

## Are we NZ's most sexist province?

I woke up at the start of this week to hear something that confirmed I've been deluding myself for most of my adult life.

Before the sun was up, Lin came in from the lounge to announce the netball team had won the world cup; wonderful news, whose effects have yet to abate as I sit down to write this.

There's something uniquely euphoric about hearing your country has pulled off another feat beyond the law of averages for size and population.

Seeing it for myself would have been even better, but it was too early in the morning to get up to watch. Lin did, though, despite not being an avid sports follower.

That set me thinking, and if you're male you are best advised to stop reading about now, because you won't like what I thought – that Taranaki may be one of the most sexist places in New Zealand.

I'll support that argument in a minute.

First, there's me. In my long career I've worked for and with many outstanding women, and when I was finally put in charge of a large workplace I removed the glass ceiling and watched how the gender balance among line managers hit 50/50 without me having to do anything more than promote on merit.

Yet here I was on Monday, still recovering from sitting up half the night last week to watch the cricket blokes fail to win their world cup, but not bothered enough about the netballers to accord them similar support.

Boys, if you're still with me, don't bother protesting that I'm being too hard on myself...and by association, you. I profess to be gender neutral, but really I'm not. I'm a typical Taranaki male.

Which is why I want us all (women, too) to take a look at what we do in the coming local government elections. The statistics are revealing. For example, Taranaki Regional Council has a photo on its website of 17 councillors and top staff – and just two are women (18 percent of the 11 elected councillors).

Only two (13 percent) of New Plymouth District Council's 15 elected reps are women; South Taranaki District Council is marginally better with three out of 13; Stratford has two of 11.

There are just nine women among the province's 50 elected local councillors and mayors – an embarrassing 18 percent. The national average for district councils is 30 percent, with 22 for regional councils, proportions that themselves ain't great, given the country has 97 men for every 100 women.

We could spend a lot of time discussing why those imbalances exist, but while that might inform the way ahead I reckon the time for hand-wringing is past. The facts speak for themselves.

We have a female prime minister acclaimed in some quarters of the globe as one of the world's great leaders, although I suspect those doing the hailing have no knowledge of the out-of-whack political gender pyramid she stands astride.

I asked one of Taranaki's women politicians how she felt about being so outnumbered around the council table and she waved me off with the traditional "oh, it's not relevant – we're all people".

Nice try, but unhelpful. It hardly needs me to pipe up with the cliché about different planets. To exclude from modern political power such a wealth of differently nuanced thinking is surely madness, an outdated and malign approach to governance that ensures flaws so often exhibited by us males have little chance of being countered.

I'd like to think we're emerging from the dark ages on this and in future we'll put as much emphasis on gender balance as we have begun to do on ethnic diversity (preferably without using it for political manipulation, like Trump does).

In a way, the woman councillor was right – gender shouldn't matter. But to test that hypothesis we need to shatter that ancient ceiling and let matters take their natural course, which addressed from a statistical standpoint actually means slightly more women on council than men.

Are we mature enough to handle that, fellahs? I suspect we're about to be tested come October. I've heard already of 10 women who are likely to stand in New Plymouth, including one tilting at the mayoralty.

I know most of them and they're impressive. If they'd been working for me back in the day they'd be leading their sections and contending for my job.

One of them got it after I left.