

Age angst is not what it seems

A quick look at that symptom of our fast era, Wikipedia, shows the quest for eternal life, also known as the "elixir of youth", has attracted heavy hitters since biblical times.

None succeeded, although we may have moved fractionally closer with news from that paragon of reliable information, the Daily Mail, that scientists may have extended the lives of lab mice by 35 percent.

Just what that means is unclear, and if it's good news it's come too late for people like Doug Truman of Hokitika, who was cruelly discarded as deputy mayor of Grey District in recent local body elections after 48 years of public service.

There is a suspicion Doug copped the big voter freeze because of his age, which at 76 was actually a year less than our own Keith Allum, a trim, alert man of 77, who chose to step down as a New Plymouth District councillor.

Asked why, Keith said: "I'm an engineer, not a politician" or words to that effect, and added the rider: "I'm 77, you know."

Few of us did, because he doesn't look a day over 60.

Unlike his fellow councillor, Harry Duynhoven, who if he said it once during the campaign he said half a dozen times that he was much younger than his white head of hair suggested.

"I'm only 61," protested Harry.

In the end though it'll get him, will age. Because the recent election appeared like never before to bring ageism to the fore in Taranaki.

Shaun Biesiek, a three-term veteran councillor who shaves his head, possibly to eradicate evidence of grey hair, may have started it with a letter to the editor about the grey-haired old boys club that had in his view dominated council too long.

He recanted, a bit, with a clarification that he meant there was a crying need for more women, Māori and young people, an appeal that fell largely on deaf ears, given that only one young woman and a youngish mayor got elected to join Shaun and his old boys.

The hue against male oldies reached a crescendo when a fellow Daily News columnist said some old geezer aged 73 had the temerity to stand for council in New Plymouth.

His was an ill-advised target, given the ancient one is someone who, despite the added handicap of blindness, is very much active in the cause of improving life for the community's 30 percent suffering disability.

But the damage may have been done. The worthy blind man, recently honoured for his energetic community work, missed out, as did a large cast of those of us whose grey (and in my case, white) hair is obviously an impediment to wisdom.

Nobody would be silly enough to disagree that diversity is needed at the council table, but you have to ask how much thought voters put into that equation when they maintained the female presence on the New Plymouth council at two (out of 15) and ignored Māori candidates entirely.

One of the discussions at a post-election function I attended centered around the question: "Who's going to say the karakia at council meetings now Howie's gone?"

But back to age. As you look at photos of successful mayoral candidates around the country it occurs that ageism is one of those social phenomena that typically starts north of the Bombay Hills and migrates south, where it will stumble eventually against ageless Tim Shadbolt, who was elected mayor for the eighth time. Conservative New Zealand (barring Hokitika) has still to catch on.

But why has ageism apparently become so pronounced in New Plymouth?

Have voters old and not-quite-old (we're assured the young don't bother) had it with the supposed usefulness of elders?

Is that the conclusion to be drawn from their decision to trust a youthful mayor with fresh new ideas and energy, but no local government experience?

Actually, the risk with that isn't great.

The council that worked hard to sort out many issues over the past three years is still largely intact. Wisdom and experience - and age - remain its dominant feature.

Nobody is more aware of that than the new leader. And he's smart enough to understand that he gets just one vote, like everybody else around the table.

That means his successes, in whatever form they take, will depend largely on gaining the co-operation of a bunch of people for whom the prospective benefits of scientific breakthroughs with mice running forever energetically around a cage will be completely irrelevant.