

Green row reveals shoddy schools

Wow! I rarely use exclamation marks - the sign of an amateur writer, Gordon McLauchlan declared - but in the case of the Green School row, my “wow” merits one.

We haven't seen such moral outrage since...um, well, Yarrow Stadium raised our rates.

It's worth delving beyond surface anger ignited by the government's decision to give/lend \$11.7 million to a private school, whose trendy outward facade reeks of privilege and hints of eccentricity but hangs on an innovative business designed to attract wealthy overseas families.

You can see why New Plymouth mayor Neil Holdom was keen to encourage them to set up here - all those invested dollars in something with such esoteric ideas. Should he have foreseen one of them would be crystal-planting? What does such unconventional activity portend?

My generation reminisces about bullrush and bullying, so it's difficult to grasp the use of sticking a bit of shiny rock into earth whose shovelling is to be subsidised by taxpayer money.

But let's look beyond Greens co-leader James Shaw's politicking in getting the Green School what it asked for (whatever that actually is) by holding the shovel-ready fund committee to ransom.

He saw a chance to score a late goal, Holdom was doing his best to attract investment, the school seized an opportunity to use the shovel-ready pot to help it out of a bind caused by the COVID-19 international shutdown.

The row has revealed something fundamental about Taranaki. At the risk of offending Mr Taylor (but pleasing Ms Hedley) it seems our province's previous status as the country's richest region was an illusion.

A contrary picture of long-term public facility neglect has been exposed by Taranaki education leaders, who see the Green School grant as a chance to pressure Labour on overdue maintenance.

Previous governments happily sucked energy dollars out of Taranaki while ignoring the fact our regional “wealth” was partly based on pay rankings artificially inflated by oil industry workers who were gone by lunchtime when the current government said fossil fuel extraction has no future here.

It seems clear we didn't get a fair share of those hydrocarbons dollars. If we had, the housing of our polytechnic, schools and health services, and supporting infra-structure, would have ranked as highly as our economic performance.

This all became a big shebang when media attending the daily Covid live show last week raised it two days running. National sensed blood, so the row might even fester until ballot day. Or not, if Labour tidies it up.

Holdom's justification is well-constructed, but incorporates a couple of flaws.

One is the Green School's insistence on privacy. That's okay for any commercial entity in normal circumstances, but these aren't and if they want to hang on to their public windfall their books need to be more accessible.

Holdom said they had already spent tens of millions. We need to be reminded (if we ever knew) how much, exactly, and what has it been spent on, and where will the new money go? Let's have details.

The school commissioned a report that claims its expansion will give a \$43 million boost to the local economy, including our already busy construction industry.

How was that 43 mill calculated? At time of writing, the school was refusing to release the report for our scrutiny.

It's an effective strategy among entrepreneurs to predict impressive potential amounts of income and benefit when wooing politicians. The problem is such figures tend to be just that, potential. How often does anyone go back later to see how they turned out?

Let's look at the hard facts of this case. The Green School saw an opportunity in the government's Covid-inspired "shovel-ready" fund (not its education one, remember) to help rescue jeopardised expansion plans, and did a smart job of applying. Good on them.

However, people at a high level of national politics - both Green and Labour - didn't think it through, didn't see the now-obvious risk of political embarrassment.

The only good thing that may come from this is that a bit more money might now be re-directed to NZ's third "richest" region to sort out its shoddy public schools, stretched public health system (ever seen the inside of the mental health services building at Taranaki Base Hospital?) and failing three-waters infrastructure.

I suspect Marfell School's entrepreneurial Ms Warren might overlook neighbouring privilege if she can get her crappy classrooms remodelled...but it needs to be soon.