

Straight Thinking – By Owen McShane

It's Great to Come Home – but

Ten days in the US.

After ten days in New York and San Francisco Bay it was great to come home.

I enjoy big cities in small doses but it was so good to return to home and family, and be astonished by the growth in new vegetable beds, and to see ducklings turned into ducks, and a “hen” turned into a rooster – all after only ten days away.

But, as they say, you cannot eat the scenery, even though you can eat the vegetables, and I soon had to confront the harsh reality of our local inability to cope with the real world.

It's particularly sad to see Auckland spiraling down its path to self-destruction.

Auckland's Looney Tunes.

A story in the Herald (*Move to Tighten City Parking*, March 13) reports that the Auckland Regional Council is determined to pressure the councils of the Region to tighten the supply of parking spaces in new property developments.

The ARC central planners declare that this will encourage the use of public transport, without even bothering to explain why this is a good thing for most of us.

We know from overseas experience that the end result is simply another reason why people will not buy a downtown apartment (who wants to end up in a knife-fight over a parking space?) and why developers will stop building new apartments.

Portland imposed such rules on all new developments around their Orenco Centre light rail station. The result is a five hundred metre oasis of green grass all around the station with the nearest housing on the edge, where the restricted park space rules no longer apply. The high density zone has zero density. The Portland planners still refuse to admit error.

“Kiwi Ingenuity” now refers to our ingenious ways of ignoring such experience, combined with our recent discovery of Number 8 Red Tape.

Then to add a touch of pure fantasy, former ARC transport chairman, Joel Crayford, claims that “Thirty five percent of the land area of the Auckland Region is taken up by roads or places to put cars.” I presume he meant the Auckland Metropolitan Area. Or maybe the ARC has now defined rural land as a place to park cars – rather than methane belching cows.

If you have any doubts about the real percentage use Google Earth to look at all that space between Warkworth and Orewa. Given that Auckland Region is about 6% urbanized, paved areas account for about 2.5% of the Region's land area.

Haven't we Heard the News? Central Planning doesn't work.

Compared to cities like New York and San Francisco, Auckland should be easy to manage – yet we are busy talking ourselves into a nervous breakdown.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Auckland governance will hear numerous proposals for shuffling the chairs between the Regional Council and the Subserving Cities.

We must all hope that some submitters question the ARC's love of Central Planning.

Aucklanders appear to assume that central planning works. We should have learned by now that it doesn't. Of course some infrastructure projects, such as roading, need some public input, but the aim should always be to model the market as best we can. We should laugh at the idea that a few "wise" people in a Committee Room can holistically, sustainably, or comprehensively (choose your favourite word) have enough information to centrally plan all the elements that serve, drive and constitute the modern urban economy – or any other economy for that matter.

Successful cities are notable for their lack of central planning. Instead they have a number of organizations, each dedicated to providing their own infrastructure services, as best they individually can, and publicly and transparently competing for resources. Once large planning agencies are given multiple planning tasks they are unable to resolve the conflicts between competing interests and soon fall back on a single "cult" or "fad" to make all their "holistic" decisions. This is why the late Karl Popper called holistic thinking the handmaiden of fascism.

The current conflict resolution cult is "public transport good" – "private transport bad". No matter what the problem is, this simple-minded decision rule provides the answer.

How else can one account for the current enthusiasm for a rail link to the airport, when shuttle buses, taxis and private vehicles are doing a great job without subsidy? The only problem is the grid-lock risk which means we all waste time with early departures to make sure we are on time. The answer is not to build a rail-link which simply destroys wealth on a grand scale while failing to address the problem. The answer is a series of High Occupancy Toll Lanes (HOT lanes) – starting with the conversion of the North Shore Bus Lane. HOT lanes use

variable congestion pricing to ensure that everyone can travel to their destination without the risk of grid-lock. Such thinking is heresy so long as our central planning agencies worship trains.

The Power of Broadband.

In my last column I promoted the power of broadband as a means of reducing congestion. Many concede that high speed broadband can make a difference at the margin but say it will never compete with the “efficiency” of rail.

While I was in California *Sun Microsystems* announced that 55% of its 35,000 workers in Palo Alto were now telecommuting. That is about 20,000 vehicles taken off the local roads to the “campus” at peak hours – in each direction. Auckland is now proudly proclaiming that rail now carries about 6 million passengers a year. At say 220 days a year that is say 25,000 passengers a day, both ways, or say 13,000 a day in each direction, and these are widely dispersed. Given that many of these passengers have transferred from buses rather than cars our total investment in rail may have taken only 10,000 cars off the road or half the number achieved by *Sun Microsystems* – who did it without subsidy and with many other gains.

When will our transport planners start looking to the future for solutions rather than longing for the past?

Another Carbon Commitment.

Andreas von Warburg reporting from New York has just let us know that New Zealand is one of the founders of the Climate Neutral Network (CN Net), launched on February 22 in Monaco by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). He reports:

“The development of the Climate Neutral Network signifies a major step forward in creating a coordinated global response to climate change,” said David Parker, Minister for Climate Change of New Zealand. “I am proud that New Zealand is a founding member of the Climate Neutral Network. As a signatory we are leading the way in actively laying out strategies to become carbon neutral.”

Which is all very well, but how many such climate alarmist initiatives and treaties are our Ministers signing up to without any scrutiny by Parliament? The Green Party is demanding that the China Free Trade Agreement be thoroughly scrutinized but seems happy to leave anything to do with climate change in the hands of the Cabinet.

The kicker is in the last paragraph of the Minister's announcement which reads:

New Zealand, which will host World Environment Day 2008 under the theme "Kick the CO2 Habit", is paying particular attention to emissions from agriculture. Some 40,000 farms account for 50 per cent of the country's greenhouse gases versus around 12 per cent from agriculture in most developed countries.

Are we really committed to punishing ourselves for daring to feed the world? Those other countries are much more industrialized and hence emit far more greenhouse gas per head than we do.

Why are our politicians so determined to select statistics that stack the cards against us?

1294.