

Bega District News

Tables are turned

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THE continuing debate about logging in the Bega Valley took an unexpected twist on Tuesday.

Instead of doing the blockading and protesting, Bega Valley Shire councillor Keith Hughes was himself blockaded.

A group of timber industry workers waited for Cr Hughes, stood in his path as he approached the council building in Zingel Place and said they had “turned the tables” on him.

Led by Stephen Cocks, Kevin Clunie and Stephen Pope, the group also issued leaflets to other councillors as they entered.

Taking Cr Hughes to task for his involvement in protesting generally and at the South East Fibre Exports Eden chipmill specifically, Mr Cocks asked why Cr Hughes was conducting himself “that way”.

The Mumbulla forest protest last year - a matter still before the courts in which Cr Hughes and others chained themselves by the neck to logging machinery - added to the group’s disdain for Cr Hughes actions.

“Cr Hughes obviously doesn’t like what we are doing so we thought we’d tell him we don’t like what he is doing as a councillor,” Mr Cocks said.

“He has the position of a councillor and just doesn’t conduct himself properly or in a way that represents the ratepayers.”

The leaflet Mr Cocks handed out stated that Cr Hughes did not respect the industry or the workers’ right to free access to their workplaces.

“So we decided to deny him free access to his workplace and see how he likes it.”

During the peaceful confrontation, Cr Hughes was asked, as a councillor and a person of leadership and significance, why he did nothing to try and stop the protesters from their actions.

Cr Hughes said he wasn’t at the protest on behalf of council, it was his decision as a private individual.

Mr Pope said Cr Hughes was “guilty by association”, a statement with which Cr Hughes disagreed.



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“Well, you are,” said Mr Pope.

“If you weren’t guilty then you wouldn’t be there and if you stayed away, others might too.”



Cr Hughes said he didn’t agree with all that happened at the protest and was asked by Mr Pope if that was the case, why he didn’t leave.

“Had I not been there, it would have made no difference,” Cr Hughes said.

Cr Hughes said he was trying to promote the transition from the logging of native forest to sustainable plantations, to which the group said what they were doing was already sustainable.

Cr Hughes was told the local timber industry was economically hurt by his actions.

Mr Clunie said the actions had cost him “thousands of dollars” and told Cr Hughes that “those actions don’t hurt SEFE, they only hurt us contractors and the broader community everywhere.”

Accusations and questions of Cr Hughes came from many of those present, including Fran McNaught, an Eden woman who said she had “nothing to do with the timber industry whatsoever”.

“I am here to tell you, Cr Hughes, that I support totally your right to protest peacefully,” she said.

“But you have no right to stop workers from doing their job and I think as a councillor you are a disgrace.”

Cr Hughes tried a few times to explain his position but the group was having none of it, instead they said how proud they were of the sustainable way the industry worked and that it was the “best in the world”.



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“That protest was disgraceful and you are a disgrace too,” Mr Cocks said.

Cr Hughes was asked by Mr Cocks to explain why a car carrying a young man who was injured on a jet ski was not allowed to go through the blockade.

“That was terrible, how could you do that?”

Cr Hughes said he “had no authority over the tactics” used and therefore “no responsibility” for them.

“There is an element in the community who agree with the protests,” he said.

“I wish it hadn’t happened but I didn’t have any authority over it.”

While the timber workers made their points, police watched, however there was nothing of concern apart from the occasional raised voice – a different matter, Mr Cocks said, to the protest at the chipmill.

After about 30 minutes Cr Hughes wanted to leave.

“I appreciate what you have told me,” he said.

“But I want to go along this footpath and into council.”

Mr Cocks laughed and said to Cr Hughes that “you stopped us doing that, so what’s the difference.”

Then, their point being made, the group let Cr Hughes through and the crowd dispersed.

Afterwards Mr Cocks said he thought the group had made their point, that when “the shoe is on the other foot, it’s a bit different”.

“We will be doing it again,” he said.

“The protesters have an on-going campaign and so do we.”

And From You Tube:

Keith Hughes Put on Notice

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcTnNKHwHnU>

Keith Hughes Hides Behind the Mayoral Robes

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=99JC9SW2IWk>

Keith Hughes Decked

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WjeJZKc7kcQ>

