

## Happy reforming Minister Hipkins

Good luck to education minister Chris Hipkins for suggesting a collaborative approach to Labour's education review. "Collaborative" in this sense means Labour and National agreeing on reforms so when governments change there won't be wholesale "revenge" restructuring by whoever takes over.

Politicians can't help themselves when it comes to sectors like education and health. Each new regime interferes in accordance with its philosophies. More dangerously, its social engineers will roll out new ideas that will often be a surprise to electors and a pain in the butt for the bureaucrats who must try to implement them.

I never saw a better example of this behaviour than when National took over from Labour in 2008. I was running the journalism school at Whitireia Polytech at the time and succeeded in persuading Labour powers-that-be that journalism scholarships being given to Māori and Pacific Island students at another polytech known for its focus on those groups ought to be extended to Whitireia's similarly diverse journalism student body.

It was an historical thing with the other polytech. Its journalism programme was set up in the 1980s with a lot of support from the media industry, which was concerned about the scarcity of non-Pakeha journalists. New Zealand's changing ethnic makeup was not reflected on TV screens, on radio or in newspaper bylines.

The strategy worked well, to a degree. The programme provided staff for the Māori TV channel and special focus programmes at various broadcast outlets, but not so many for the print industry, whose needs were just as important. Still are.

Whitireia's school taught some broadcasting (we were also the first to venture into internet media), but the focus was on print, which still had a big demand and plenty of jobs, despite misleading information later propagated by the Labour Department's employment marketeers.

I wanted our students to have the same opportunities for funding assistance from every available quarter as those enjoyed not just by the Māori-PI school but by the university programmes. We were in rebuild mode when I went to Whitireia in 2007 and there was a lot to do.

I made some noises via the usual channels, upwards through our faculty to management and hopefully in the direction of the Tertiary Education Commission, which handled polytech funding. It was a cumbersome and highly politicised system, with lots of levels and angles and barriers to fairness. In my view, anyway.

I got nowhere. It was all too hard. Get back in your box, Jim, and do what you're there for – teach. However, in my previous job of running the NZ Journalists Training Organisation, I'd got to know a few top-level politicians in the Labour government. It was time to lobby directly.

It worked. Next thing, a bunch of grim-faced people found themselves summonsed to our J school to hear how my proposal for scholarships would work. You could have struck a match on the faces of some at the meeting. They were not amused.

We got the money. That year, about half a dozen outstanding young people were given significant help to study journalism at Whitireia. If my bosses were miffed by my cheek they showed no signs of it. We all quietly celebrated what seemed a victory for diversity.

Not for long. Midway through that year-long journalism programme (it ran mid-year to mid-year) Labour lost power. Within weeks we were told all bets were off. The scholarships, already fully paid out to the students, were not only dispensed with for future courses but all the money we'd been advanced would have to be repaid by Whitireia.

Our dean had no choice but to cut the J school budget for the next year (maybe more) so the "debt" with the new government could be settled. It amounted to something like \$80,000 from memory. Our

operation got just that bit harder to maintain over the next little while. It could be argued all our students felt the impact.

The senselessness of it got to me. No doubt the politicians thought their particular aims, whatever they were, trumped a few journalism students and their uppity tutor. They plainly did. We were powerless even to complain, which has its own irony given the nature of journalism.

I sincerely wish Hipkins good fortune. He'll need it when it comes to dealing with impersonal bureaucracy and selfish political aims. I can't see politicians on any side of the House relinquishing *carte blanche* power to do what they want.