

Democracy, Leadership, Difficult Conversations and Truth-Decay

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Leadership can be found in many contexts, from the sporting arena to the political stage. But leadership cannot be an end in itself, for leadership can be good or bad, effective or ineffective. Leadership must have a purpose, a goal. There is no one style of leadership that is universally effective, but there are common and essential qualities which include understanding your team, being prepared for the unexpected, dealing with adversity, and finding opportunity in the face of challenges. We have seen a fantastic example of this from our Prime Minister in recent weeks. Her leadership in the worst of times exemplified the skills of great leadership. She has shown clarity of purpose and communication, and true empathy combined with decisiveness when it is needed. This has been carried out with honesty, integrity and humility. Such is the a hallmark of a true leader. In short, leadership means being honest about who you are and clarity about where you and your team are headed.

So, congratulations on being selected as Kupe scholars; congratulations to the sponsors of the scholarship programme, and particularly to John McCall MacBain for his initiative in promoting this development.

Your potential to be leaders and to make a difference comes at a critical time in our history as a species. I have a background in evolutionary sciences and when looked at through that lens, it is apparent that the world is undergoing the biggest transformation arguably since the agricultural revolution, and certainly since the Enlightenment and the ensuing industrial revolution. The transformation we are in now has demographic, environmental and social dimensions. All of these are largely driven by the pace of technological change resulting from humans' unique ability to innovate. Rapid, cumulative and progressive developments in life sciences and particularly the digital technologies are at the heart of the transition we are experiencing today.

The way we interact with each other, the way we organise ourselves in groups and amalgamate those groups into societies, the way we perceive ourselves, even the way we value our self-worth, our relationships and our environment is all undergoing fundamental change.

We are proud to live in a democracy. But what does that mean in a time of fake news, the ad hominem attacks flourishing on social media, and much conversation being reduced to the triviality of tweets and Facebook posts? Much of the media seem obsessed with

celebrities, violence and sex. Certainly the critical importance of deep conversations has been put into sharp focus by recent events, but deep conversation and the use of robust evidence is not a matter just for crises and media ratings – it is the critical component of protecting our democracy.

And conversation on key matters is often hard, particularly as it requires discourse crossing different strongly-held values and world views. It can be obscured, it is manipulated and participation is unequal. Yet, failure to have effective conversation on difficult matters is a real existential threat to all of us. This why climate change is not being aggressively addressed, it is why social cohesion is under severe threat in many democratic countries, it is why democracy is being undermined with the rise of nationalism, nativism and populism. These 'isms' arise when there is not real conversation based on robust rather than manipulated evidence. Social media and the very changed nature of mainstream media have obscured the capacity and need for real conversation. Ideas are not contested; rather, people are attacked. Falsehoods multiply. We evolved as social animals and that required mechanisms for group consensus and group rules. Democracy is a manifestation of that social dynamic at scale.

Democracy works best when publics are informed and not manipulated, and when publics can have a contest of worldviews, values and ideas in a way that is informed by robust evidence. But robust evidence must have brokerage and defence from manipulation and manipulators. This requires real leadership.

The current environment has undermined trust in expertise and knowledge. As the Italian historian of science Andrea Grignolio recently put, in speaking of the anti-vax movement: *"There is a global trend of distrust in mediators – doctors and scientists – who can interpret and explain data... With the advent of the Internet, people have the illusion they can access and read data by themselves, removing the need for technical and scientific knowledge."*

This is a dangerous trend. Universities are places where scholarship is protected, where ideas are contested, where organised scepticism abounds, where evidence from all the knowledge disciplines can be developed, tested, refined. But the part of the word that can be forgotten is its first three letters: 'uni'. We can easily get caught up in disciplinary silos. The leaders of tomorrow need to ensure their awareness across disciplines, because new ideas come at the interface between disciplines. Arguably, the biggest academic challenge we face is addressing the pace of technological, societal and environmental changes; siloed knowledge cannot help us cope well with such change. Use your scholarly time wisely to reach beyond your discipline.

At the same time, just because you have scholarship does not make you a leader. You must excel in effort, commitment, in deep understanding of your discipline and the knowledge that comes before you as well as that you will contribute to.

Remember the whakataukī: He tina ki runga, he tāmore ki raro (*in order to flourish above, one must be firmly rooted below*).

But leadership in the context of what is ahead of you, will mean battling to ensure that truth prevails, that citizens have access to robust knowledge, that we find ways to address

the existential and difficult challenges ahead and do so in ways that get beyond the short-termism that prevails in much current discourse and politics.

Indeed for democracy to thrive, for countries to progress and the planet to be healthy, dialogue and decision-making on matters that are difficult will need to progress in an informed, collegial, and constructive manner. And as we have already discussed, the urgency is obvious given the pace of change in society created by technological, demographic, environmental and societal transitions. Yet, we live in a world where ideas are contested in an ever more partisan, uncompromising and misleading way. We desperately need mature and multi-dimensional discussions on complex issues. Yet there is an environment of declining trust in expertise and institutions. Robust analysis, scholarship and discourse is needed to find our way through this challenge if we are to avoid a dystopian future. Further, a leader has to communicate clearly and understand the significance of competing views. This requires humility and empathy.

And just as Kupe led his people to the land of the long white cloud, just as our PM has shown the world in the last two weeks how to deal with extremist violence, NZ is in my view in a unique position to be a global leader in exploring and tackling these emergent issues.

This is why I am assisting the University in establishing a Centre for Science (broadly defined) in Policy, Diplomacy and Society, so this University can lead the way in thinking about these issues and use the power of intellect, scholarship and honest dialogue to find ways ahead.

I hope you will use the opportunities offered by your scholarship to join in paddling this waka. You will be welcome in our centre but most of all use this year to understand yourselves, your society, your country. Let me generalise the words of one of you, Tristan Pang, when he says 'although you may not be able to change the world, you want to at least put a dent in it'.

Please do so.

Thank you.