

# High price for sudden insight

May 7

I want to talk about the word "epiphany". Not the religious kind; the one about having a sudden realisation. Andrew Judd's epiphany, to be precise.

At the last local body election he thrashed incumbent New Plymouth mayor Harry Duynhoven by an embarrassing 9206 votes. Embarrassing for Duynhoven at the time, but now even more embarrassing for Judd, who because of this epiphany thing has no hope of a repeat.

Two thirds of the 3000-plus people who voted in a recent Stuff poll said they wouldn't back him again. So his "shock" announcement on TV1 late this week that he won't contest the mayoralty in October was hardly a surprise. Maori TV reported the mayor's decision a month ago (how revealing).

This has happened because Judd publicly epiphanised (if there's such a word) over what must be the most sensitive issue in politics, national and local - race relations.

He backed a proposal for a Maori ward, an idea that was roundly defeated in a poll organised - paradoxically - by the constituency that voted him in as mayor, the seniors.

Judd is hardly the first person to delve into Taranaki's race relations and become perturbed, but he may be the first top local politician to take such a corner-backing stance.

It was commendably honest, but naive. Sadly, it's politicians with guile who tend to succeed, not those displaying refreshing tendencies to wear their hearts on the exterior.

So now he's out of contention, who are we going to get as mayor?

Harry might have another go. After all, as New Plymouth's MP he once enjoyed the biggest majority in Parliament, which made his dumping as mayor after only one term all the more surprising.

Voters may have felt a little shame-faced about that, if his success at the mid-term by-election for replacement councillors is anything to go by. But many may think he's yesterday's man, and a comeback to this particular office hasn't been achieved since someone called Edward Dockrill in 1906.

Which leaves who?

Roy Weaver obviously garners a lot of respect, given his success in the same by-election, but it would be unusual for someone who's not served at least one full term as a councillor to get the nod as leader.

Judging by the number of letters-to-editor he writes on local issues, Neil Holdom might fancy his chances. But without even serving a term as a councillor? Not likely.

The only "outsider" who could expect to be taken seriously is former mayor Peter Tennent, who seemed to quit prematurely after three successful terms. He's still only 58.

If Peter isn't a starter, that leaves just one serious contender in my book - Gordon Brown. He has what every successful mayor needs - a flair for communication - and had a big following when he wrote for the Daily News.

Gordon needs to be careful, though. Last year he voted against the council looking at becoming an "age friendly" city. Not a great idea if he wants the support of those most likely to bother voting.

The other interesting thing about the New Plymouth mayoralty is we've entered an unusually erratic era.

Although New Plymouth changed mayors pretty much every three years during its first 45 years as a provincial town, after 1920 they tended to hold the job for several terms, a trend thoroughly cemented in with the record 20-year reign of E.C.R. Gilmour from 1933.

From 1956 there was Alf Honnor (12 years), Denny Sutherland (12), Daisy Lean (9), the first and so-far-only woman, Claire Stewart (9), and then Tennent (9). Just five office-holders in more than half a century. That suggests we're usually happy with our mayors and stick with them (a phenomenon mirrored by our MPs)

Until now. Harry's quick demise might just have been unlucky, but two short-lived top dogs in a row?

How has the electorate changed?

My theory is that as the number voting continues to shrink, the influence of special-interest groups holds more sway. The seniors have always been powerful, but the disaffected are having an impact, as well.

Witness the support over the past decade or so for unconventional candidates like Shagger, Horse and Sheryl George, none of them what you'd call traditional local body politicians, but people able to inspire those for whom politics of any kind is normally someone else's power game.

Horse has hinted he'll have another tilt. The mayoral race looks wide open from where I'm looking. Horse for mayor?