

Power player

Whakatāne mayoral aspirant Professor Victor Luca, a scientist who has spent a career in the nuclear industry, says his peers are conspicuous by their absence “in all political circles” in New Zealand. **by CHRIS HALL**

For reasons that will soon become apparent, I agree to meet Professor Victor Luca at a small hotel close to Auckland Airport. For now at least, MIQ has been consigned to the history books. But I mention to him that in 2020 I spent a fortnight across the road in the Holiday Inn.

It sparks a long, forensic, wide-ranging polemic about the pandemic: how unsuitable hotels were, how unprepared the country was, and how no one listened to him about Covid’s aerosol transmission in the early days of its arrival. “We were caught with our pants down despite decades and decades of warning about pandemics, but we got lucky,” he concludes.

Luca, 60, is not an epidemiologist or a virologist, but nor is he an armchair critic. He’s a materials chemist who has worked in the nuclear industry for more than two decades, addressing problems in the nuclear fuel cycle, radioactive waste management and the production of isotopes for medical diagnostics. He was principal scientist and research

leader at the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, at Lucas Heights in New South Wales, for 12 years. He also spent a decade in a similar role at the Argentine government agency in charge of nuclear energy research and development.

He is due to take a flight to Buenos Aires the next day, hence our rendezvous near the airport. He will work as a consultant for two months in a United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency-funded “expert mission” to build nuclear technology capacity. And when he gets back, he will ramp up his campaign to be the next mayor of Whakatāne, in the Bay of Plenty.

The stint in Argentina is quite the honour, he says, and not bad going for “a guy from a provincial outpost”. But he won’t be leaving the outpost entirely behind. As a Whakatāne district councillor, Luca will be taking his council iPad with him so he can continue working on local issues. At least he’s used to all the Zoom meetings by now.

The lobby is the only space we can find to talk while maintaining a social distance. I didn’t want to jeopardise a UN nuclear

mission, thank you very much, and we’re certainly well ventilated with gusts of wind sporadically bringing in leaves and other hotel guests through the sliding doors.

Before we get going, he takes a quick call from his younger brother Giovanni, who works in IT, and signs off with a “ciao”, giving away their Italian heritage.

ENCROACHING CAPITALISM

Luca’s father left the volcanic island of Stromboli, off the coast of Sicily, at the

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tail end of World War II and emigrated to Australia with his three brothers. But his grandmother’s family had been in New Zealand since the 1890s, and the family eventually moved across the Tasman. The three brothers ended up in Gisborne, then bought and ran a restaurant in Whakatāne. The Lyric lasted from 1957 to 1993, and Luca remembers it as a bustling, thriving hub in the coastal town.

He met his Argentinian wife, Cristina, while she was “cruising around New Zealand on holiday and got more than she bargained for”, he laughs. They have two children, Stefano and Agostina, and moved to Argentina to help look after her parents when they needed it. But Luca had always intended to move back to New Zealand, and after three decades away he returned in 2019.

While Covid has clearly left its mark on New Zealand society, as it has



Victor Luca: “What would I bring to the mayoralty? An ability to make the right conclusions, to make good decisions.”



Size and number: rather than an SUV, Luca prefers his small petrol scooter for running errands.

everywhere, Luca had already noticed other significant changes while he was away. One thing he says he has observed is how much more capitalistic it is – “it has become more like the US”.

In the late 80s, he worked at the University of Houston for two years as a postdoctoral research associate, before deciding it wasn't for him. He was shocked by what he found there. “There was hustle everywhere – it's all about money. Despite being the richest country in the world, there's poverty everywhere – extreme inequality that's probably comparable to Argentina. But the propaganda we get makes it look different. I just couldn't handle it.”

He's worried New Zealand is going

down the same road and frets that we are still not taking climate change as seriously as we need to. “We're not in immediate danger, but if you look at the frequency of extreme events, it's exponential – everything is exponential.”

VICTIMS OF OUR SUCCESS

He was shocked, for example, by the number and size of SUVs and utes he observed when he returned home, and continues to be appalled by people who drive a two-tonne truck 500m to the shops for a loaf of bread. For his own short trips, he uses a small petrol scooter instead of his car, and has recently taken to driving his father's electric mobility scooter to the supermarket, purely for

environmental reasons.

“I seem to have attracted some quite funny looks,” he says. But there is an added bonus – drivers tend to stop for him.

The problem, he suggests, is that the average New Zealander would rather divorce their partner than divorce their car. “We have one of the highest rates of car ownership in the developed world. But when a \$5000 electric car comes along, maybe we can get people into it.”

He sees climate change as a symptom of our rate of economic development. “We're going to end up being the victims of our own success. Everyone is chasing growth as if it's some sort of panacea. In local government circles, you always



1. The island of Stromboli. 2. Luca, left, with his younger brothers Giovanni and Enrico on Stromboli. 3. Luca in Stromboli. 4. At Victoria University of Wellington in 1985. 5. At the University of Houston in 1989. 6. In his study in 2020. 7. With his daughter, Agostina, wife, Cristina, and son, Stefano.

hear about growth, but if we carry on along that trajectory, we're in trouble."

No chief executive wants to report minimal profit growth – it's simply expected that bigger is better, he says. "But we've chased growth at such a rate that we can't build the infrastructure to match it. Two per cent growth per annum translates to a doubling every 35 years – most people don't understand this."

He has a zeal to inform his community about such matters and writes a column in his local paper, the *Whakatāne Beacon*. "They printed a two-page spread of mine on the exponential function," he marvels. "It had equations and everything."

