



The polarising force that is Cr Peter Hulin

Description



Warrnambool City Councillor Peter Hulin, holding an upholstery ruler, with this faithful companion, Boris, a 68kg Rottweiler.

Words and images by Carol Altmann

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] I [/dropcap]f it's true that people subconsciously choose a pet dog that mirrors themselves, it is appropriate that Warrnambool City Councillor Peter Hulin owns a 68kg Rottweiler called Boris.

Big Boris, who Peter jokingly refers to as a Chihuahua cross, is – like his owner – from strong German stock, intensely loyal to those he respects and not one to take any crap when provoked.

“Does Boris reflect you?” I ask Peter during our conversation at his Koroit St upholstery business, where a stretched-out Boris looks like a couch blocking the doorway.

“In many ways, yes. He is as placid as can be and would not hurt a fly when he is out here, hanging around, but come to my place after dark and try and take something and see how you go then,” Peter says, laughing.

“It was like when I grabbed a guy who had hurt my son,” he adds, referring to an incident from 2008 when he attacked a man in Port Fairy, who, Peter argued, was part of an ongoing campaign of harassment against his son, John.

Peter was fined, but no conviction was recorded, after being charged with recklessly causing injury and unlawful assault.

Peter has similarly been accused of being too aggressive in his role as councillor since being elected in 2008, but others – like the steady stream of ratepayers who visit his shop to seek advice or a listening ear – consider him a hero of the common person.

Perhaps more than any other councillor, he is either loved or loathed, with not much space in between.

“It’s not personal to me and I don’t take it personally. I just believe there is a better way,” Peter says of the criticism he receives from those who would prefer he remain quiet.

“We need people elected to council with the ability to move this city toward the place it should be, and could easily be: we are not elected to be puppets.”



Peter Hulin grew up the son of an upholsterer, John Hulin, who shaped his life in ways that went well beyond the usual father-son relationship.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"] Peter grew up the son of an upholsterer and World War II veteran who, Peter says, could be extremely violent as a result of the mental trauma he suffered after fighting on the Russian front line for the Germans.

It was an often traumatic childhood, but one that Peter says has given him a strong survival instinct.

As a teenager, Peter was apprenticed to his father and, during this time, witnessed an event that shaped him for life. As Peter tells it, his father had complained to the council for years about an unsafe auto engine business at the back of his shop in Kepler St (at what is now Day Kitty), warning it was a major fire hazard.

The inevitable happened and a fire from the engine business swept through a number of buildings, including a garage that housed the Hulin's new car. Peter, who was then 17, and his father attempted to retrieve the vehicle but such was the shock and strain, his father suffered a heart attack and died in front of him.

Peter saw the tragedy as an avoidable problem that, because of the council's ineptitude, had catastrophic consequences.

"I understood then that if you had a problem, you sort it out: you don't pretend that it is not happening," he says.

"When someone comes to me with a problem now, I try and sort it out for them and get something

done, and I cannot see why that is considered being radical.”



Away from the council chambers, Peter Hulin – and Boris – fields a string of visits from ratepayers and supporters to his Koroit St shop.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #DC943C;"]T [/dropcap]he difficult and ultimately tragic relationship with his father saw Peter seek out his own role models and he has several older mentors who continue to guide his thinking.

He also absorbs information like a sponge, listening to ABC 774 rather than 3AW and reading biographies on inspiring leaders such as Abraham Lincoln.

“I want to know what I don’t know,” he says.

A passionate, rather than a passive, approach has always been Peter Hulin’s style. Before being elected to council (it took two attempts), he wrote copious letters to the local paper, outlining where Warrnambool could do and be much better.

“Those same issues are the ones I am still fighting for today – CBD renewal, pedestrian safety, the environment,” he says.

“I fix things for a living. I can see the potential in someone’s old piece of furniture and what can be done with it. And I can see Warrnambool bursting with potential, but it is being held back.”

With council elections to be held next year, Peter Hulin will again be among the candidates and, if re-elected, has no intention of pulling his head in.

“Making the right decisions can be hard: it is easy to just blob along and not rock the boat, but I am not like that,” he says.

“I know who I am and what I am made of and not many people can say that. If you stand up for what you believe in, it can be very difficult, but nobody can question your integrity in being prepared to do it.”

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1. adversity
2. Boris
3. domestic violence
4. John Hulin
5. Peter Hulin
6. rottweiler
7. upholstery
8. war veteran
9. Warrnambool City Councillor

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