

## Prominent Collingwood members call for serious reform of the board after racism revelations

*Influential business people associated with the AFL club say now is the time to bring in 21st century skills and experience*



*'When something goes wrong, analyse, learn and apologise – don't spin': Elizabeth Proust says more transparency is needed from the Collingwood board.*

*Paul Daley*  
10 Feb 2021

Elizabeth Proust grew up in Sydney as a proud supporter of what was then the Balmain Tigers rugby league club.

When she moved to Melbourne and married Brian Lawrence in 1972, she passionately adopted his Collingwood Football Club as her own. As a Collingwood supporter and member she has been dismayed by the episodic flare-ups of racism against Indigenous people and those of colour that have shamed her club.

And now, like so many other prominent and influential business people associated with Collingwood, she is calling for serious reform of the club's board so it can implement the 18 recommendations of the Do Better report, which identified a culture of systemic racism at the Magpies and precipitated Eddie McGuire's resignation as president.

As chairman of Cuscal Ltd, director of Lendlease Ltd, and past chair of Nestle Australia and the Bank of Melbourne, Proust's record of leadership in the corporate and public sectors (she has also been a secretary of the Victorian Department of Premier and Cabinet and CEO of the City of Melbourne) gives her unique insight into management processes.

She is an expert at identifying corporate strengths, weaknesses and, occasionally, dysfunction.

Meanwhile, her time as chair of the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD) until 2018 qualifies her to speak with authority on corporate governance. She is not backward in doing so in relation to Collingwood.

"This is the opportunity to bring 21st century skills and experiences onto the Collingwood board because some of the issues that have been identified for Collingwood in that Do Better report, and elsewhere, are not quick fixes and they need skills beyond the board to turn that around," she says.

"Clearly we can't continue to have what we have had for the last few years – for the last 20 years, at Collingwood. Certainly, more transparency is needed. But you need term limits too, for directors and chairmen, and good succession planning. As soon as you join a board you should start to think who, for the next few years, you need to keep on the board or you need to attract to the board so that you've got ... people who can succeed you. You're not thinking how long can I cling on to this job. That wasn't evident at Collingwood.

"Leave aside racism and the racism [*Do Better*] report, just for a moment. At its base the issue is also corporate governance. Good corporate governance is the underpinning of all organisations: not-for-profits, listed, private, etc. You mostly don't notice it because its elements, when working properly, ensure that the organisation works well and achieves its aims."

She says at its heart good corporate governance hinges on: succession planning including for the board chair; term limits of about 9-12 years for board members; challenging and collegiate boardroom dynamics that challenge bad decisions and errant culture; clear roles for directors and managers; and risk management policies that are followed and actioned.

Critically, she says, "when something goes wrong, analyse, learn and apologise – don't spin".

Which all resonates in the context of Collingwood Football Club, where McGuire was president for 22 years alongside a board that includes a number of long-serving directors whose role in guiding the club through the Do Better scandal has been, at best, opaque.

Journalist Barrie Cassidy is a Collingwood member who has called for serious reform at the club. He has flagged an interest in serving on the board while recently pointing out there has been no membership election for club positions for the best part of 20 years.

“McGuire was a great president for 10 years. He does have a powerful legacy and future generations will thank him for that. But like so many agents of change, he did his best work early, and in the end he failed to identify his use-by date,” Cassidy wrote.

Proust says: “[Cassidy] says it well. If Eddie had stayed 10 years, he would be fondly remembered especially after the 2010 premiership.”

But the guidelines on healthy corporate governance exist for a reason, she says.

“Don’t overstay, don’t make yourself bigger than your organisation – and leave your successor with clear air.”

Right now that successor is unknown – except, perhaps, to McGuire, who may wish to extend his influence as a director or from outside the club boardroom like other historical luminaries and patrons of Magpie history, such as John Wren.

A decade ago Proust may have been convinced to seek board membership or even the presidency herself, had the club found itself then in the predicament it is in now.

But she is about to move semi-permanently to Sydney and she believes her potential time to serve on the Collingwood board has passed.

Indeed, she turned down an offer to join the Collingwood board about five years ago.

“I grew up in Sydney and followed the Balmain Tigers, but since ... moving to Melbourne in the early 70s I’ve followed Collingwood, and for 24 years I’ve been a member. So [being a director] was not quite on my bucket list but, you know ... that would be an interesting role,” she says.

“And I explored it, but I came to the conclusion ... that there would be likely governance issues which would bring the two roles, both of which would be high profile, into some embarrassment. And I chose the AICD over Collingwood.”

Proust says she would like to see the board reform, implement all 18 recommendations of Do Better, and revitalise with new members.

“I want to see more good people join,” she says, without giving the “kiss of death” to anyone she might wish to see on board by naming them.