

No way forward – Brookes

DEPARTED NZNO president Grant Brookes said he decided to quit when the board agreed to seek further legal advice about his presidency, after spending an estimated \$250,000 on legal action related to Brookes in the past two years.

“I’d had enough,” said Brookes, who was first elected in 2015, and was re-elected unopposed in 2018. “I could see there was no way forward and did not want to see any more members’ money wasted, he said. “It was clear Kerri [Nuku, kaiwhakahaere] could get a majority all of the time.”

Brookes had hoped a new board, with new members voted in after promising transparency, democracy and action last September, would make it easier for him to transform NZNO into a “genuinely” bicultural and member-driven organisation, he said. But the vote to seek further legal advice at an April 8 board meeting – an agenda item requested by Nuku – made it clear to him that would not be possible.

Brookes, having declared a conflict, abstained, as did Anne Daniels and Sela Ikavuka. Katrina Hopkinson voted against, while Simon Auty, Tithuia Pakeho, Margaret Hand, Anamaria Watene and Nuku voted in favour of seeking further legal advice. Andrew Cunningham was not present. Board minutes confirm these numbers.

Dissenting comments ‘expunged’

However, dissenting comments – raising the possible impact on reconciliation and cost to members of further legal action – had been expunged from the final minutes approved by the six remaining board members, Brookes noted. This was “concerning”, as without the “dissenting minority” views, the minutes were not true and accurate, said Brookes, who had not seen NZNO board minutes edited in that way previously.

Nuku said the final minutes and any amendments were approved by the board.

The vote on seeking more legal advice followed a special general meeting (SGM) in December, where 66 per cent of member group representatives voted against

a motion of confidence in Brookes, rejecting a members’ petition calling for support. That was an about-face from an earlier SGM in September 2019, where 50.5 per cent of member group representatives voted in support of Brookes.

Both SGMs followed a drawn-out dispute born during contentious nurse pay bargaining and strike action in 2018, and involving a late-night social media message from Brookes to the then industrial leader Cee Payne, who laid a complaint. A legal review commissioned by the board found serious misconduct by Brookes, who was simultaneously taking an Employment Relations Authority claim of unfair treatment. He dropped the case and pledged a fresh start after winning the members’ support in September.

Brookes has blamed “shadowy forces” for long seeking his ousting, and said his resignation followed two years of “extreme ill-treatment and bullying”, which had been “devastating” for him. Those behaviours included excessive scrutiny of his work and exclusion from “secret” board meetings held in 2018 and 2019.

In recent times, he had repeatedly witnessed “unethical” behaviour at governance level, but “excused them” as he wanted to preserve NZNO’s bicultural relationship. However, he could no longer stand aside, he said.

A February board decision to send a Te Rūnanga member in Brookes’ place to accompany Nuku to the International Council of Nurses conference in Geneva, instead of the vice-president Cheryl Hanham, was a last straw, as it was a clear “breach” of the board’s own policies and NZNO’s bicultural model, he said. Hanham resigned shortly afterwards. Nuku said Brookes had not proposed the vice-president go in his place at any point,

and absented himself from the discussion.

Nuku was a “key figure” behind the board’s attempts to remove him from office, and – after four and a half years of trying – it was no longer possible for him to work with her, Brookes said. “Strengthening a partnership is impossible unless there is active commitment from both partners,” Brookes stated in his resignation letter.

The board’s decision – at Nuku’s behest – to “re-open the bitter divisions of 2018-19, while our members on the frontline and our communities in lockdown needed us most of all to be united against COVID-19, was a truly appalling thing to do”. Nuku had previously told *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand* that any further action would only come at the request of member groups.

Systemic change wanted

Brookes said he did not want to focus on the personal division between Nuku and himself, but systemic change. “It’s about an individual, but it’s not about an individual. It’s about getting NZNO’s system and its democratic processes working.”

Brookes said his hopes for NZNO were that it could become a membership-driven and genuinely democratic organisation, rather than “top down”. A “re-negotiation” of how to create a genuinely bicultural relationship was needed. His “biggest mistake” was supporting the removal, in 2017, of time limits for the kaiwhakahaere and tumu whakarae terms of office. He now believed this was hampering development of new Māori leaders.

Brookes, a mental health nurse, has joined the Public Service Association, but said NZNO had some “amazing” staff and services. He would continue his NZNO professional membership and urged others to do the same. “Storming off never crossed my mind. What I want to see is a genuinely bicultural organisation.”

He is returning to the frontline, with a new fulltime role this month but, in his blog, has pledged to “continue fighting . . . to take back our union for members”.

Resigning the presidency, he said, was a “huge burden off my shoulders”. •



Grant Brookes