

## How governments keep a lid on ineptitude

All governments bully people. Whether this one is any worse than previous versions is open to debate. They can't help themselves, which is why we take notice when someone comes out unexpectedly with strong criticism of a government action, someone who's not a politician or part of an anti-government lobby group. Someone like Mike King.

When he rubbished the Ministry of Health's proposed suicide prevention strategy and resigned from the panel that produced it, some of us would have been surprised. You usually get paid for being involved with that kind of government-funded initiative, so in speaking out King may have done himself out of income. And the prospect of future appointments. Governments like to keep the lid on disagreements like that.

The current government let its message-management slip show recently when the Associate Minister for Social Housing, Alfred Ngaro, speculated that if Labour candidate Willie Jackson criticises National on the campaign trail, the result might be a cut in funding for Jackson's Manukau Urban Maori Authority in its bid for a second charter school and Whanau Ora contracts.

No less a person than Ngaro's boss, Prime Minister Bill English, reigned him in and denied such pressure is applied to organisations reliant on government funding who disagree with government policy. I don't believe him. Certainly, he's right in the sense that such fallout is rarely overt. But it happens subtly. And I'm not just picking on National; Labour is as bad when it's in power.

Here's a recent example. I was asked by an NGO to write a profile for its newsletter on someone who'd retired after a long career, but it was made clear I couldn't be "too frank". The NGO's funding might be affected if I told the full story. I complied, because if I'd included some of his commentary it would likely have upset those holding the purse strings.

I wrote a tame story, which is unlike me. I've always prided myself in attempts to report the truth. But the man deserved some publicity for his dedicated work over many years, so I went along with it. For obvious reasons, I can't tell you his name, the name of the agency or the area it controls.

It sticks in my craw that a government ministry can wield such power over those who actually know what's going on. You'd think the government might want to know, but sadly not. Everybody toe the line, please.

RadioNZ's John Campbell looked into this problem following the Ngaro gaffe, ringing several NGOs to ask what sort of pressure they face from the government as a result of receiving taxpayer dollars. They all said they'd been told in no uncertain terms that if the news media approaches for comment on anything, the inquiry must be referred to the government's spin doctors. Nobody is to say anything directly to the media...or else. The implication is every message must be massaged.

So, I have to ask – what kind of State do we have in New Zealand? Of course, there is a need for confidentiality and the protection of privacy when it comes to contracts; that applies in the private sector as much as the public. But if NGOs and contractors through their work become aware of mismanagement, waste and ineffective policies, and their feedback on such issues is ignored by government functionaries – and that's what we're talking about here – then the rest of us surely have a right to know.

There's the Protected Disclosures Act to encourage people to report serious wrongdoing in their workplace. It supposedly protects employees who want to blow the whistle, and it applies to public and private sector workplaces. Whistle-blowers can go to the police, the Parliamentary Ombudsman, the Serious Fraud Office, the Financial Markets Authority, the Commerce Commission, and the Inland Revenue Department, and local councils for breaches of the Resource Management Act.

However, some blowers have found to their cost that going public with an allegation for which they have documented proof may still land them in trouble with the Employment Relations Authority,

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which has sometimes found an employee should have reported to an official authority rather than the news media.

The thing is, we're not really talking about that kind of whistle-blowing here. I'm more concerned about instances where people observe long-term malaise in public services that has resulted from poor government policy. Perhaps they just have to wait until they retire...and don't mind foregoing the chance of a knighthood.