**Q + A**

**Episode 8**

**SHANE JONES**

**Interviewed by Jessica Mutch McKay**

**JESSICA** Joining me now from Kerikeri, regional economic development minister Shane Jones. Thank you for being with me this evening, Minister.

**SHANE** Kia ora.

**JESSICA** Let’s start off by that question from the farmer. It’s not something we ask you very often, but have you thought about the negative impacts of planting a billion trees on some of those communities?

**SHANE** Well, look, there is a lot of apocryphal fable making going around. We are in the business of allocating $120 million dollars for purposes of forestry grants, targeted primarily on land which is erodible – on red-zone, on orange-zone land, for want of a better expression. I accept that there are some dangers in terms of the wrong tree in the wrong place at the wrong time, but actually our mantra is the opposite, and I’ve just had all the farming leaders into my office, where I’ve undertaken to work with them to ensure that inadvertently I don’t inundate the countryside with trees, but the majority of the money that’s been put aside for working with landowners is actually for native trees.

**JESSICA** But isn’t that the whole point? I mean, you label yourself the champion of the regions, if it’s hurting those small communities?

**SHANE** Yeah, I think you’re asking a good question, but can I offer the riposte in this fashion? If we’re to meet the costs of climate change, then one transitional measure is expanding the size of the nation’s lung. Now, farmers themselves, I’m told, they don’t want a carbon tax. They want to work with the Crown and have a mixed model. I accept that some farms are going into trees, but, you know, farmers can’t have it both ways. They insist that their private property rights are sacrosanct and they should be allowed to sell their land to who they like. If I’ve had that lecture once, I’ve had it a thousand times. I don’t believe that the Billion Tree strategy is denuding the farming community of land. In fact, over the last 10 years, Jess, 70,000ha of land went from forestry to farming. 2017, about 3000ha has come from farming back into forestry, so I don’t buy into the exaggerated claims that the Billion Tree strategy is destroying the Wairarapa economy.

**JESSICA** One of the other concerns that was raised in this story is about the OIO, the Overseas Investment Office, and softening the rules around that. Why have you done that?

**SHANE** That’s a very good question. So, well over 70% of the forest estate is already owned by international investors. When we formed the government, what are we to do? We’re not going to nationalise those investments. That horse bolted a long time ago. So what we’ve done is build a primrose path, because in order to achieve the Billion Tree strategy, we will plant some of the trees with the putea via the Provincial Growth Fund, about 500 million for a variety of purposes, and then we want to ease the process--

**JESSICA** But people will just see this as subsidising those foreign investors, won’t they?

**SHANE** I don’t know of a single foreign investor who has received a grant from Te Uru Rakau. I know of foreign investors who have sold to other foreigners. Now, there may be some farms that are being sold internationally, and they go through the OIO process, and, you’re right, the OIO process has been simplified for forestry purposes, but at the same time, we have tightened up the amount of land that can be sold without you requiring the permit. There are other areas in the Overseas Investment writ, such as mining, which I am very disappointed by, and forestry is a simplification, but mining has suffered. And I will have more to say about that later.

**JESSICA** You simplifying. It’s softening, though, isn’t it? Let’s not mince our words.

**SHANE** No, I mean, we’ve got some criteria, Jess, that the new investors, if they are going to take over existing forests or plant new forests, the expectation is they’ll make the material available, the fibre available, for New Zealand-owned businesses’ processes, secondary and tertiary. And I put it back to you. If trees are going to be a key ingredient in enabling New Zealand to meet this enormous carbon-- climate change impost, where are we going to get the money from? The money’s not just going to come from the Crown. The cockies themselves have said they don’t have money to meet all of their carbon emissions, so it’s a mixture of the ETS, Te Uru Rakau and, obviously, subject to OIO approval, international investment.

**JESSICA** I want to switch topics now. One of the things you’ve been questioned about this week is around NZTA. We’ve got a situation where a company has been asked by authorities to get off the roads. You’ve stepped in as the Associate Transport Minister. You know the owner, and you’ve meddled in that. That’s inappropriate behaviour, isn’t it?

**SHANE** Well, I do think the issues surrounding NZTA have become a matter of political pinball in Parliament, but in actual fact, I think it’s largely beltway trivia. I’ve had absolutely nothing to do with any prosecution ever. I have nothing to do with NZTA.

**JESSICA** But it’s not trivia, though, in fairness, Minister.

**SHANE** Never have and never will.

**JESSICA** But if you’re stepping in, Minister, on behalf of not only people who donate to your party, but you have a distant family connection as well. That’s not appropriate for a minister, is it?

**SHANE** Yeah, but you see, you’re repeating yet again this falsification being trotted out in Parliament. I have never once interfered with a prosecution, and I totally reject the notion that I have. I am the first citizen of the provinces, and I’ve continued to raise existential issues that pertain to the provinces, and if it’s necessary for me from time to time to raise those with an independent body, the public expect me to do that.

**JESSICA** But as a minister, that blurs the lines, doesn’t it, when you have personal connections with those people?

**SHANE** Look, I hear what you’re saying, but I really feel you’re repeating uncritically more of this political pinball pettifogging that is totally irrelevant to what I hear in the regions. Any person that is involved in a court case, whether it’s fisheries, forestry or any other element in the New Zealand economy, they can look after themselves. That’s their business. That’s why democracy requires the high court, where people can check whether or not the exercise in power is in compliance with statutes and people have their day in court, and if they win or lose, that’s their business.

**JESSICA** Let’s move on to the topic of the latest poll. 4% for New Zealand First, that’s pretty disappointing, isn’t it?

**SHANE** Well, look, we never discuss these polling matters in our caucus, and my rangatira, Winston Peters, he has constantly reminded us that the poll that counts is the poll at the end of next year, and for small parties, they do ebb and flow over the life of a three-year political reign, and whether or not we’re up and down, bobbing around, judgement day will come in late 2020, and we’ll gladly put our credentials out in terms of the mahi that we’ve done in the provinces and the role that we have played.

**JESSICA** But is it hard to be yourselves, though, when you’re in government? It’s hard to play that renegade card that New Zealand First so likes to do.

**SHANE** Yeah, but, Jess, I’m often criticised myself as being something of an internal element of opposition within the government. The reality is that we have an obligation to maintain a level of coherence, but we’re never going to agree on everything. For example, I do not agree with the current sluggishness associated with the Overseas Investment Office being unwilling to approve things that are in the extractive sector. I don’t know why it take so long. I’m a champion of the regions, and I think that there is a great role for the extractive sector in regional New Zealand.

**JESSICA** What do you mean by that? Do you mean more mining?

**SHANE** And I’m entitled to have that view, and I’ll continue to say that.

**JESSICA** What do you mean by that?

**SHANE** Well, I’m a pro-mining MP. I’m pro-fishing. I’m pro-farming. I’m pro-forestry. I’m from a pro-industry party. My leader, for example, has always been a great supporter of aquaculture. And where international investment opens up new vistas, that’s classic New Zealand First policy.

**JESSICA** All right, Minister, we will have to leave it there. But I very much appreciate your time tonight.

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