

Speech to Philanthropy New Zealand Annual Conference

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Passion and Pragmatism

Thank you. Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge the organisers, in particular Robyn Scott, for their own passion and pragmatism. Providing a place for this type of dialogue is critical, and thank you again for your policy work on charitable donations, for which organisations like Sustainable Future are very grateful.

Secondly, I would like to start by reporting back on my take-home from yesterday's presentations. What was clear to me was that if the Prime Minister considers there are limits to what the government can do, and Jennifer Gill believes philanthropy is the venture capital of social change; then this underlines the importance of philanthropy for public good research. What you do, once you leave the conference, really matters. So before I even start on my personal story and the story of Sustainable Future – I wish you 'good luck' and 'thank you'.

Passion and pragmatism are inspiring words. Passion is feeling strongly about a subject. Pragmatism is a practical, matter-of-fact way of approaching situations and solving problems. Combined, they unleash sheer determination and a way forward.

So why do I give? Seven reasons:

1. Because I get mad. Life can be very tough and very unfair. Bad things do happen to good people.
2. Because I can't sit on the sidelines and see a train crash. I cry in sad movies!
3. Because I can afford to give – both time and money. I have worked hard, my husband has worked hard, but we have worked hard doing work we enjoyed and our capital is a by-product, not the end product. We do not have lots, but we have enough to give some back.
4. Because New Zealand invested in me. When I went through university, the government paid all my fees and even contributed to my food and rent.

5. Because New Zealand is my home. My ancestors arrived in New Zealand just over 150 years ago. My family has lived and died through pandemics, gold rushes, land wars, Māori partnership, world wars, and depressions. I am a King Country girl who became an accountant.
6. Because I have children, nieces and nephews, friends, other New Zealanders, other citizens of the world, animals, birds, sea life – all of whom will go on living after me.
7. Because I have an idea – and it just might work.

My idea is a national strategy ... but there are obstacles

Society is made up of specialists, we do not spend enough time looking for trends and interconnections, we do not spend enough time listening, discussing, thinking or reconsidering the important issues of our time. We are simply too busy. We jump from one crisis to another. We are not creative enough with our economic models. We do not applaud attempts, only successful attempt. We lack critical thinking. We lack critical information.

The idea: a national strategy was to create a way forward that considers the many issues facing society. This is not about central control, but a strategy that sets the scene for people to work together – or work separately – towards a vision built on consensus and creative thinking. We do not want group think!

Julius Vogel provides an excellent example of leadership in New Zealand during a time of crisis. In the late 1860s, New Zealand had been in a depressed state for over three years; farmers were receiving low prices for their wool and wheat, and gold production had declined. Net immigration was not encouraging, and the situation presented an enormous challenge to the government. In response, Vogel promised a plan.

In February 1870, Julius Vogel, largely working on his own, presented a budget to government that was both simple and ambitious. It was a scheme to increase the population and revolutionise communications, including the building of roads and railways. In 1893, Vogel acknowledged a further purpose, which was to bring peace; the scheme did ‘more to put an end to hostilities and to confirm peaceful relations with Māori, than an army of ten thousand men’. At a time of crisis, Vogel’s plan got

the country working again. Importantly, Vogel's strategy was a big leap from the past. He showed resolve and remained focused on the long term.

The mechanism: a think tank

So how do we make a national strategy happen? In 2000 I was a chartered accountant that had worked in the public and private sector, had specialised in risk management, and was concerned about the growing problems across many fronts – economic equity, environmental degradation, poor decisions about the use of public funds – and I was looking for a way to respond. More importantly, I was looking for a model. After years of thinking and discussing this idea with friends, I found the answer was just under my nose – literally.

In my house, a 2001 Nigel Brown painting shows three native birds that live together at the bottom of the South Island – the native owl, the wood pigeon and the hawk. Mark (my husband) and I would be the wood pigeon, the experts (such as Morgan Williams and Guy Salmon) the owls, and the hawks – well, they are graduates. They are nimble, quick and have loads of energy. Interestingly, I had fallen for the painting because it said: 'If the wild bird inside you could cry out' – so in many ways the scene was set – it just took me a few years to match my passion with my pragmatism.



