

## What's the real energy agenda?

I'm wondering about the government's real energy agenda for Taranaki.

Not surprising, given what's happened to one of the province's most innovative engineering companies, EHL Group, which has been working with the Americans for years on a machine that makes power from waves.

It asked the Provincial Growth Fund for \$6.3 million to go towards a full-scale version of its invention, an application that was supported by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, but recently turned down by something called the "Ministerial Review Panel, which said it "failed to demonstrate increased sustainable regional development".

The panel flicked the application on to something called "NZ Green Investment Finance Ltd", which said "early stage alternative electricity generation plants...are not a high priority for (it)".

We can only guess that a government expert - or more worrying, a politician - has spotted something in the EHL proposal the rest of us missed. "Us" includes New Plymouth Mayor Holdom and Taranaki's regional development group, Tapuae Roa, who both backed it enthusiastically.

Earlier this year, I examined Taranaki's energy future in a long article that analysed options to replace the oil and gas industry; EHL's clever wave machine looked an outstanding prospect.

The Prime Minister has assured Taranaki her government will help get everybody through the after-effects of her momentous decision to ban further oil and gas exploration. So has her energy minister.

I suspect I saw an early sign of the vacuousness of those promises. It was inadvertent, subtle, but it was there.

It happened at the first of many talkfests arranged by Venture Taranaki and financed by the government (with several hundreds of thousands), occasions to which many Taranaki people from all walks were invited to sit down in groups and come up with ideas on how we could have a "just transition" to a new golden age of oil-less existence.

I joined a bunch of people I didn't know and we waited expectantly for the process to be kicked off by the newly appointed head of VT, Justine Gilliland.

There were two empty seats at one end of our table, duly filled by a couple of young people from some government department or other. They had come up from Wellers to be part of the process. A hopeful sign, I thought. A show of commitment. This government means to, well, see us right.

But as Gilliland launched into her welcoming speech, I noticed something irritating; the two young people were peering into their phones. I frowned and looked away.

When I glanced over again, they were still at it. I started to glare. No point – their eyes were firmly glued. I coughed. Then again. No response.

Finally, I did what I'm well known for doing, something that has kept my circle of friends to a very small group - I spoke up. I said they were being disrespectful to their hosts.

You'd have thought I was publicly accusing them of child molestation. After that, it became obvious I was no longer welcome at that table, so once the chattering began I moved to another.

The problem I have with that little display was it suggests some people in Wellington, people who as always are playing a crucial role in determining Taranaki's future, may think those living here are a bunch of hicks, a tiresome species of world despoilers whose direction in life must be corrected.

Who knows what that expensive and supposedly exhaustive series of group discussions - so tenderly managed and paid for by those from or of Wellington - actually achieved.

As a public relations exercise it was impressive, and from bureaucratic and political viewpoints the outcomes were a satisfying collection of words, coded in the fashionable language of the moment (meaning lots of acronyms and something called "learnings"), some bound in inappropriate plastic covers held together with plastic spirals and accumulated in desk drawers for those moments when that awkward term "accountability" rears up, ready to bite.

Well, one of those has just bitten, so far as the Taranaki engineering community is concerned.

That community has produced what seems to be an admirably non-carbon dioxide-producing alternative for generating electricity, an invention that displays the renowned ingenuity that's always resided in Taranaki farm sheds and backyard workshops.

The government response is insulting in its brevity and opaqueness.

So what's the reason, government? You'd better come up with some convincing arguments or you might as well write off the vast sum you spent on "just transitioning" Taranaki.