



Memo political leaders: Tell us about the dream, not the nightmare



Steve Maharey
COMMENT

THE Canterbury earthquake has shown us that New Zealanders stand together in times of adversity. It has been profoundly moving for those of us who do not live in Christchurch to see the courage of our fellow citizens under fire. People ran away from buildings that were collapsing. But they were as quick to run into the same buildings if they thought someone needed help.

As the magnitude of the earthquake became known the debate about an appropriate long-term response began to take shape. I will leave the debate about Canterbury itself to the people of Canterbury to lead. My interest is in the wider debate that has been led by calls for cuts to public spending and taxation. A good example of this argument was provided by Jean-Pierre de Raad in *The Dominion Post* (March 11).

The argument that Mr de Raad and others advance is that New Zealand was in trouble before the quake and it is in more trouble now. The overall cost of the earthquakes is estimated to be as high as \$20 billion. Much of this will be covered by insurance but there will still be a sizeable bill to be met from somewhere. So we have to tighten our collective belt.

This argument appears to make sense. But it is wrong and if followed will only serve to make matters much worse.

An alternative approach has been advanced by financial commentator Rod Oram. Put succinctly, Oram argues that instead of treating the Canterbury earthquake as yet another reason to cut KiwiSaver, health, education and welfare, the Government should work out how to grow the economy. Why, asks Oram are we trying to overcome our economic problems by doing nothing more than reducing spending? When

for growth?

I find Oram's argument compelling. And I hope that the political parties he is calling on to listen do just that because there is no way forward for New Zealand in the politics of limits that followed the global economic crisis and now the Canterbury earthquake.

Let me put it another way. Imagine if Martin Luther King had substituted "I have a nightmare" for "I have a dream". Actually he did.

On August 28, 1963, millions of people gathered on the Mall in Washington DC to hear King speak about civil rights. He was worn down by the challenges he faced and the demands placed on him.

When he began to speak he sounded discouraged and unsure. His message was one of despair and his audience was responding accordingly. But at that moment the legendary singer Mahalia Jackson called out to King and asked that he talk about his "dream". King did and the rest is history.

I feel at the moment in New Zealand our leaders are focused only on telling us about the nightmare. They seem unable to move away from the spectre of New Zealand drowning in debt and the need for more and more cuts. It seems a badge of pride to deliver more bad news.

I am all for straight talking but leadership is about more than telling the patient their condition will require radical surgery. Leadership is about showing what is possible.

If we are going to explore what is possible we need to finally break with the belief that has dragged this and other countries down over the past three decades. This is the belief that all we can do is promote business and finance so they can ride the wave of globalisation by lowering regulation and taxation.

If we believe this we also believe we must cut back anything that gets in the way of this goal.

We have done this since the early 1980s, with a short hiatus, and it has not worked. We are not

rich, fair or sustainable. And the fact that we are not is being used as the excuse to try the formulae all over again in response to the Canterbury earthquake.

Those who continue to advocate this line argue they want to build a better future. They are not. Rather than unleashing our potential as a nation they are constraining it. We have been and are being told there is really nothing much we can do but strip down for the world market.

I could accept this if it showed signs of working anywhere outside text books. I could accept it if clear realisable policies that will bring growth were on offer. But they are not. What I want to hear about is this:

□ How are we going to construct a New Zealand innovation system to support private wealth generation and jobs?

□ How are we going to ensure the talents of all New Zealanders can be enlisted to the task of building a future based on entrepreneurship and innovation?

□ How are we going to lower the deficit while maintaining investment in those areas that underpin innovation and human capability?

□ How are we going to reform public services so public servants are empowered to drive change rather than being seen as the cause of all of our problems?

□ How can we attract international investment that will grow New Zealand as opposed to taking over already existing assets?

□ How can we work together to shape our own destiny and impose our will as a nation on our history.

We have choices to make. We must choose between the politics of limits or the politics of possibility; a focus on investment and assets or a focus on cuts and deficits; and a discourse of prosperity or a discourse of insecurity. Most of all we must choose between a debilitating narrative of re-



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trenchment and a positive narrative of overcoming.

We do have to acknowledge the challenges we face. But they should not be allowed to fuel a sense that we can do nothing other than share the pain. We can still dream of rising to the challenges and making something better.

Steve Maharey is the vice-chancellor of Massey University, a sociologist and former Labour Cabinet minister.



Change focus:

Imagine if Martin Luther King had substituted "I have a nightmare" for his famous "I have a dream" speech. New Zealand needs to focus on the dream, not the economic nightmare.

Photo: REUTERS