

Leader's Letter



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October was the second windiest month in Wellington for 40 years, with 60% more rain than usual. There are icebergs off the Otago coast, and Al Gore has been in town giving a live presentation of his movie on the imminent demise of the planet unless we curb carbon emissions. So is all this evidence of human activity affecting climate change, or just some periodic adverse weather conditions coming our way?

It is the classic dilemma – especially for a modern centre party like United Future. On the one hand, we are rightly sceptical about joining the latest bandwagon, and taking a whole lot of actions that are symbolic but otherwise utterly meaningless in support of the cause. On the other hand, we must not ignore the scientific data. Whatever we do, our responses must be credible and achievable.

The evidence is now clear, and close to incontrovertible, that climate change is taking place. What has been suspected with increasing intensity since the late 1980s - that the build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere was a building crisis - is now confirmed. So the question becomes what can a small nation like New Zealand do about it.

Our carbon emissions levels are insignificant on the world stage, and our response of itself will be similarly insignificant. But it is important we do what we can, in concert with other like-minded countries. And because climate change issues transcend political divisions, it is important that our actions are broadly based and non-partisan, so that they continue whoever the government of the day in the future may be.

That was the mistake Labour made when ratifying the Kyoto Protocol ahead of many of our trading partners, and attempting to introduce an ill-considered carbon tax that it could not get support for, and was ultimately forced to abandon.

What is important in the wake of the recent Nairobi Conference, where the Climate Change Minister announced the government would be unveiling its climate change strategy soon, is that the same mistake is not repeated.

Every party in Parliament has or is working on comprehensive climate change policies. Therefore, the logical thing for the government to do is convene a climate change summit to get multi-party agreement on the way forward, so that the

measures New Zealand ultimately puts in place are politically as well as environmentally sustainable. No single party has a mortgage on the truth on climate change – all have a positive contribution to make, and the government should encourage that through convening a multiparty summit as soon as possible.

It is probably going to take more than a summit to resolve the Auckland stadium issue, though. An iconic waterfront stadium still has its supporters, but do not discount a late run by the North Shore stadium. This is seen in some quarters as an increasingly more attractive option than the rather staid alternative of Eden Park.

Whatever the outcome, the blunt truth is that neither Auckland nor the rest of the country should ever have ended up in this position.

The stadium issue should have been sorted out at the time the original application to host the Rugby World Cup was made, and it is not for central government to come charging in now, posing as an expert on stadium placement, design and construction. They are local decisions to be made locally.

The rest of the country has enjoyed the Spectacle of Auckland being called on to make a unified decision. While the decision is theirs to make, the government should have anticipated this need and focused on its role of making sure the legislative and other tools were in place to ensure Auckland's eventual choice would not be bogged down by planning or funding restrictions.

Recent events in Tonga, though horrific, are not all that surprising.

In the last Parliament I chaired the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into New Zealand's relations with Tonga. It was clear from the evidence we heard then that the situation was very fragile.

While there was tremendous respect for the late King, the same did not extend to other members of the Royal Family. So, once he had

died, it seemed only a matter of time before the tensions about the slow path to democratic reform spilled over in the way they have done with such tragic consequences.

New Zealand cannot now shrink from a decisive role in helping resolve the situation. A starting point should be the implementation of the recommendations contained in the select committee's report which will help towards the ongoing economic viability of Tonga.

At the same time, our government needs to engage actively with the Tongan government about democratic reform, and the constitutional and political infrastructure needed to bring that about. If we fail to act, or are seen to have failed to act, we help create a power vacuum and an aura of regional instability for countries like China to exploit to our collective detriment.

My comments about the "undie run" in Christchurch secondary schools have attracted national and even international interest, especially when an unnamed staff member in my office suggested my interest may have been sparked by having taken part in similar events when a Christchurch secondary school student myself.

Well, sorry to disappoint anyone who thought that might be the case, but we did not have such things in those far-gone days. Streaking was more fashionable, which leaves the undie run looking pretty tame by comparison.

Hi jinks and a bit of frivolity go hand in hand with the end of school life, and there is nothing wrong with that. School principals simply make themselves look silly and undermine their long-term authority and credibility as educators, when they over-react, as has happened here.

In the long term, public respect for educators is far more important than a few kids letting off steam in an undie run.

No sooner had I written those comments than I received a remarkable, threatening and

bullying e-mail from the Headmaster of Christ's College, which really serves to prove my point.

Releasing e-mails seems to be the current vogue, so I am releasing his tirade in full herewith:

Dear Mr Dunne

I write as a courtesy to let you know I will be referring to your recent expressed views in "The Press" about young people visiting other schools when I give addresses in many contexts in the future. There is a certain expectation on most occasions that I can find humour in aspects of my work, and your pontification is a fertile resource!

Your references to 'political correctness' were as cliched as they were irrelevant to the issue. I suspect you have distanced yourself from every secondary school principal in Christchurch and probably elsewhere, almost the entire parental community, a significant majority of students, not to mention the Police. A splendid achievement.

When the activity referred to results in a serious road traffic accident, or personal injury, as it surely will, I trust the fatuous remarks of a Cabinet Minister in 2006 will be faithfully reported.

Yours sincerely

*Simon Leese
Headmaster*

All I can say is that I think I now understand why undie runs are so popular at Christ's College!

Have a great weekend.

Peter Dunne