

Democracy won't work whilst most media lean far left

By Dr Muriel Newman, NZCPR Founding Director, 27 September 2023

As the election closes in, there appears to be an overwhelming mood for change.

New Zealanders have had enough. The chickens are coming home to roost for Labour as disgruntled voters, sick and tired of the incompetence, the lies and deceit, search for alternatives.

Election campaigns can be noisy affairs, and this one is no different. Given the unprecedented manner in which Labour has crushed democratic rights and imposed their destructive agenda onto the country, protesters are out in force, expressing their concerns directly to those who are seeking their vote.

But is it really any worse than it's ever been?

In the nine years I was in Parliament and the four election campaigns I was involved in, shouting, yelling, heckling, pushing, and shoving, were all part of the rough and tumble of politics.

It wasn't out of the ordinary to have to break through lines of protestors to get into an event, and I well remember giving one speech to an audience, where the barrage from opponents was so loud, even I couldn't hear the address!

What seems to be different this time around, is that the media are also copping the wrath of a disgruntled public. And it's not hard to see why.

When Jacinda Ardern was elected leader of Labour just before the 2017 election, the gushing media coverage was so extreme it was given a name: "Jacindamania". From that point on, any semblance of media impartiality was swept aside, exposing the strong political bias of mainstream journalists.

That bias was revealed by journalists themselves in the "Worlds of Journalism Study 2.0. Journalists in Aotearoa/New Zealand" [published](#) last October by Massey University. In this third such survey undertaken by the Worlds of Journalism Study group - a collaboration of academics from more than 120 countries - a snapshot of the 1600 journalists who work in print, digital and broadcast media, is provided.

Almost 60 percent of the workforce are women, 10 percent are Maori, and as far as age is concerned, the profession is split between those in the younger 25 to 30 age group, and older 50 to 65 year-olds.

When it comes to political bias, the results are definitive – journalists overwhelmingly

identify as left wing: “There are very few strongly right-wing journalists, but a substantial number of moderately or strongly left-wingers.”

The survey reveals 5 percent describe themselves as “extreme left” and 15 percent as “hard left”. Of the rest, 22 percent say they are “left”, 20 percent are “mild left”, and 23 percent are “middle left”, while 6 percent identify as “middle right”, 4 percent “mild right”, and only around 1 percent all up say they are “right”, “hard right” or “extreme right”.

In other words, nine out of ten New Zealand journalists are socialists, with one in three hard-core. Only one in ten journalists claim to have no socialist inclinations.

When it comes to ethics, the survey shows there’s been a significant shift in attitude, with journalist support for adhering to their professional code of ethics dropping 28 percent since the last survey in 2015.

And when it comes to the *role* of journalists, there is now a growing disconnect between what the public expects from the media and what journalists believe their role to be.

While the public wants journalists to report the news in an unbiased manner, presenting both sides of the argument on contentious issues so they can make up their own minds, that’s no longer how most journalists see it.

They regard ‘educating the audience’ as their most important role, followed by ‘countering disinformation’. But in some cases, this has led to a concerning development: hard-core left-wing journalists describing information they disagree with as “fake news” or “disinformation” in order to discredit those with alternative views.

Journalists still regard monitoring and scrutinising political leaders as important, but letting people express their views has declined significantly. Also dropping is the notion of ‘being a detached observer’ and ‘providing analysis of current affairs’.

The role that rose the most sharply, albeit from a low level, was ‘supporting government policy’.

In other words, the gulf that has opened up between what the public has traditionally expected from the media and what the media themselves believe their role to be, is no doubt responsible for the decline in public interest in the mainstream news.

Making things worse is the fact that journalists overwhelmingly believe the Treaty of Waitangi should be a key part of their reporting.

The survey, which was carried out just after Stuff announced its absurd apology to Maori for its historic news coverage - and other organisations such as Radio New Zealand and TVNZ had started to become more ‘inclusive’ - says this: “Asked to what extent did the Treaty apply to what they wrote, almost a third (31%) said it applied to everything. Another 43% said it applied to most things, such as any stories that involve legislation or politics, culture or

society in which the treaty is referenced. A minority (16 percent) thought it only related to some things, such as stories for Maori about Maori issues, while 2% thought it had no relevance to journalism.”

It’s no wonder the media are seen to be increasingly out of step with society.

This week’s NZCPR Guest Commentator, freelance journalist and former newspaper editor Karl du Fresne, believes these developments are the consequence of the transfer of journalism training from the newsroom to the lecture room:

“Earlier generations of journalists learned on the job from other journalists. Many of my contemporaries came from working-class backgrounds. They didn’t go to university and were proud to regard journalism as a trade rather than profession. The importance of neutrality, fairness and balance was drummed into them. They had no delusions of grandeur.

