

Grant McLachlan: Stop feeding the monster

By Grant McLachlan

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The new Government has promised to review all spending under its control. What it should also consider is the size of the industry recommending the changes.

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus once said that "the only constant is change". In New Zealand, the growth of civil servants and consultants advising government departments has grown at a greater rate than the Government's budget.



What's scary is that the government sector has seen growth greater than the economy. The two major parties in the past have been so diametrically opposed that changes have been frequent. New Governments have tried to make considerable changes during their first term and struggled to find uses for those extra staff for the rest of their period in office.

One of the arguments in favour of MMP was to involve more collaboration to smooth the tug-o-war changes between Labour and National-led Governments. Five MMP elections later, the number of people advising those decisionmakers has gobbled up chunks of Government surpluses.

Steve Maharey gained his profile by slamming a "culture of extravagance" within the Welfare Ministry. I once asked him whether his ministry had an exit strategy should he place all the unemployed into jobs.

His response was brief: "No." Two terms into his charge the country supposedly had the lowest unemployment in recent memory and yet the welfare budget continued to grow.

An administrative body needs the right incentives to achieve its goals. There is no point asking civil servants to plan their redundancy.

The worst part of our political system is its antagonism with the economic cycle. The last election saw the Labour-led Government booted out over red tape and waste during a period of considerable economic and government growth. The National-led Government inherited a bloated government sector at a time of imminent economic strife.

The last time our economy was this bad was after the 1987 crash. The political ramifications of economic reforms during worsening economic conditions meant the Government carried the can. As former US President Woodrow Wilson said: "If you want to make enemies, change something."

The risk that you run when making too many changes is that it creates an industry that tries to be self-sustaining.

The Resource Management Act and local government reforms were passed during a recession. While both reforms were meant to deregulate and streamline processes, those involved in the processes have

managed to build a self-feeding monster.

Local governments say they have inherited more responsibility from central government regulations including "uniform" infrastructure, resource management and building codes. Why then is there so much inconsistency between the councils when trying to achieve similar goals?

Councils are often run by managers and elected officials who try to justify their existence. What looks better on a CV than a growing organisation? And what gets you re-elected – an arts festival or a sewage plant?

The growth of local government has resulted in fewer people taking responsibility. Unpopular decisions are often delegated to independent reviews, reports or committees.

The biggest problem I see in my industry is the self-interest of those advising local government. Why would a consultant planner try to streamline a district plan if it reduced their potential work? Recently, a planner quadrupled the size of a district plan and was recognised for "significant contributions" to the "practice of planning".

The differences between council processes can be vastly different. I've worked with one council which had a town planner authorised to make decisions. Another council only allowed a committee to make decisions while a third used big city consultants who made recommendations to a committee.

The town planner could give you a straight answer, the second council's staff shied away from giving any answers, and the consultants for the third council would be the ones asking superfluous questions.

The result of such disparity in accountability by the three councils is inconsistency of decision-making, a lack of transparency and increased risks. Time, cost and quality are the victims.

Councils lacking direction are breeding grounds for parasites. I've watched top lawyers and landscape architects take almost two years to design a poplar hedge between two neighbours.

I am disgusted by central and local government organisations' inability to rein in consultants who drag out processes during the economic downturn. What took one month during the building boom now for some reason takes more than six months.

Merging and purging of the civil sector will result in splurging by civil servants if they aren't given the right incentives to deliver value to those paying their salaries. The risk of not doing so is an industry of consultants larger than the civil servants they replaced.

*** Grant McLachlan is a planner and lawyer.**

By Grant McLachlan

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Grant McLachlan: Planning disasters – there's been a few

By Grant McLachlan

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Among the buzz words to be thrown around in 2009, one will be "infrastructure". While words like "economic meltdown" and "recession" will make our shoulders sink, "infrastructure" will be to our Government what "change" is to Barack Obama.

But it shouldn't be seen as the cure for everything.

It would be a prudent to learn from our mistakes.

So here are what I consider to be the biggest planning disasters in New Zealand's history. They are disasters because they are irreversible due to costs. As one mayor once said to a developer: "The only thing that will improve this town are 12 bulldozers side by side heading down the main street."

Auckland is not included in this list because, technically, Auckland was not a "planned city" and, fortunately, there have been no major mistakes yet – it's just it's taken forever to get any infrastructure built. It's now time for Auckland to learn from the rest of the country.

1. The Resource Management Act 1991

Hot on the heels of merging councils in the 1980s came a "simpler, more consistent, less regulated, effects-based regime" focused on sustaining natural and physical resources.

Ironically, the act resulted in the opposite of its intentions.

