to distinguish truth from lies, and honest speech from evasive promises. The last three years have been an all-time low for this city, in which we have been denied nearly every aspect of a functioning democracy. But not even the DCC has been able to deprive us of our votes - not yet. In the end they are the key to everything.

**Dave Witherow**