

12/08/2020

The Editor
The Ovens and Murray Advertiser
Wangaratta, VIC

Dear Editor,

Re: Proposed Local Law No. 3 – Indigo Shire Council

If any citizens of Indigo Shire are concerned about the repression of democracy and dissent in Hong Kong they should have a look closer to home and study Indigo Shire Council's proposed "Local Law No.3" on the Shire's website – Have Your Say – On Exhibition.

The purpose of the proposed new "Local Law No.3" is to replace an existing law and to "create offences with respect to conduct at Meetings" and to "regulate and control the use of the Common Seal".

Of course meetings and council business need to be conducted according to established norms, parliamentary procedure and common courtesy. However the proposed new "Local Law No.3" goes far beyond this and is clearly designed to prevent opposition to Council's activities. Of particular concern is point 9.1:

"It is an offence for any person to make any comment, question or remark that is defamatory, indecent, abusive, offensive, disorderly, or objectionable in language, substance or nature. Penalty: 5 Penalty Units" (\$500.00)

Who determines what is offensive or objectionable? Given the composition of the current council and bureaucracy the mention of a certain brand of cheese or beer, support for traditional marriage or praise for Captain Cook would be considered worthy of rebuke and a penalty. Even quoting from historic documents could be open to punishment. A politically incorrect remark can get you fined and even expelled from a meeting. In other words toe the party line.

"Local Law No.3" is draconian and designed to stifle debate and criticism at council meetings, committee meetings, and public forums. A robust democracy requires spirited debate and argument and relies on freedom of expression. The democratic rights of Australians are already under attack. The passage of this law in its current would be another nail in the coffin.

Residents of Indigo Shire have until August 30th to comment on the proposed "Local Law No.3"

Yours sincerely,

John Harvey
Beechworth