Development has been sporadic and opportunist as the deregulated void was filled by bureaucrats and consultants. No matter how effective the Government's proposed changes are, it will take decades to fix the damage done.

2. Wellington

Wellington is a disaster waiting to happen. If an earthquake or tsunami doesn't cripple the capital, the weather will have a go. The airport runway has wind shears at either end, the ferry navigates treacherous waters and the road and rail arteries are straddled by erosion-prone slopes.

The politicians who chose Wellington as our capital in 1865 must have been sadists.

3. American Army Engineers



Wellington's infrastructure is prone to earthquakes, tsunamis and erosion.
Photo / Mark Mitchell

We had a few hundred thousand American engineers here during World War II and they needed something to do. So they offered to build a motorway between Auckland and Wellington, upgrade the Napier– Taihape Road, build a Manawatu Gorge flyover and a few highways out of Wellington.

Sorry, we said, that won't be necessary – but thanks for the offer.

4. State Highway 1

Whoever chose the route for State Highway 1 through the central North Island must have been a pragmatist.

"OK, the railway went that way, we'll build the road another way."

The route they chose closes many times a year due to snow and getting to Wellington from Auckland is much quicker through Taumarunui and Otorohanga.

Instead of building a bypass around Taupo, they should change a few signs and reroute State Highway 1 around the back of the lake.

5. Hastings

Planners in Hastings ripped up orchards to build state houses. It was only after the city took off from the growth in horticulture that someone realised the town was on the most fertile soil in the country.

They then chose a satellite suburb site on some marginal grazing stony soil and called it Flaxmere. Wrong again: Flaxmere is now surrounded by the largest grape-growing area in the country.

More extraordinary is the road network connecting Hastings and Napier. Hastings was originally built on a bypass of Havelock North. Since then, two bypasses have been built around Hastings.

Now there are four main roads between Napier and Hastings, all single carriageways. The newest road – the "Expressway" – is only as fast as the slowest car on it. One dual carriageway (two lanes in each direction) would suffice.

6. Department of Conservation

No single group of environmental activists has been responsible for achieving the opposite of their intentions more than DoC. Not satisfied with the DoC estate, it has interfered with every other piece of land with "conservation value".

Any hunter or high-country farmer will tell you how DoC would prefer to waste taxpayer money on poisoning everything but its target when hunters and the fashion industry are willing to pay to do the job well.

North Island farmers are increasingly required to fence off native trees that provide shelter for stock. The weeds take over, pests move in and kill the native flora and fauna and the stock die from disease from the pests, the pest poison or exposure to the elements.

DoC is starting to take over South Island high-country stations. Watch the merino industry take a hammering, not to mention the taxpayer.

7. Karori

Some bright spark back whenever decided to build New Zealand's largest suburb with only a two-lane tunnel connecting it to the city.

Alternative routes are just as annoying to use.

Karori is the Maori word for snare – appropriate for trapped valley residents.

8. Carterton

Back in 1957, the design for Carterton was pretty simple – build a boulevard between the main road and the railway and the town would grow along it.

Few people took notice as the town grew along the main road through the Wairarapa. For a town of only 4000, the 50km/h zone is almost 4km long.

9. Dunedin Airport

Come on, 30km from the town centre? What were you thinking? Auckland's airport is only 20km from the centre.

Obviously, Dunedin has a powerful taxi lobby as public transport is pathetic.

10. Queenstown

Ever notice that postcards of Queenstown are either of the mountains or the town from a distance? That's because the town is ugly.

If you've visited the place recently, you'll notice a mix of inappropriate architectural styles competing to attract the tacky American tourist.

All the camouflage in M*A*S*H won't hide the damage that's been done to the once-idyllic town.

*** Grant McLachlan is a Wellington-based lawyer and planner.**

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Forces need to talk to one another

DEFENCE: Grant McLachlan says the war in Iraq illustrated the errors in the way New Zealand organises its military

A breakdown in communication has often been the catalyst for armed conflict but, as the Iraq War demonstrated, it is also the biggest killer.

The footage of BBC journalist John Simpson diving for cover from an American laser-guided bomb demonstrated that the weakest link in armed conflict will always be a lack of effective communication, regardless of the sophistication of the technology.

The American forces featured regularly among those guilty of firing on coalition forces, firing on civilians at roadblocks, or simply taking a wrong turn and getting captured or killed.

The Americans sent their troops into Iraq knowing only a few basic words in Arabic, collected their intelligence using many sources, and expected a digital battlefield to maintain effective communications between the many branches and sub-branches of their Air Force, Navy, Army, Marines, CIA, NSA and Special Forces — not to forget the other members of the coalition of the willing.

