

Creeping Secret Government

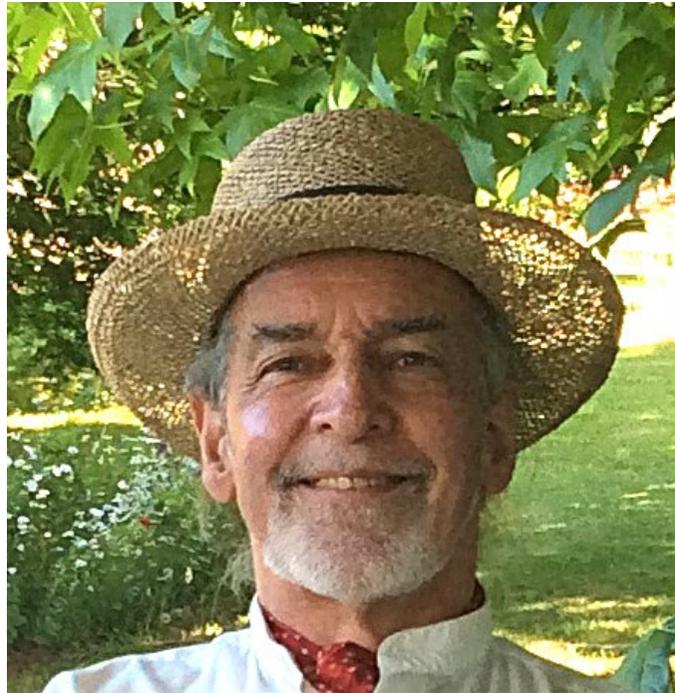
Stephen Wealthall asks where has our open democracy gone?

At no specific date, but gradually over the past fifteen years or so, open democracy as we knew it, has virtually disappeared from New Zealand central and local government.

Western democracy traditionally relied upon politicians proposing policies which the electorate then endorsed and if the policies didn't work or weren't implemented, the electors chucking out politicians and their policies at the next election.

This changed when Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan decided that the ordinary voter and elected representatives were too dim to understand the complexities of managing how we live, and introduced layers of non-elected, self-perpetuating 'expert' bodies, to directly control the planning and management of our lives. Weirdly this philosophy was labeled 'Neoliberalism', although its' relation to truly liberal ideology is obscure. Even odder was the 'Neo' component of the name as the idea of having significant control of the people by an unelected elite, is as old as having kings or dictators, and is still a hallmark of Totalitarian Societies such as Russia, China and North Korea.

NZ Politicians never asked us whether we wanted local and central government to set up a myriad of autonomous bodies to direct large parts of 'how we are to live' that are now outside of challenge at the ballot box. From tariff negotiations, through national road planning to harbor utilization, the elected representatives, and therefore the public, have been excluded from definitive input into vast areas of the decisions that shape our lives, happiness and the future structure of what makes us a unique society. The real puzzle about the growth of these Quasi Autonomous Non Governmental Organisations (Quangos), is that they were ostensibly introduced to reduce expenditure by 'ignorant and inefficient' politicians and civil servants, when in fact they arguably now cost more and are less efficient, and are certainly less representative, than the commonsense elected individuals they replaced.



This 'secret privatization' of things that affect us all, is of great advantage to politicians in power, as they can truthfully say the disasters that these quasi-governmental bodies lead us into, are nothing to do with them, or that they don't have the power to change things. The world financial crash of 2008, which had resulted almost entirely from Banking being freed from direct Government overview, was still handled by the same people and organizations that caused it. Barack Obama, despite his rhetoric, before election, continued to use the same 'regulatory' systems he derided when used by George Bush, after he was elected. The mantra of 'Self-Regulation' by bodies which often have a vested interest in concealing their real purpose from the public, has demonstrably failed to protect the public's health, housing aspirations and the urban and countryside environment.

In addition to these autonomous and often semi-invisible Quango's, we now have large covert influences on our politicians from other countries and increasingly the influence of multi-national corporations. All three non-voter influenced groups, have a vested interest in keeping right of

centre parties in control, and invisibly, and often financially, supporting the status quo of 'Secret Government'.

From the increasing number of individual examples of 'Secret Government' affecting individuals and the whole population's lives, it is obvious that there is a systemic problem in our democracy. MMP has not made the situation any better and may have made it worse, in that the minor parties, in an attempt to have influence in their major policy areas, have allowed the 'Creeping Secret Government' to spread in what initially seem minor matters, but inevitably spread to major ones. The problem is compounded in New Zealand, as unlike almost every other democracy, we have no second chamber of elected representatives to review, moderate and give time for thoughtful input on often hastily constructed and unthinkingly passed legislation.

We need to look very hard at whether the type of democracy that has crept up on us is really what we want, and at the next elections make our political parties debate the really important issue of whether real democracy is failing.

A possible solution is to require both local and central government to publish a list of all of the 'Quangos' and similar bodies that are responsible to them, well before each election, together with an audit of what each body's role, costs and efficiency are. It should then be the duty of each political party, or candidate, to say whether they support the continuation of each body. A more radicle solution would be that any Quango's continued existence would require a majority vote of incoming Councilors or MP's.

It is time for us to look at some constitutional protection such as these, to ensure that matters that affect the lives of all of us are determined by elected representatives, not gangs of backroom politician's mates, whose primary loyalties are to themselves or the industries they work in, not to you, me or Joe Blow.