

A Prosthesis and the TPPA

There is something profound about Josie Butler's choice of props to voice concerns about the government's participation in the controversial multi-lateral trade agreement. The Greeks in the time of Aristotle considered a penis the distinguishing feature between a man and a woman; a woman was a man with an unformed penis. Josie Butler then turned up to the government's latest TPPA meeting appropriately armed, prosthesis in hand, to challenge a bunch of dicks.

There are lots of things that have been said about the TPPA but one thing that can be agreed upon is the level of secrecy around this deal is perhaps unprecedented. It's as if a bunch of men have retreated to the best way they know how to get something done in secret; do it behind closed doors. Unfortunately, a vibrant and effective democracy demands a level of transparency - not opacity - that was not present when as adolescents they were carrying out self-induced pleasure in their bedrooms.

Democratic rights were hard fought for by our ancestors, in some cases with their lives. Free speech, an apolitical public service, judicial independence and independent media are examples of mechanisms that work as checks and balances against the excesses and abuse of power by those we put in power. As a public who enjoy these hard fought privileges we seem very blasé about ensuring these remain. In law, rights become less efficacious if we don't use them, that is to say, over time, if we don't practice these rights they are gradually eroded to become non-existent. Such an outcome would be a regression and the anti-thesis of what western secular democracies claim to be, that is, democratic. However, our governments' recent actions reveal a trajectory heading in the opposite direction. On one hand it wants to, and has already, expanded its capacity to pry into our lives through the expansion of legislative enablers for the NZ Secret Intelligence Service and GCSB. On the other hand, it wants to conduct its own affairs in increasing secrecy. Now of course governments require some level of discretion to get things done. However it appears as if what we are observing is a level of secrecy heading in the direction of some of the most extreme autocracies.

During this public TPPA gathering when Josie Butler attempted to offer a symbolic award to government agents, the microphone was removed and she was ushered outside; a reflection of the state's unwillingness to allow dissident voices to speak, yet alone be heard. Such actions are based, in part, on the presumption that what people have to say might be received well, and therefore has the potential to undermine the government's agenda. Better to have her not speak at all. This is symptomatic of what happens to power when it feels threatened. It attempts to silence all dissenting voices.

Public support for the Key government, as evidenced at the last election, despite a significant number of serious questions being raised around some of their tactics was on the face of it slightly surprising. Now Key, it has been said, fronts as a very affable, a Kiwi sort of Kiwi and the public likes this about him. However the allegations directed at his government amount

to serious abuses of power, the very power that we as a public invested in them. Even the government's most ardent, faithful and loyal supporters would have been troubled by the allegations, and paused, if only for a short while. Those supporters would have recognised Key's logic contortions when in "spin" mode, something lauded by Rodney Hide in a recent NZ Herald column. It is more accurate however to describe these performances as an evasion of reality. But this is accepted because it is politics after all, and all politicians engage in these murky sophist arts. Such reasoning, which amounts to accepting the unacceptable (and those who chose not to accept such reasoning, perversely become unacceptable) is pervasive in the world of politics where strong narratives, not reality reign. Reality here is akin to things we wish to remain hidden behind closed doors and not contemplate, yet alone witness.

In part, the level of support for the Key government had as much to do with how the message was delivered, as opposed to any rigorous assessment of the message itself. Kiwis don't take too kindly to foreigners, and particularly Germans who read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, meddling in "our" politics. I suspect that it was as much a rejection of Kim Dotcom and other meddling Americans as it was an acceptance of the Key government's narrative. Messages are often rejected because of the implications they might have for our existing order. But what if our current order is not particularly orderly? The Maori proverb "E kore te uku e piri ki te rino, ka whitikia e te ra, ka ngahoro" – Clay does not stick to iron, when the sun shines it breaks away, is apt here. It seems as though sections of our society would prefer the sun does not shine on some things.

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Garrick Cooper

Aotahi School of Maori and Indigenous Studies, University of Canterbury