One of Luca's biggest cheerleaders is the redoubtable Alexander (Sandy) Milne, MBE, a retired clinical lab scientist, research worker and microbiologist known for his tireless work calling attention to New Zealand's hepatitis B outbreak in the 1980s.

Although Milne is originally from Scotland, he has lived in New Zealand for 57 years and has known Luca and his family for decades. He recalls that Luca's grandmother taught him to make spaghetti bolognese, but says he only got to know Luca as a friend in the past couple of years.

"He was a breath of fresh air in our council when he came in," says Milne. "They were moribund, as far as I can tell. I've never seen someone as exciting. I've met lots and lots of public figures here,

and several prime ministers, but he's probably impressed me more than any of them."

There is no doubt, says Milne, that Luca is an interesting bloke. "He doesn't suffer fools gladly, but he tries not to be rude. He cares a lot about the people at the bottom of the heap and has a sense of social justice."

THE DEEPER PROBLEM

In the early days of Covid, Milne and Luca wrote a paper together, arguing that the

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virus was airborne. Luca claims this was well before health officials came to the same conclusion.

"I looked at other infectious diseases, such as influenza, and noticed there was a 30-year debate about how that was transmitted. But the jury's in – it's airborne. If you compare influenza and Covid molecules, they're the same size and density. So, if [influenza] can float and travel, then why not Covid?"

He tried to get his views across in the

local media, but soon found that everyone else thought they were experts, too. "I've encountered the full brunt of this thinking – that everyone is a virologist, an epidemiologist," he says, shaking his head.

It proves, however, that people can trust him to do the right thing, he says. "I nailed it in April 2020 – a guy from a provincial outpost with a microbiologist mate. We also advised our communities to use N95 masks. So what would I bring to the mayoralty? An ability to make the right conclusions, to make good decisions."

Luca would like to have seen New Zealand lock down earlier during the pandemic, but he is glad we managed to keep Covid at bay until most people were vaccinated. The deeper problem, he says, is capitalism, which he believes is to blame for insufficient supplies of personal protective equipment. "It won't allow you to have a stockpile. We have a medical system that is 'just in time and just enough'."

He finds it scandalous that about a third of Kiwis have private medical insurance, creating a two-tier health system. And in case there is any doubt about his politics, he follows Michael Moore, Bernie Sanders and John Pilger on Twitter.

Many scientists aren't averse to political discussions. Yet it must be said that local government isn't exactly teeming with experts in nuclear chemistry.



IVORY TOWERS

Luca suggests that his peers are conspicuous by their absence “in all political circles” in New Zealand.

“It always amazes me about politics that it’s the only job you really need no qualification for – or it doesn’t matter. You’ve got people that take on the portfolios of health that have no training in the health area. That seems incongruous to me.”

Yet he also thinks mayors have more reach than most of them make of it. “Mayors can have influence and hopefully make changes for the better and help their communities,” he says. “Scientists are a meek lot and inhabit their ivory towers, but I think this is something I’ve communicated quite effectively to the community via our local newspapers. I’ve spent 30 years thinking, learning how to think and learning how to learn – and I’m still learning.”

Former New Zealand First MP Brendan Horan was at primary and high school with Luca in Whakatāne in the late 60s and early 70s and knows him well. He jokes that he still boasts that he had similar science grades to Luca in what is now called Year 9. “Unfortunately, during my other school years, I thought surfing was much more fun than studying hard.”

The pair have reconnected in the past few years. Horan, who these days is a business and court mediator and singer, speaks of Luca’s heart and warmth as well as his intellect. “I’m very proud of him and his love for Whakatāne,” he says. “The

man’s got more degrees than a Fahrenheit thermometer. He could be anywhere in the world, but he chose here.”

Horan sees Luca as well rounded. “For all his intellect and his manaakitanga, he’ll go out fishing and knows how to fillet a fish. He’s a man’s man,” he says. “He’s not a chained-behind-the-desk academic. He’s broad-minded and looks at all the angles. Some people can’t see the wood for the trees, but he sees through the branches, he sees the ecosystems. He’s a classic big thinker.”

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He does, however, think that Luca may not have quite appreciated the daily grind of being a councillor until he became one himself. In hindsight, he thinks the fact that Luca came second in the mayoral race in 2019 counts as a positive, enabling him to see how the council ticks.

According to Milne, Luca is also an impressive golfer – even though he only took up the game about a year ago. The man himself begs to differ, but admits he now plays three or four days a week.

“I’m really bad,” he insists. “I only play with friends because I don’t want to embarrass myself. But I’m enjoying it. I tell people I’m a professional golfer now, but only by virtue of the time I spend on the golf course.”

Presumably, as mayor, he wouldn’t be spending quite so much time on the greens. After all, there is much he wants to do.

One of the first things Luca did as a councillor was to promote the construction of a solar farm. “A majority of people put their hands up, but then nothing happens. I find that frustrating. We like to promote our district as the sunniest one, but all we use the sun for is to get sunburnt, and a lot of us end up in hospital with carcinomas.”

He also wants to drive through environmental approaches that take into account the environmental impact of a product or project over its lifetime. “I’m trying to bring this thinking to the council. We’re embarking on a project to do with the boat harbour in Whakatāne, but I question the environmental benefits of it.”

He’ll return from Argentina in July, before mayoral nominations are due, and have another good crack at it, standing on a platform of climate, environment, science and education. “I’ve earned my stripes,” he says. “My first campaign proved there is some appreciation out there for science.”

If politics is, as he says, a job requiring no qualifications, then it seems he is uniquely unqualified – in the best possible way. ■