



Who may be using the SOS campaign politically?

“ONE has to question the motives behind the campaign, and, in fact, the people behind it,” local list MP Michael Woodhouse has been quoted as saying about the campaign, launched by the Dunedin City Council, to try to ensure Dunedin Hospital is rebuilt (when that finally happens) in central Dunedin, rather than, as the list of options produced by the Southern Partnership Group suggests is possible, at Wakari, on a greenfields site, or dispersed on several sites.

Because the “Dunedin Hospital SOS” initiative has been promoted by former Labour MP David Benson-Pope, and is supported by local Labour MPs David Clark and Clare Curran, Mr Woodhouse sees the initiative as a Labour Party-driven initiative intended to “create a win and proclaim some kind of forcing of the Government’s hand” for party political purposes.

The site, size and structure of the future Dunedin Hospital are vital issues for Dunedin (and for Otago and Southland), and one would expect even the dullest person, of whatever political persuasion, to see the importance of it being located close to the highly ranked medical school, for the mutual flourishing of both institutions and the efficiency of their joint staff; and centrally, for public access. It would be irresponsible of the DCC not to do its best to help achieve that, and it knows that citizens making their views known to the Government has been effective in other campaigns, regarding the container port (remember the forklift driven into the town hall?), the neurosurgery service and the courthouse.

By devolving responsibility for planning the future hospital to the Southern Governance Group the Government may hope to reduce political fallout for unpopular decisions. But where and how the hospital is rebuilt will, in the end, be a political decision. It’s right for citizens, as part of the political process, to pressure the Government to make the right decision about the hospital’s location, even if the immediate dollar cost of a central rebuild is higher than for a distant site.

Like councillors, electorate MPs have a duty to take seriously issues affecting their electorates, irrespective of whether their party is in government or opposition.

Mr Woodhouse is a list MP, and has never represented an electorate, so perhaps his understanding of the responsibilities of electorate MPs is limited. But, coming from Dunedin, which has no electorate MPs in government, he describes himself as a local MP and has an office in Dunedin, where electors can, and do, meet him to discuss local issues. So he should understand the responsibility of any list MPs aligning themselves with a local area, as of electorate MPs, to convey the views of local electors to Parliament. All MPs based in Otago and Southland, whether electorate or list, should be supporting this campaign.

Once a decision about the hospital has finally been made by the Cabinet, Mr Woodhouse will, no doubt, abide by the convention of Cabinet collective responsibility, and support whatever that decision is. But in the meantime he should be (is he, perhaps?) representing local views of the matter to the Government in which he’s a minister. And joining other local MPs to support the campaign publicly — which he isn’t.

It is irrelevant that a sometime Labour MP leads the campaign, and that the two Labour electorate MPs (as they should) support it. Mr Woodhouse’s denigration of their support suggests he is perhaps the one using the campaign for party politics, rather than addressing the very real issue at stake, crucial for Dunedin Hospital, for the university and medical school, for Dunedin city, for Otago and Southland, and, indeed, indirectly, for all New Zealand.