

Hollow Auckland, Hollow Media, Hollow Opposition

Keith Rankin, 24 August 2015

I was interested to hear this story ([More students at poorest schools](#)) on Thursday (20 August), about the large changes in school enrolments in Decile 10 and Decile 1 schools. These are the schools that are located in the richest and poorest suburbs and towns in New Zealand.

The Radio New Zealand report cited was presented as an education story, and not – as it should have been – as a story about demography and changing neighbourhoods. And the headlines emphasised the smaller Decile 1 effect (increased children in the poorest neighbourhoods) over the larger Decile 10 effect (a 13.5% drop in school enrolments in New Zealand's richest suburbs, with almost all the Decile 10 drop taking place in Auckland, making it a 33% drop there).

Much was made of a recent reallocation of schools. Evidently affluent suburbs in Auckland that still do have large numbers of children are now relatively less affluent; again a matter of demography. The real story is that the more affluent of suburbs in Auckland are either emptying of children, or are entering the richest tier of suburbs because they are experiencing depopulation.

More than anything else, this story is evidence of the demographic hollowing out of Auckland, whereby increasing numbers of houses in the most affluent suburbs (the high-speculation zones) are either unoccupied or underoccupied. Family homes in these suburbs are no longer being purchased by families. It's a waste of our best located urban land.

I have been reading quite a lot of New Zealand history this year. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the one single biggest issue in New Zealand politics was 'land monopoly'. (Land monopoly does not literally mean 'monopoly', in that only one party owned it. It means concentration of ownership. Interestingly, one of the popular cures of the time – land nationalisation – would have created a literal land monopoly.)

The land monopoly problem was twofold: the very high concentration of land ownership (creating the very inequalities our early settlers were escaping from), and the lack of economic use to which much of that land was being put. These New Zealanders, from the 1880s and 1890s, would have had no trouble grasping the nature of the land problem in Auckland this decade. They were concerned that much good rural land was not being farmed. Today they would be concerned that much good urban land is not being lived in by New Zealand families, and that far too many families are being squeezed into the margins.

The increasing hollowness of our analysis of social issues matches the increasing hollowness of our biggest city.

The mainstream media keep telling us that the government has classified 'worm farms' as less safe than 'dairy farms', and that pastoral farming generally has been classed as 'low-risk'. Of course nobody in government has ever tried to claim that worm-farming is dangerous. The statistical truth is that in the miscellaneous classification 'other-livestock-farming', the rate of deaths per person employed is higher than in, for example, dairy farms. Any person of some intelligence and integrity would realise that an average fatality rate for 'other-livestock' does not apply to every component of that category.

I am continually disappointed at the lack of listening that takes place by media interviewers. For example, on TVNZ's Q+A yesterday ([Workplace Relations & Safety Minister Michael Woodhouse](#), transcript on *Scoop*), Woodhouse said "they [the deaths] were obviously in the other occupations that made up that ['other'] industry. The interviewer Michael Parkin replied "How were those people killed on the worm farm?" Listen, Michael, listen.

I have also been disappointed by Andrew Little's getting caught up in this. He's an intelligent man, who is genuinely trying to find a cross-party solution to the issue of work-safety. Yet he couldn't help himself when he said "worm farming, which according to the minister, has caused deaths" (TVNZ's Q+A yesterday [Andrew Little - Health and Safety Reform Bill](#), transcript on *Scoop*). No Andrew, the minister has not made

that claim. It does the Opposition no credit to go along with the silly gamesmanship displayed by too many in the mainstream media in lieu of presenting the actual stories.

Another problem of our shallow contemporary public discourse is the binarisation of truth. The classic case was George W Bush's 2001 speech (20 September; transcript [here](#)) where he said "Either you are with us or you are with the terrorists".

On the health and safety issue Mr Woodhouse said (on Q+A) "what I did last week was agree to disclose the taxonomy that would be used to describe the upper quartile of high risk". Thus it was implicit that most forms of pastoral farming in New Zealand would probably fall into the second risk quartile. (Trained journalists should be able to understand concepts such as 'quartile' and 'decile'.) At no stage did any official say that pastoral farming was 'low-risk'; only the journalists were saying this through a process of binary inference (ie by assuming that if it's not high-risk then it must be low-risk).

I work in education, and I know that most students who do not pass their courses are New Zealanders of European ethnicity. Nevertheless, we pay more attention to Maori and Pacific non-success, because that problem is higher per person of those ethnicities enrolled. I would hope that most journalists would realise that more people dying on dairy farms than on 'other-livestock' farms does not mean that dairy farming is more dangerous, just as more aggregate non-success by Pakeha students does not mean that educationalists should be more concerned about the Pakeha ethnic group than about other ethnic groups.

There are very real issues about safety on our farms. The best solutions for farm workers may or may not be the same as the best solutions for miners or factory workers. Our journalists should appreciate these nuances. One size fits all may not be best.

There's a role for humour in journalism and politics. But using humour as a cover for shallowness is not the best use of humour. Hollow city, hollow beltway, cheap shots. We can do better.
