

Environment Southland facing turbulent times

Environment Southland wields jurisdiction over a large area, including Milford Sound and Stewart Island. Outwardly all is apparently well. Inwardly, over the last 12 months the council has lurched from crisis to crisis, writes Peter Owens:

There's been the resignation and resettlement of CEO Ciaran Keogh, and in January this year Head of Compliance Mark Hunter confirmed his departure. These changes have been overshadowed by the action of Council Chairperson Ali Timms.

Her saga began in December, when Timms telephoned Invercargill's Mayor, Tim Shadbolt while he was fielding calls on a local talk-back show.

Timms posed as a local woman whose husband had been made redundant at the Bluff aluminium smelter. She said her name was Ruby, but Shadbolt indicated he knew who the caller's identity. When *The Southland Times* put this to chairperson Timms she admitted the pretence.

On December 12 2012 Environment Southland held an extraordinary meeting. While the media and public were excluded, there was general condemnation of Timms' conduct and calls for her resignation. Timms refused to resign at this meeting and the council voted to accede to her request for six weeks paid leave. While the voting details have not been revealed, several councillors publicly opposed this motion. Timms should have resigned at that meeting, the councillors declared.

At a second extraordinary meeting on January 24th the council voted on a motion of confidence in Timms. The motion was carried, 7-5 and Timms, who cast a vote on her own behalf after taking legal advice, narrowly survived. Her six supporters all stressed how she had led the council well and that one "mistake" should not rob her of the position of chair. Cr Marion Miller emphasised this, saying Timms was "the most competent and professional chair Environment Southland had ever had."

Five councillors voted otherwise. Cr Brian Mason, criticised Timms not only for her irresponsibility in making the phone call to Shadbolt, but also for her general handling of the council's affairs. He was also critical of the fact that Ms Timms continued to be paid while on leave and this had amounted to about \$7,000.

There was also criticism from Cr Rowley Currie (a former Rector of Southland Boys' High School) and from Jan Riddell who was concerned that the whole matter had not been dealt with using appropriate procedures. Riddell urged Timms to resign before the matter went to a vote.

Timms has apologised and called the publicity a "huge over-reaction by the media."