

Overcoming the Politics of Fear: Living Adventurously in
Aotearoa-New Zealand
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Western democracies are facing a cruel dilemma. Instead of feeling secure in our affluence and generous in our disposition we feel insecure, fearful and selfish. Politicians play on our insecurity and fear and we become passive rather than active citizens; infants instead of adults and supporters of the status quo rather than liberating change. George Orwell predicted some of this a long time ago when he said

“Do you begin to see then, what kind of world we are creating? It is ... a world of fear and treachery and torment, a world of trampling and being trampled upon, a world which will grow not less but more merciless as it refines itself.”

George Orwell 1984

If we are to become active empowered citizens we need to address our fears so that we can be politically bold, critical and engaged. To do this we have to determine what we are afraid of and what we want from our political leaders and political parties. There are two types of fear: healthy, probable and realistic and unhealthy, imagined and unrealistic. We are hardwired physiologically to avoid risky activities that might result in danger and death. In 21st century New Zealand we do need to worry about climate change, inequality and injustice; we do not need to worry about terrorism, criminality or existential insecurity. By focusing on these healthy, immediate and realistic fears we already begin to gain some understanding about what we need to work for and what we can safely ignore.

The reality is that fear is a very bad motivator of positive behaviour and normally engenders both individual and social paralysis. In his book, *The Politics of Fear*, Frank Furedi said that

“ The Right in politics have forgotten what sort of past they wish to preserve and the Left has forgotten what sort of future it wishes to realise so we are caught in a paralysing present” .

Most politics, in the West, therefore, lack any sense of purpose, perspective and meaning. It's a sad fact that it is a default option for both the Right and the Left to lapse into cultivating a politics of fear. The major consequence of this is that citizens are infantilised and we are treated like children by our politicians.

The solution is two fold. We need to start with something positive. “Without a vision the people perish”. If we do not have a strong ethical frame for our politics we cannot measure whether progress is being made.

(i) My suggestion is that we start with a reinvigorated humanistic vision suitable for the 21st century. In this vision, people and communities at local, national regional and global levels are not trapped in a paralyzing present but strive to realise justice, peace, compassion and truth in their personal social and political relationships. Our basic expectation is that “hope and history will rhyme” and that we will develop a politics that will be enabling rather than disabling, participatory rather than exclusive, one which will enable us to connect as adult to adult rather than child to adult. We want a vision that will help us realize the common sense and wisdom that each one of us brings to life. This is a very different vision than that promoted by most politicians .

(ii) We need to be very systematic about what we want from our politicians and clear about whose interests we are promoting. It is sad to me that the notion of “Public service” seems to be at a premium at the moment and that the “Common Good” is seen as a relic of a more idealistic past. If we cannot reactivate this notion that the state is the servant of the people rather than the other way

around we will never be able to challenge dominatory politics or discover the power inherent in every single citizen. In this we must also be guided by tactics and strategies that deal with the root causes of political violence and not its symptoms. The *US Political Instability Task force 2004*, for example, correlated the following factors with incidents of terrorism and other sources of political violence: poverty, underdevelopment and maldistribution of resources; weak regimes and poor governance; poor regional integration and bad neighbourhoods. (by which was meant regional neighbourhoods afflicted by drug, gun and people trafficking). If we wish to do something about political violence and the democratic deficit then we need to ask our political leaders to address these and other concerns. They are much more important than current growth strategies or the potential for tax breaks.

In all of these kinds of discussions it would be helpful if all states responded to Kofi Annan's call to advance the cause of larger freedom-by ensuring freedom from want, freedom from fear and freedom to live in dignity. In an increasingly interconnected world, progress in the areas of development, security and human rights must go hand in hand. Both development and security also depend on respect for human rights and the rule of law.

For Christians contemplating these issues we must enter what I call the mystery of suffering. How do we as strangers make loving sense of suffering? What are our responsibilities for the suffering of self and others? How do we witness it creatively? How do we embrace it so that we might be softened and transformed by it? With those who are suffering, how do we discern creative possibility? How in the face of polarisation and division do we stand for union and reunion of self with the other and self with the world?

In an interdependent world we can no longer afford to have narrow circles of compassion In a world of democratic deficits we can no

longer afford to be infantilized and paralysed by the politics of fear. Our individual lives and sense of well being hinges on the well being and safety of others. For us to assume responsibility to and for the welfare of the other we need to reach out to those in need (including those whom we fear) and stand in radical solidarity with them as they and we satisfy our basic human needs together and create the conditions for each one of us being able to realize our full potential.

John Paul Lederach, in his delightful book, *The Moral Imagination: The art of Building Peace* has a pocket mantra that we should be sharing with all candidates for political office . It goes as follows.

Pocket Mantra

Reach out to those you fear,
Touch the heart of complexity,
Imagine beyond what is seen,
Risk vulnerability one step at a time

▪ J.P.Lederach.

If we did this we would be living beyond the politics of fear . We would be empowered and emboldened change agents for a better world.