

THE HILLS SHIRE COUNCIL LIBERAL PARTY COUNCILLORS

Mr RAY WILLIAMS (Castle Hill) (17:43): An issue that I have raised previously in this House concerns the undemocratic political processes of the Liberal Party regarding the choice of candidates for the local government elections held in The Hills shire during December 2021 last year. At these council elections, the former popularly elected mayor Michelle Byrne and six sitting Liberal councillors were replaced by the Liberal Party State Executive without the usual preselection processes normally afforded to such positions. Given that no response by the Liberal Party has to date been provided to these former good community representatives, and the general community, I again raise this matter.

The previous mayor, Michelle Byrne, and the former councillors of The Hills shire were held in extremely high regard by my community, so their removal came as a complete shock. By way of background, the Liberal Party State Executive chose to endorse new Liberal councillors, some living outside the area, to run at The Hills council elections last December without a reason or excuse ever provided to those six sitting councillors and mayor, who were subsequently replaced. Allegations have been raised with me that senior people within the New South Wales Liberal Party, a member of the Liberal Party State Executive and former Hills councillor, were supported financially at the time by a large developer by the name of Jean Nassif, who owns Toplace. Toplace has one of the worst records in the residential building industry. According to media reports, Toplace continues to produce faulty apartments with serious building defects across the Sydney metropolitan area, including in my electorate of Castle Hill.

Apparently prior to the council elections Jean Nassif of Toplace met with Christian Ellis and other senior members of the Liberal Party, who were paid significant funds in order to arrange to put new councillors on The Hills Shire Council who would be supportive of future Toplace development applications. Christian Ellis is the owner of a lobbyist company and at the time a Liberal Party State Executive member who listed Toplace as one of his major clients. It has been well documented that Jean Nassif of Toplace had purchased a number of properties between Highs Road and Glenhope Road, Castle Hill, for the amount of \$250 million. Once purchased by Toplace, the company then sought a planning proposal through The Hills Shire Council for thousands of new high-rise apartments to be constructed on this land, with some apartments to be above 20 storeys in height. The proposal raised the ire of the community and was quite rightly refused by both the council officers on The Hills Shire Council and the NSW Department of Planning and Environment local planning panel, but the proposal was wholeheartedly supported by certain councillors at the time.

Hills councillors have raised with me that one previous councillor—who is now a member of the New South Wales Parliament—actively supported the Toplace development proposal during this time, apparently arranging meetings with The Hills Shire Council staff together with Toplace consultants, speaking favourably during council meetings on behalf of the Toplace planning proposal and caucusing with Liberal councillors in order to obtain support for Toplace. The former councillor was also mentioned on the Ray Hadley 2GB radio program as organising some of the new councillors for The Hills Shire Council. One of the newly elected councillors,

Virginia Ellis, is employed as the electorate officer on behalf of this member of Parliament, and incidentally is the mother of Christian Ellis. Needless to say, these are very serious allegations.

If Christian Ellis, senior members of the Liberal Party, a former councillor and now member of the New South Wales Parliament, received financial benefit from Jean Nassif of Toplace in order to put new councillors on The Hills Shire Council who would subsequently be supportive of development applications on behalf of Toplace, then my community has good reason to be very concerned. This issue must be investigated. However, due to the inherent conflict of interest that currently exists with members of the Liberal Party State Executive, only an external investigation will substantiate these allegations, or ultimately refute them. I will have more to say about these matters in the future.