At Sustainable Future, we believe that think tanks have enormous potential to identify and explore complex issues, and to inform the public about them. As such, it is important that their role is understood and effectively utilised and nurtured. Our latest think piece, *Think Tanks: New Zealand's Own 'Ideas Factories'* was written for you as a take-away, to raise awareness of their value in challenging times. We identify thirteen New Zealand think tanks and summarise their areas of focus. Copies of this and our previous think piece, *Magnifying Hope and Reducing Fear*, are available on the table outside.

Over the last few months, we have read and heard a lot about the economic crisis. An economist put it this way: we are either heading for a V curve or an L curve, being a recession or a depression. Put another way: if your neighbour is made redundant, it's a recession; if you're made redundant, it's a depression. Whether it's a recession or a depression, it is what happens to you and your family that will determine your experience. Fortunes are made and lost in recessions, and poor countries can become wealthy. The crisis is the opportunity – everything is up for grabs.

Think tanks can add value. We tend to focus more on asking new questions than answering old questions. At Sustainable Future, we are currently asking:

What are the underlying implications of the recession?

Jennifer Gill started the ball rolling when she began to talk about *Income Down, Demand Up*. The unintended consequences of this downturn will be significant, but what are the opportunities?

Past experience tells us that:

Family matters.

Safety is paramount.

Trust is essential.

New Zealanders will return home. But will we need more police, more nurses, more mental health support? Some of the implications may mean families spend more time together around the kitchen table, going on camping holidays, having picnics and barbecues, baking, sewing, going to fresh food markets – suddenly this sounds like fun. Winning industries are likely to be movie theatres, pubs, and supermarkets.

I got this point when James Lovelock, originator of the Gaia theory, which describes Earth as a self-regulating planet, talked about the Second World War: In answer to the question; 'If you were younger, would you be fearful?' - He replied:

No, I have been through this kind of emotional thing before. It reminds me of when I was 19 and the Second World War broke out. We were very frightened but almost everyone was so much happier. We're much better equipped to deal with that kind of thing than long periods of peace. It's not all bad when things get rough. I'll be 90 in July, I'm a lot closer to death than you, but I'm not worried. I'm looking forward to being 100. (*New Scientist*, Jan, 2009)

So the questions we are considering include:

1. What crisis is the recession hiding?

Crises can become fashionable and distracting. Is the recession becoming fashionable, and if so, what are we not thinking and talking about? We've had the threat of nuclear wars, pandemics, Martians landing, Y2K - but are we putting our time and energy into the right crisis? Are we thinking hard enough?

For example, what happened to the looming global food crisis - last year? In April 2008, the Washington Post did a five-day spread on the globe's worst food crisis in a generation. One billion people living on less than a dollar a day. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization considered 37 countries to be in crisis due to the rise in food prices, meaning they likely lack the capacity to deal with critical problems such as food shortages, hunger and civil turmoil.¹ Are those people no longer starving? While developed countries focus on themselves, what global problems are in the making?

¹ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/gallery/2008/04/26/GA2008042601665.html?sid=ST2008042602333>

2. What is under everyone's nose that no one is seeing?

We can see the lights of the truck coming towards us, but can we see what is happening a few feet away – in the dark? How can we turn on the light, even a little, to understand the big picture? Climate change is a case in point. Which is more important: climate change or the recession? Leaders should be focusing on the important, rather than the urgent. James Lovelock again, in response to the question 'Are we doomed?' replied:

There is one way we could save ourselves and that is through the massive burial of charcoal. It would mean farmers turning all their agricultural waste – which contains carbon that the plants have spent the summer sequestering – into non-biodegradable charcoal, and burying it in the soil. Then you can start shifting really hefty quantities of carbon out of the system and pull the CO2 down quite fast. (New Scientist, Jan, 2009)

3. What should we be doing?

More importantly, how can we deliver New Zealand to a better place – a more robust, resilient, just and fair country? In our view that requires a clear understanding of all the problems and all the opportunities – and it needs a national strategy.

Sustainable Future's three-year project is to explore New Zealand's long-term future – and put forward a plan. This could be described as brave, arrogant or stupid – but it is what I'm driven to do. I will feel better having a go and failing than not having a go.- Not giving it a go – would be the failure.

At Sustainable Future, we are a think tank committed to exploring New Zealand's long-term future. Thank you.

Attachments:

Think Piece 8: *Magnifying Hope and Reducing Fear*

Think Piece 9: *Think Tanks: New Zealand's Own 'Ideas Factories'*

See http://www.sustainablefuture.info/Site/Publications/Think_Pieces.aspx