



knowledge
wave2003
the leadership forum

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21 February 2003

*Presentation to Knowledge Wave 2003 - the Leadership Forum
February 2003*

"Presentation also available on Forum website - www.knowledgewave.org.nz"

LEADERS' FORUM NEW ZEALAND SNAPSHOT – COMMUNITY

Anne Salmond February 2003

E aku rangatira, tena koutou.

The islands of New Zealand, set in the world's largest ocean, are one of the last places on earth to have been discovered and inhabited by people. The Polynesian seafarers came here at about 1250; Abel Tasman arrived less than 400 years later. Human history here is recent, founded by 'travelling cultures' from the Pacific, Europe and Asia. People have come to these glorious islands to make a new life for themselves; to build new families, communities and ways of living. This restless, experimental spirit, and our remote, insular location may help to account for some striking paradoxes in social life in New Zealand.

The paradox of a small, intimate society, with a highly fragmented social order.

- This observation is usually made about the business sector, where firms are characteristically very small. Only 4% of New Zealand firms employ more than 19 staff, and only 2% more than 50.
- In fact, though, the same pattern can be found across a surprising array of sectors.
- Governmental structures are also highly fragmented. There are 43 Government departments in New Zealand, and about 100 Crown entities, compared with 21 Government departments in Britain, for example.
- This is also true of the Maori community, which is organised into a large number of iwi, and a myriad of small hapuu and whaanau.
- The voluntary sector is also split into many small units, with 35,000 societies and charitable trusts; and their number is increasing.
- Tertiary education is also fragmented. We have more than 800 tertiary education institutions, for a country the size of Sydney.

On the face of it, the way we organise ourselves looks remarkably atomistic. In so small a society, this is quite puzzling. Perhaps it is because of the pioneering spirit, carving your own group (business, voluntary organisation, PTE) out of the wilderness; the spread of a small population across two long islands; or perhaps lack of leadership that brings people together across social boundaries, creating networks and critical mass in collective activity.

Where groups are linked by densely overlapping membership and active networks, they can generate trust, shared experience and knowledge. Most sports, many schools and churches work in this way, enriching our society; and hours worked for voluntary groups in New Zealand are actually growing – we're a good-hearted lot, on the whole. A mosaic of small groups may also suit the 'creative classes,' with their penchant for flexibility and diversity. But if groups act as isolates, they can generate social division and fracture, building barriers rather than networks, and diverting effort and limited resources into running a myriad of small, competing organisations.

Here is a challenge for leaders in this country – how can we co-operate more effectively across sectors and boundaries? How to grow successful small groups to a larger scale, building strong and active networks between them?

The paradox of a nation of migrants with relatively high rates of intermarriage, yet with sharply defined ethnic boundaries.

Despite the fact that all groups of New Zealanders have been in these islands for a relatively short timespan, compared with most other societies in the world, we share their tendency to talk about ethnicity in primordial terms. ‘Maori’ and ‘Pakeha,’ for example, are often talked about as timeless, distinct and mutually exclusive populations, rather than as historical constructs. With the arrival of a new wave of migrants from Polynesia, and latterly from Asia and many other parts of the world, other ethnic categories are in the process of being set in concrete.

Intermarriage, which confounds ethnic boundaries, is treated as an anomaly, despite its high rate of occurrence. In everyday life, a child with a Maori or Pacific parent is typically treated as a Maori or Pacific Islander, with their other affections and loyalties being sidelined and disregarded. Why should we treat our children this way? Why not let them feel proud of all of their identities and heritages?

Although in many respects, New Zealand is becoming a ‘creole’ society, with hybridity a key characteristic, we are still uneasy and clumsy in the way we deal with plural identities. Ethnic categories, if they are defined too rigidly and policed too harshly, can encourage individuals to treat others as alien forms of life, undeserving of empathy and respect, and those dynamics are visible amongst us.

Yet cultural diversity can also be a source of social riches, making life much more vital and exciting. You can see this creative power at work in the arts in this country – in cuisine, fashion, painting, dance, theatre, literature and film, producing marvellous outcomes. Its also characteristic of sport in New Zealand. Why not unlock its potential, not just in the arts, but in everyday life, business and the professions?

Which brings me to the next paradox:

The paradox of a society with a strong egalitarian ethos, yet with striking inequalities in life chances for its citizens.

In New Zealand, there is a strong egalitarian ideal, which works a contradictory fashion. Sometimes, it manifests itself as a bent towards conformity, resulting in ruthless ‘one size fits all’ policies and institutions, a drive towards the lowest common denominator and a distaste for success (except in sport, of course) which leads to quite spectacular ‘crab antics.’ On other occasions, it reveals itself a sense of fair play and decency, which enriches civic life. Most Kiwis would agree, for instance, that every child in this country

should have a fair chance of making a good life for themselves, as their birthright. That is not what is happening at present, however.