It is no surprise that the British and Australian forces suffered fewer "blue on blue" (friendly fire) incidents. The British and Australian knew their capabilities and prepared themselves accordingly.

The Australian forces set themselves specific tasks at which their SAS troops worked in conditions for which they were trained, and they were supported by combat pilots with whom they were familiar. The result? No problems, mate.

The British preparation suffered several setbacks from a couple of helicopter collisions, a handful of troops finding themselves accidentally behind enemy lines, and one British tank reportedly firing on another. These incidents were ultimately

▶ New Zealander Grant McLachlan is a London-based communications consultant.

the result of a lack of communication among a few.

The British were, however, trained to rely not only on technology but on their instincts. Pilots could withdraw from firing on a target if civilians were nearby.

In stark contrast, an American A-10 pilot flew past a tank clearly identified as British, then returned to fire on the British column, apparently relying on technology rather than his own eyes.

The British demonstrated a more effective co-ordinated effort in their part of the Iraq operation. They had had more experience with urban guerilla warfare and they made a considerable effort to prepare for interaction with the Iraqi people.

Just after capturing the southern Iraqi ports, the British quickly set about hiring locals to run them.

The Operation Market Garden debacle at Arnhem in World War II taught the British how impotent armed forces are without working communications systems. The operation failed because the intelligence was flawed, radios did not work and the Army and Air Force did not have much experience of working together.

The British have since adopted a defence strategy of integrating the combat and transport capabilities of all branches of their armed forces. The Harrier programme of the 1950s integrated the combat capability of the Navy with close ground support for the Army.

Armoured vehicles can be deployed by truck, train, ship, hovercraft, helicopter or transport aircraft. The new HMS Ocean-



BLIND FAITH: An American A-10 pilot flew past a tank clearly identified as British, then returned to fire on the British column, apparently relying on technology rather than his own eyes.

class ships have a full-length flight deck that can launch combat and transport, rotary and fixed-wing aircraft, a hangar deck that can be used as a mobile hospital or to transport humanitarian aid, and an amphibious dock to launch hovercraft or engineering barges.

The British forces train together so that the overall potency and manoeuvrability of their forces are optimal. The taxpayer saves a lot of money as well.

The Joint Strike Fighter programme, a project between Lockheed Martin and BAE Systems, will replace the ageing Harriers, Tornados and other combat aircraft with a short-takeoff vertical landing, supersonic stealth fighter-bomber. Its cost is a fraction of the Eurofighter programme that achieved only a fraction of the Joint Strike Fighter capabilities.

The Australians and British contrast starkly with the fragmented and factioned New Zealand Defence Force.

In Britain, the Army does not lobby for new tanks at the expense of the Air Force and the Navy. In Australia, the SAS trains with combat pilots so the troops can identify ground targets deep within enemy territory for the pilots to eliminate. The Australians demonstrated in Iraq that a few SAS troops supported by a few combat aircraft are more potent than several battalions of tanks or troops — cheaper, too.

The decision by New Zealand to scrap

its air combat arm, buy LAVIII armoured vehicles and civilian-style ships will cost more money and lives.

Our SAS troops are being exposed to working with foreign forces they have not

trained with; other armed forces will be fixing and transporting our armoured vehicles; and other armed forces will need to protect our defenceless ships.

If New Zealand improved its communi-

cations with all of our traditional allies and within our own Defence Force, so much more could be achieved with the least cost — both economically and, more importantly, in the saving of lives.

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Grant McLachlan: We're heading towards the status of republic

COMMENT

The political fallout from the ongoing armed presence of coalition forces in Iraq demonstrates the strength of the Westminster-style of government over the separate executive style of government of the United States.

Scrutiny of the executives in Britain and the US over the failure to find weapons of mass destruction has exposed the inability in America to hold presidents to account for their actions.

President George W. Bush does not receive face-to-face grillings by opposition members of Congress. His spin doctors front up for regular press conferences on his behalf. He can delegate appearances before congressional committees to members of his unelected executive.

The public are not well-served by the inability of politicians and media to cross-examine their President on issues that concern them. What the public gets instead is a country run by photo opportunity and press release. As the President lives in a highly insulated environment, he will always be perceived and portrayed as a level above his opponents.

Bill Clinton managed to maintain a protective bubble during his impeachment trial in the 1990s. His evidence was given in secret away from his opponents, his speech to the nation was pre-recorded, and he was never seen within telescopic lens of the special prosecutor.

The British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and his advisers have been unable to insulate themselves from the media or their political opponents. Mr Blair faces a weekly barrage of questions from MPs, has appeared before select committees, and now the inquiry into the death of Dr David Kelly.