“But from the 1970s on, journalism was subjected to academic capture. Budding journalists were inculcated with a highly politicised vision of journalism’s purpose. They were encouraged to acquire degrees that were often based on esoteric theories far removed from the simple, practical concerns of good journalism. Over time, that has had the fatal effect of creating a widening gap between journalists and the communities they claim to serve. Even more dangerously, it has led journalists to think they are wiser and smarter than the people who buy newspapers and watch the TV news, and even morally superior to them. As the Marxist American journalist Batyar Ungar-Sargon puts it, they climbed up the status ladder and became part of the elite.”

To make matters worse, most mainstream media organisations accepted handouts from Labour’s \$55 million Public Interest Journalism Fund, and as a result, became echo chambers for government propaganda. This was especially the case with regards to promoting Labour’s fraudulent Treaty ‘partnership’ claim that underpinned their whole unmandated race-based *He Puapua* agenda.

With tens of millions of dollars of additional taxpayers’ money also poured into the media through Government advertising and sponsorship, it’s no wonder the public became worried the media had been ‘bought off’ and could no longer be trusted as a reliable source of information.

There have been stand-out pockets, of course – mainstream journalists who continued to speak the truth and hold the Government to account - but they are few and far between. As a result, alternative media channels have emerged to fill the vacuum.

As Karl says, people no longer look to our mainstream journalistic institutions to reflect the society they live in. “The crucial nexus between media institutions and the community they purport to serve has been strained to breaking point. In fact the media often seem implacably opposed to the society they live in and determined to re-shape it, whether people want it or not.”

With journalists now advocating politics rather than merely reporting it, it's little wonder that they are now being berated with the same contempt the public has for politicians.

While thankfully the media lovefest with Jacinda Ardern began to wane before she actually left Parliament, the impact of her incompetent leadership on our society has been devastating.

More than anything, what Labour's time in office has taught us is that for our democracy to function properly, we need balanced journalism.

And if anyone needs further explanation, look no further than *Three Waters*.

*Three Waters* was the brainchild of Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta, and her Maori Caucus colleagues. Their primary motivation was to pass control of fresh water to Maori, but to dress it up as necessary reform for the public good.

If journalists had been doing their job of holding the government to account, the policy would have never withstood their scrutiny.

Let me explain.

Water supplies in New Zealand have traditionally been regulated by the Ministry of Health. Their annual water quality [audits](#) showed excellent results - as did the regular surveillance [reports](#) from the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR).

But to create an imperative for reform on the scale Labour needed, a water quality crisis had to be created.

Minister Mahuta did this by resurrecting a [report](#) that had been prepared for Helen Clark's Labour Government in 2006. ESR scientist Andrew Ball had been contracted to provide information on the incidence of *endemic* waterborne gastro-intestinal disease in New Zealand. While he found no real problem with water quality - "the size of most outbreaks is small, averaging nine cases per outbreak in 2000-2004, and is smaller than any other countries for which data are available" - there was insufficient local data to calculate the incidence of *endemic* disease.

As a result, Dr Ball used UK statistics to estimate between 18,000 and 34,000 infections a year in New Zealand, but he qualified his findings with a disclaimer: "*The reliability of this method is questioned by the author.*"

In other words, even he knew these estimates were not accurate.

Unfazed, Minister Mahuta used that old report to claim - as a mantra - that the main reason for the *Three Waters* reforms was that "At least 34,000 New Zealanders become ill from drinking tap water every year."

We exposed the Minister's claims as rubbish, knowing that if 34,000 people each year got

sick from drinking tap water, we would all know about it because the issue would never be out of the news headlines.

The recent water contamination problem in Queenstown, where 30 or more people are [reported](#) to have become ill from drinking tap water, which dominated the news for days, has demonstrated what a huge lie the Minister's 34,000 claim has been.

And the point is this - if the media had questioned the Minister about her ridiculous claim instead of regurgitating her lies, the whole senseless *Three Waters* scheme would never have got off the ground - saving the country billions of dollars that will have been utterly and completely wasted once the scheme is cancelled by the new government.

The Ardern legacy is about to come to an end and a new government will need to set about correcting a multitude of wrongs. But the media should also reflect on the status of its industry and what it needs to do to restore public trust. The damage done is such that restoring their reputation will be no small task.

Predominantly journalists need to go back to their role as neutral observers and reporters of the news. And with regards to contentious issues, they need to return to providing a balance of perspectives so that their audience has reliable information on which to make up their own mind.

In particular, they need to recognise the dreadful division within our country that Labour has created - with their assistance - and they need to help rebuild our society and heal the harm.

In summary, we don't need the media to advocate political agendas – we have politicians for that. But what we do need is balance and truth in the news. Is that too much to ask?