

Time to delete the expletives

Notwithstanding the fact I've uttered the occasional "bloody" in these columns, I want to make a plea for a better standard of spoken language in public.

It's inspired by what happened when I walked through Pukekura Park the other day. As I approached Poet's Bridge, I saw a group of Japanese tourists faced with that classic dilemma – which one of them was going to take the photo, and therefore not be in it?

I volunteered. They were pleased. We chatted briefly. They were over from Melbourne. Where should they go next? Was it true there's a Japanese garden in the park? How would they find it? I said I was headed that way, so follow me. They did, but dawdled well back looking at things I've seen often.

The delay was fortunate. As I got near the garden on the hill overlooking the fountain lake, I heard it. Or them, to be precise – loud and oft-repeated "f's". You know the word I mean. I use it myself, because it's releasing when you need to let go. Sometimes it just slips out. But there's a time and a place, and Pukekura Park on a fine day just didn't seem to be one of them. Who could be so insensitive towards overseas visitors, who might or might not know such words?

There he was, up the hill on the wooden platform overlooking the fountain, a man aged in his late 30s, surrounded by his young family. Kids aged no more than primary years - excited, lively, curious, leaping about in the way kids do when they're in a place they like. The only active thing about dad, though, was his mouth.

That set me thinking about my own childhood (most things do, these days). How did I learn to swear? Who taught me? I can't remember, exactly, but most likely it was kids at school. I don't recall my parents swearing. I have a vague memory the 1950s were a time when a single oath uttered in public caused national horror of the delighted kind.

All Black Peter Jones, a rugged Northland man of the type much admired in that era, created sensation when he declared on live radio he was "absolutely bugged" after a win over the Springboks in 1956. You have to suppose he was referring to his state of exhaustion. His declaration, with the expletive, is even in the heading of a report about it in one of our leading online history compendiums, *Te Ara*.

Believe it or not, it's still against the law to swear in a public place. The Summary Offences Act 1981 states you can be fined up to \$1000 for using language to threaten someone in public. Using "obscene" or "indecent" words in a public place carries a maximum fine of \$500.

Like most laws susceptible to societal change, the legislation doesn't include a list of offending words. Two kinds of court continually revise that list – the law courts, and the one adjudicating public opinion. While the latter tends to be led by the language of politicians and movie actors, as well as parents and schools, the former is decided by judges. Churches, once the sole arbiters, now seem silent.

It's several decades since a New Zealand court threw out a charge against a man who swore at the police. It seemed a small step at the time, but may have opened flood gates that were already creaking. Prime Minister Dave Lange gave them a nudge when he said "shit" on TV in the 1980s, as did a lottery winner, who preceded the word with "holy" when reporter Ian Sinclair knocked on his door on live TV to tell him he'd won big.

As *Sunday Star-Times* writer Adam Dudding reported in 2015, mainstream news media seem to be the last bastion of decency when it comes to bad language. So, not a lot has changed on that front since the 1980s, when I was reminded of my responsibilities by parents whose children read the TV programmes listed each day in the *Auckland Star*.

A mild expletive in a story on the same page drew a small tsunami of complaints – while nobody seemed to notice the c-word when it appeared one day in a book review in a different part of the paper.

Children, then, remain the real arbiters of language decency. I only hope park man's kids don't grow up thinking dad's example is the right one.