

Why we offend on principle

These days, I don't often get asked to speak to civic groups, or groups of any kind. The word must have got around after I did a few stints a while back: he doesn't speak from notes.

It's relevant to raise this because of the final question someone asked at the last occasion: it was unfriendly, Trumpian. "Why are journalists left wing?" he demanded to know, after an apparent inner struggle to leave out the word "you".

My answer was limp. I mumbled something about seeing too much of life to be anywhere other than a place whose denizens are compelled to question those with set views. I won an inner struggle to omit "like you". He looked triumphant.

After following Hawera's unwelcome moment in the glare, I've been considering why people inhabit lonely public pulpits from which to deconstruct success and frailty, rather than confine opinions to the anonymity of Facebook or the bar table?

You don't win popularity contests from there. The *Taranaki Daily News*' editor has copped it for his coverage of the Hawera thing, although a few brave souls have backed his stance. I support him, of course, because I know from experience that some good comes from reminding a community to re-examine its values now and again.

I first learned that from Rash Avery, the *Taranaki Herald*'s editor, who backed my first attempt at investigative journalism, an unwelcome look at water pollution. One dairy company chairman and council leader threatened legal action over it, but Rash stood firm.

Later at *NZ Woman's Weekly*, I watched editor Jean Wishart shock her loyal readership occasionally by tackling hitherto ignored issues like child abuse. Pat Booth showed real courage with his leadership of the *Auckland Star*'s campaigns. At the height of one, unknown cars pulled up outside his country home at night, and he had to check his full milk bottles in the morning for signs of LSD injection.

My old friend Lance Girling-Butcher got death threats when editor of the TDN after the paper started referring to the mountain by its Māori name, something newspapers around the world had long before decided to do. This paper, produced in the mountain's shadow, was the last to change.

One of my own experiences of swimming against the tide as an editor came at the *Star* during a visit to Auckland by the Danish queen. When our team got back from covering one of her public appearances, I went to the photography darkrooms (oops, that dates me a bit) to help choose a nice royal shot for page one.

As the photographer drew his negative strip through the enlarger and the images appeared on the plate below, there it was. He was horrified at my interest: "We can't use that...can we?" Oh yes we could. I lacked the guts to display the photo on page one, so it went on three. But newspapers around the world showed no such caution.

The startling image of the Queen of Denmark with a newly lit fag sticking out of her mouth as she talked to people at the Auckland event went viral. And so did the reaction in New Zealand – how dare the paper show such disrespect. The MP for Dannevirke rose in Parliament to voice his constituents' disgust and I found myself on national TV news defending my impudence.

It was nothing personal, I claimed. She had shown spectacular indifference to the fact our country was in the throws of heated public debate about the evils of smoking, something future prime minister Helen Clark was determined to meet head-on as minister of health.

The Press Council backed us when it dealt with the inevitable complaint, saying one of the media's roles is to challenge convention. I recalled that with amusement the other day when reading the current government is about to push out the next stage of smoking bans. It's taken a while, but we're getting there.

Don't get me wrong. I have absolutely nothing against South Taranaki people. In fact, my family history book-producing colleagues and I have nearly finished a publication about a couple of wonderful people who live there. We're hoping Mayor Dunlop will agree to launch the book.

I'm saying we ought to see the blackface controversy for what it was – the media doing its job in reminding us we live in a world of bewildering change. Reality can be unwelcome. Everything else is public relations.