NATIONAL VICTORIA LOCAL COUNCIL

Police investigating vandalism, confronting house visit as tensions rise at Whittlesea council

By Cameron Houston and Benjamin Preiss

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Police are investigating vandalism at the home of embattled Whittlesea mayor Emilia Sterjova, as well as a confronting visit by two men to the house of the government-appointed monitor who recommended sacking her.

Whittlesea council on Melbourne's northern fringe was sacked this week after Local Government Minister Adem Somyurek accepted recommendations made in a report by government-appointed monitor Yehudi Blacher less than three months into his role.

Mr Somyurek was not expecting the monitor's report until June. "But the monitor said 'I've seen enough now', mid March. And the longer this circus continues, the more the people of the City of Whittlesea are actually missing out," he said.

However, in a legal letter the Whittlesea mayor has accused Mr Blacher of "intimidating, threatening and overawing" conduct during a recent meeting.

Government-appointed Yehudi Blacher recommended the sacking of Whittlesea Council. DARYL GORDON

The allegations are not being investigated by police, but Ms Sterjova has urged Mr Somyurek to look into the meeting, as well as separate claims that Whittlesea council had been systematically undermined by feuding ALP factions.

The allegations arise from a meeting between the pair on February 17, when Ms Sterjova claims Mr Blacher accused her of failing in her role as mayor to calm tensions between Greek and Macedonian residents in the Whittlesea community.

Mr Blacher also revealed to Ms Sterjova that two men had confronted his wife at their home a week before the meeting, which had been referred to police for investigation.

"You [Mr Blacher] acknowledged and accepted that our client [Ms Sterjova] had nothing to do with the men visiting your home, but you then stated that you believed our client was responsible for that occurring because of her previous lack of action," the legal letter by Marcus O'Brien of Clyde and Co states.

Whittlesea mayor Emilia Lisa Sterjova sparked tensions between the local Greek and Macedonian communities after posting a photo on Facebook showing her holding a flag with the Vergina Sun symbol. FACEBOOK

The visit by the two men to Mr Blacher's home is understood to be linked to the ethnic tensions in Melbourne's north that were sparked when Ms Sterjova posted a photo of herself with a Macedonian flag on social media in December last year.

Ms Sterjova removed the post and apologised, but tensions flared again at council meetings on December 10 and February 4, when a group of Macedonian men unfurled a flag outside chambers that resulted in a confrontation with council staff.

Ms Sterjova insists she had no involvement with either incident.

She says she was the victim of a vandalism attack in December last year, when her home and car were pelted with eggs. That incident was also referred to local police for investigation.

The Age sought a response to Ms Sterjova’s allegations against Mr Blacher through the state government, but it declined to respond.

The police investigations and legal letter are the latest instalment in a decade of dysfunction that has blighted Whittlesea council, including the recent sacking of former chief executive and ex-police boss Simon Overland.

Mr Blacher's report, which was tabled in State Parliament on Tuesday, found governance had collapsed at the council, "along with its reputation".

Mr Blacher also referred a case of conflict of interest to the corruption watchdog, after accusing some councillors of using their official positions to influence decisions in their own interests or those of their families or "other parties" .

The government accepted all the recommendations in Mr Blacher's report, including that administrators be appointed until the 2024 council elections, but a bill to sack the council is yet to pass through State Parliament's upper house.

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