



Massey University

**Reflections from the Backseat: The importance of
front-line staff in the delivery of public services**

**Subversive Citizens and Public Servants
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Thank you the invitation to join you this morning. Welcome to Marian Barnes and David Prior.

It is very timely to have you in New Zealand discussing the delivery of public services.

Timely because like the rest of the world, New Zealand is looking at how it might cope with economic recession or worse.

Given the urgency of the issues we face it would be easy to fall into the tried and true pattern of thinking that we must call on financial and business focused policies if we are to respond appropriately.

There has long been a tendency to think of social policy as either an area of cost not investment or a luxury that can be attended to after the economy is fixed.

This kind of thinking means that the lessons of the last crisis on the scale of the one we now face have not been remembered.

The depression of the 1920s and 30s in New Zealand taught us that social policy is crucial to economic recovery. Indeed sound social policy may well be the driver of recovery.

If this sounds at all distant from your focus today on the front-line, it is not.

The point I want to make is that front-line workers, the interface between citizens and these workers, is crucial to the success or failure of social policy. One response to the problems we face is to empower front-line workers with a mandate to make a difference.

Right now I hope the government understands both the importance of social policy and of front-line workers.

My short comments to you will draw on my time in Parliament between 1990 and 2008 where I learned a great deal about exactly this subject.

At times I likened my role as Minister to trying to drive from the backseat of the car – or more correctly from the boot of the car – with the wind blowing. I relied totally on a chain of communication from my office to the front-line for the success of policy.

Let me start my comments by going back to the event many are comparing the current crisis too – the depression of the last century.

New Zealand was a pioneer of what became the 20th century welfare state.

From progressive, but relatively narrowly focused beginnings in the 19th century, it grew into what Francis Castles has correctly called “a working man’s welfare state by the post-war period”. That is, New Zealand, along with Australia, developed its welfare system around the needs of working men and their families.

In contrast Scandinavian countries are thought to have developed a citizen’s welfare state while the United States would be an example of a residual welfare state.

The important point to reinforce is the one I made earlier: there is no doubt that the decision to enlarge the welfare state had a decisive impact on the ability of New Zealand to not only cope with depression but also to move out of it.

The policies of the 30s and beyond captured the imagination of New Zealanders and turned the politicians of the time into

saints still remembered with reverence by the older generation today.

But the passage of decades saw a significant change in the way the public services were perceived.

They were, in a nutshell, seen as bureaucratic and unresponsive. And the reason for this was traceable in large part to the front-line where users were met by people later depicted by Roger Hall as “gliding on”.

In short, any sense of citizens exercising rights, being empowerment or a difference being made was diluted as best and gone at worst.

This led to ongoing complaints about the welfare state that came to a head in the 1980s during a period of massive change in New Zealand.

You will recall the effort to halt the march of market-led reforms through social policy by David Lange and his Royal Commission.

The Commission process did hold up the forces of neo-liberal reform, but only for a while.

In the 1990s, in the face of persistence poor economic performance and mounting social problems the market argument was advanced again and this time made headway.

Public services were marketised, citizens became customers, services became products, and the contract became the symbol of the states relationships within itself and with the wider community.

I suspect there are many in the room who would see all of this as unfortunate. I agree but I need to say that there were positive steps forward.

If I take Work and Income as an example, prior to the reforms getting something as simple as a benefit was a very difficult process that could take weeks. After the reforms a benefit could be available before the applicant arrived home from their interview. There was a much more businesslike approach to the delivery of services that led to real improvements.

But, of course, the delivery of income support is not a business. There is no market. Customers cannot shop around. There are no products to sell. It is all a fiction.

And the fiction led to many negative effects. To take Work and Income again – the businesslike approach was used to tighten up on beneficiaries who were expected to solve their own problems despite a lack of resources to do so. All the marketspeak did little to reduce the problems people faced and the positive forward momentum was outweighed by the negative.

Being a front-line worker in this situation meant being an efficient dispenser of services. In Work and Income delivering entitlements (or denying them) efficiently was all.

But resolving the issue was not.

I recall listening to a senior manager of Catholic Social Services in Massachusetts say that they had changed their approach by replacing the question “what are you entitled to?” to “how can we help?” and thinking that is the nub of the problem. We should be helping people.

In the 2000s the focus shifted to a social development framework which contained the crucial argument that frontline workers needed to be able to resolve problems. Instead of being a cost social policy should be seen as an

investment in the capacity and capability of citizens to get on with their life.

None of this could be achieved unless frontline workers were people with the mandate and ability to assess problems and look for solutions.

Progress was made down this road – Work and Income is a good example – but not in a uniform way. We are only just beginning to see doctors and nurses being given scope to make a difference again.

But this is the way forward and needs to be reinforced in the current climate.

It would be too easy for old understandings to re-emerge. Social policy is a cost so let's cut it. It is the economy stupid so that is the priority.

In reality economic and social policy are two sides of the same piece of paper – that is what history has taught us.

If we do not take social policy seriously social problems will build and they will be a cost. Imagine what high youth unemployment will do to our gang population.

My hope is that the recent history of social policy will lead to a continued emphasis on social investment and social development. And that crucially more effort will be put into supporting front-line staff to address social issues.

It is in the interface between the front-line worker and the citizen that a real difference can be made and right now a difference is what is required.

Thank you for listening to my necessarily brief comments this morning. All the best for a fruitful discussion.