Almost one in five students in this country leave secondary school without any formal qualifications, but the figure for those counted as Maori is one in three; while for Pacific Islanders it is one in four. Education correlates strongly with economic success, with university qualifications yielding a 42% privilege in life-long earnings over all other tertiary qualifications. It is thus not surprising to discover that the median income for Maori is just 80%, and for Pacific people just 78% of other workers, and that the unemployment rate for Pacific people is twice, and for Maori three times higher than that of Europeans, although fortunately, these gaps are closing.

Pacific Islanders and Maori have higher fertility rates than other New Zealanders, lower life expectancy, and a younger age structure. According to recent projections, by 2050, 57% of all New Zealand children will be Maori or Pacific Islanders; and 68% will be non-European. This means that as the baby boomers move out of the work-force, they will find themselves relying upon an increasingly 'Maori' and 'Pacific' cohort of younger workers to support them.

It is thus in everybody's interests that all young people should acquire good skills in literacy and numeracy, and that those with particular intellectual and creative gifts should be encouraged and enabled to aspire to higher education. This graph, however, shows sharply inequitable outcomes in compulsory schooling. Of the third formers who entered various high schools in Auckland, it shows how many gained an A or B bursary (show graph: *Knowledge Wave with Undertow*).

Challenges— The fate of the bottom 20% of our children should be put at the top of our list of national priorities. How about setting a national goal of halving the number of children who leave school without any formal qualification? Let's put superb teachers in front of these children, and release their creative potential. Why shouldn't the Ministry actively support experimental schools, for example Susan Baragwanath's school for teenage mothers in Lower Hutt, with its 100% passrate in Bursary, and its philosophy of rigour, high standards, accountability and no bullshit? Why not establish a major competitive fund to support and rapidly grow initiatives which successfully transform educational outcomes for these children, and give them access to higher education? What other innovative approaches might help us to create a sustainable pool of human capital?

Which brings me directly to the last paradox:

The paradox of a 'young' society, with an aging population which is harsh on its young.

As recent reports have made abundantly clear, New Zealand has a poor record by OECD standards in caring for its children. Child poverty has soared, fuelled by earlier economic reforms and child benefits which (unlike superannuation) are not indexed to the cost of living. 29% of our children experience low living standards, compared with 7% of those

aged over 65. Babies from homes with the lowest incomes suffer poor health; they are five times more likely to be admitted to hospital than those from well-off families. Third World diseases are increasingly sharply in New Zealand, leaving many of their victims permanently incapacitated. Rates for child mortality, deaths from child abuse, teenage pregnancy and suicide are high. Too many of our children are suffering.

Child poverty translates into poor educational performance, high offending rates, severe health problems in adulthood, high rates of unemployment and reliance on welfare, and low incomes. A vicious circle is underway, with devastating consequences. What can one say about an aging society which does not care for its children? Is our social structure so fragmented that we are stripped of empathy, and conscience?

At present, we resolutely ignore gross disparities in educational achievement in our schools, as though they were inevitable. In secondary education, rocketing exam charges deter children from low income families from completing qualifications. In tertiary education, policy-makers congratulate themselves on rising rates of Maori and Pacific participation, although most of this is in short-term training courses, rather than the degrees which lead to high income jobs and the professions. When a student loan scheme was introduced in this country, it was more punitive than the loan scheme across the Tasman (let alone the UK), for instance, sending many fledgling professionals overseas to repay their student loans, just as the baby boomers world-wide are retiring.

An aging society that does not take care of its young has a death wish. How can we devise a concerted strategy to better the lot of our children? Why not index child benefits to the cost of living? Should we introduce a tertiary scholarship scheme on the Canadian model, for young people from low and medium income families? What about relief on student loans for graduates who stay and contribute in areas of skill shortages, citizenship for high achieving international students, or job placement for skilled expatriates? The question I'm posing is stark – if we want a prosperous knowledge economy, where is the human capital going to come from?

Visionary leadership can transform the future. New Zealand is a beautiful country, with a diverse, exciting social life, and a gift for successful innovation. In a small, innovative society, almost anything is possible. Let's tackle child poverty, which is crippling the future for too many of our children. Our education system should be the best in the world, from top to bottom – we can do this. Let's ensure that young Maori and Pacific people are prepared for high income jobs and the professions. At present, money is being poured into short-term training courses, preparing them for low income futures. Given current demographic trends, this is folly. And let's enjoy the cultural diversity of our nation, releasing its creative potential. As leaders, it is our task to deal with these issues wisely and well, so that our children and their children may live together in these glorious islands in peace and prosperity.

E aku rangatira, he aha te mea nui o tenei ao? Maku e kii atu, he tamariki, he tamariki, a taatou tamariki!

Leaders, where does the future lie? In our children.

KNOWLEDGE WAVE WITH UNDERTOW: AUCKLAND SCHOOLS
 (Source: MSE Taskforce, University of Auckland).

Decile 10 schools have the highest socio-economic status students; decile 1 the lowest.