Prime Minister's question-time in the House of Commons recognises that the Prime Minister is responsible for not only his personal activities but also his executive, government and country. He can rarely delegate answers to other ministers and his answers are scrutinised closely by opposing politicians and journalists.

In short, he has to answer the question, or other politicians and journalists will seek to answer it for him.

Mr Blair has unsuccessfully tried to run 10 Downing St in a similar style to the White House. His director of communications, Alistair Campbell, found himself becoming the story when his spin became unwound in a select committee inquiry. Mr Blair has now admitted he needs to run a more transparent government to prevent opponents capitalising through conspiracy theories.

New Zealand is headed by a presidential-style leader who prefers to be seen shaking hands with international leaders and opening facilities rather than defending her Government's actions in the presence of opposing politicians, media or protesters.

The Prime Minister rarely appears in the House of Representatives and delegates questions to her ministers, who avoid answering questions in any detail. Helen Clark prefers to hold press conferences in a controlled environment and avoids live interviews.

The result is a Prime Minister who shirks responsibility for her actions in the House but is willing to argue her case in a press release. Because she accepts responsibility only under her terms, New Zealand's long-established constitutional conventions are being whittled away by story leaks to a select group of journalists.

The ninth floor of the Beehive now wants the Prime Minister to take on more ceremonial roles normally reserved for the Governor General as head of state, such as farewelling troops and welcoming heads of states.

Before long we will have a republic except in name only.

Helen Clark knows that under an MMP environment people use their party vote to choose the party to lead a government. If her leadership is perceived to be separate from the activities of constituency MPs in her party, she can isolate herself from controversy.

If she faced a weekly grilling from Opposition MPs in the same way as Tony Blair, the public would be better served by a leader brought down to Earth – and away from the protective bubble of the ninth floor.

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Market forces will make the Kiwi bach extinct

By GRANT McLACHLAN*

My sister and I had to make the most serious decision of our lives this week. Faced with near-crippling council rates and building compliance costs, we had to accept that we could no longer afford what previous generations of our family had enjoyed and what we wished future generations could enjoy – the Kiwi bach.

The family bach was a lakefront property in Taupo in now exclusive Waitahanui, famous for the "picket fence" of fly-fishers at the river estuary.

My late grandfather, a keen fly-fisherman, built it out of dense bush as one of the first fishing lodges on the shore, using the first harvest of pine from the central North Island forestry and rocks he moved from Bluff Hill in Napier, where he raised my mother.

The property meant everything to my sister and me because it was the house my grandfather retired to, where my grandmother lived for more than 20 years as a widow, and where, more tragically, my mother died.

Now the property has suffered the same fate as other traditional Kiwi baches and become a victim of market forces.

After the passing on of my family's friends in neighbouring properties, their children decided to sell their properties to overseas investors, who have the money to stifle any emotional attachment.

The higher the prices these investors were willing to pay, the higher went the Government valuation and the higher were the council rates.

Before too long my grandmother, living in her sunset years, could no longer afford to live with the view she loved, in the house where she shared so many heartfelt memories. The family had to put the property on the market.

Property prices in Waitahanui have been an amazing phenomenon. When Pop hewed the property out of the land in 1961 it was worth a few thousand pounds.

When he died in 1981 it was worth \$100,000, and now it is worth well into seven figures.

Some might think that is an amazing investment. But it was not an investment; it was the family bach where we spent Christmases, built our first sandcastles, caught our first fish, first learned to swim, married, spent New Year, birthdays, holidays, retired and eventually died.

Now the old baches are gone, replaced by "mansionettes". The boatsheds are no longer occupied by aluminium dinghies but by the latest Miami Vice-shaped speedboats. The community spirit has been replaced with hardened-steel window shields and burglar alarms.

I am left searching my conscience, wondering how to prevent what has happened to my family happening to others. The fact is that other families provided the momentum. Our family held out the longest and we benefited by a considerable sum.

Market forces caused it and no regulation could prevent it. The councils cannot hold back the tide of family-bach sales by providing separate rates for the retired or holiday baches. Baches would become a tax dodge or an even better investment, which would force up prices further.

The Overseas Investment Commission cannot regulate sales because most of these property sales are to returned expatriates who made their money overseas, or those wishing to retire here.

The death of the Waitahanui bach is not a one-off. The wave started in Mt Maunganui and will finish in Pukenui, consuming Coromandel, Wanaka, Matauri Bay, Havelock and the Tutukaka coasts in its wake – just to name a few places.

The stark reality is that the Kiwi bach will soon be the exclusive domain of the wealthy – and the next targets will be coastal farms, Maori reserves and caravan parks.

The Kiwi bach is headed for extinction, and the best we can do is enjoy it while we can.

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