

Towards integrity in public dialogue on issues that matter

Sir Peter Gluckman's address to the breakfast panel "Trusting in Truth"

NZ Parliament

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I am somewhat uncomfortable with the title of this seminar, as trust and truth are both rather complex topics.

In my nine years as science advisor to the Prime Minister, I experienced several examples of politicians from across the house saying one thing in private and another in public. Early on I was grilled at length at a select committee by a member who was aggressively skeptical in denying anthropogenic climate change. But soon after, I found myself walking through the parliamentary precinct alongside him and he said to me something along the lines of, "Peter just confidentially I really do know that you are right, that the world is warming, and that human activity plays a large part in driving it – but admitting that does not help me politically."

Should I have been shocked?

More than one politician who has been firmly anti-GM and anti-GE has, in the very same week that they have been making such dogmatic statements in public, been rather supportive in private conversation and been clear that they understand that we need these technologies to address biodiversity and greenhouse gas emissions challenges. Yet the conversation remains off the table. Others take a very firm public view on retributive justice, while in private accepting that the root causes of our terrible and ethnically biased prison population are matters needing very different preventative and restorative social justice. Discussions over superannuation have been frankly political rather than actuarial and then shut down.

What is going on here? Is selecting facts and truths to meet a political agenda and control the conversation a new phenomenon, or is it just becoming more apparent? For a long time, the debate over climate change has not been about the science; instead science has been an obscuring proxy for values-based discussions regarding intergenerational and global north-global south equity. We need to be honest about what is being debated, otherwise there is no true debate.

In a few minutes, I can only scrape the surface of the so-called 'post-truth'/'post-trust' issue. But at its heart is the demise of long-term thinking and its replacement with the short-termism of the 24-hour news cycle, continuous polling and electioneering. Policy making in liberal democracies is

increasingly determined by focus groups and polls, rather than by reflective analysis. Certainly, this is more overt in other countries, but we are not immune. This in part reflects the new advocacy power inherent in social media, its ease of misrepresenting facts that spread much more readily than robust evidence, and its inherent nature which is to simplify arguments into dogmatic and misleading rhetoric. And as more people get their information through such filtered sources, it is reduced to soundbites and news feeds that target and reinforce the cognitive biases of the recipient and further polarise society. This is not healthy for democracy or those who live within it.

All of this has costs: it means that the capacity to have substantial civil and informed discussions about our long-term needs, and to gain consensus on complex tradeoffs, has largely disappeared. The public discourse is now focused largely on the here and now. Beyond the politician, the policy community has also largely moved away from the long-term. Look at the diminished quality of the briefings to incoming ministers. But there are signs of anger and frustration emerging in minority communities, the younger generation and academia. Let us see this anger for what it is: not just reflection of a singular issue, but rather genuine concerns over a failure to look properly at the underlying and long-term issues that span political cycles and are politically inconvenient.

Some of the real issues are of societal resilience, social cohesion and equity, demographic change, environmental degradation, climate change, the balance between consumption and growth, and the ethics and governance of an information laden society in which governments have effectively allowed the private sector to set the terms of engagement, yet we are only at the beginning of even more invasive technological change. All these issues require long-term thinking, and they need discourse and engagement that is informed and evidence based. I am not saying that evidence should make policy; indeed, far from it, for these are all issues where societal values must inform the decision. However, and critically, decisions which are values based still need to be rooted in robust understandings.

Holistic understandings are critical in dealing with our future. Concepts like the wellbeing budget, social investment and the living standards framework need to be more than concepts for rhetorical debate. Rather, they should reflect a need to understand the complex interactions between economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability. And our various publics have an essential role in these discussions. If our politicians cannot promote, encourage and enter difficult conversations, then liberal democracy is in real trouble – we are reduced to a contestation of whose manipulated or singular claims play best.

This is not a naïve plea to sit around the campfire and hold hands and sing songs. Difficult conversations are needed to accommodate diverse views and interests. Whether it is the environment, societal cohesion or decisions about new technologies, we need longer-term analysis and thinking. Facts and evidence must be gathered and made available, and then – because every choice involves tradeoffs – the impacts of different choices on different parts of our society must be understood.

Politicians and advocates do not like to talk about tradeoffs. They generally prefer to argue for magic bullets that will deliver their solution. But tradeoffs are inevitable, and unless we encourage systems thinking, we will be more likely to fall into short-term decision making driven by short-term interests.

And what may be even more fundamental to the role of science advice is making sure that the right questions are asked.

The methamphetamine drama with which I ended my term as CSA is, at its heart, an illustration of not asking the right question. Multiple agencies had somehow fallen into the trap of never asking why testing for methamphetamine was required in the first place. The presumption was that it had health value, but when we actually asked the question it turned out that there was no basis for testing except where there had been a clan lab.

Are we asking the right questions as we enter a national debate about marijuana? Why would so many of our citizens want mind altering drugs in the first place, so much so that it fuels a subculture of crime (which is the primary argument for why advocates want the law changed)? Why do people choose that path, yet at the same time acknowledging or not the impact on young people's brain development. And why do we not ask the real questions of why rates of poor youth mental health have doubled in the last decade, focusing instead on ambulances at the bottom of the cliff.

What we are dealing with is a progressive decline in the institutions of civic society – institutions being defined broadly. So-called post-truth is not new; from the first shamans and rulers onwards, truth has been manipulated for power, resources and control. With the internet, access to information has exploded – but whose information, whose facts, and who defines what is reliable or not? There will always be pseudo-factoids to confirm one's own biases, and people become confident that they know best and experts are unnecessary. Social media and polarised media magnify this effect. In this context, the willingness of politicians to hide from and not explain longer-term realities is understandable, but has led to a rapid decline in the public's trust of the political system to address their concerns. Surveys show dramatic losses of trust in political institutions in most democracies; while New Zealand is more stable, we do not rate amongst the most trustworthy and we may not be immune from this trend.

There is a need to find structures for effective long-term thinking that gets beyond the exigencies of the next political cycle, incorporates complexity, critically recognises the tradeoffs that must follow, that focuses on major challenges, and takes account of what is robust and reliable knowledge as well as the diversity of values that make up NZ society. Indeed, there is growing evidence from elsewhere that informed and transparent discussion allows a societal consensus to be reached when politics cannot do so. For example, citizens' assemblies have enabled Ireland to make progress on a number of social reforms.

We are deficient at long-term thinking: briefings for incoming ministers no longer look beyond the next cycle; unlike many countries we do not have a foresight function in government; concepts such as sensitivity analysis and systems mapping are largely absent; research and development by the public sector, which is central to long-term capabilities and analysis is stuck well below that of comparable OECD countries despite 15 years of political commitments to increase investment; we have an enormous infrastructure deficit; and so on. While many countries have a public risk register to help examine longer-term issues, we do not even though much work was done to produce one.

Many of these issues are in a book Mark Hanson and I have just published: *Ingenious – The Unintended Consequences of Human Innovation* (Harvard).

Rather than retiring, I am helping set up a center focused on longer-term thinking. The Centre for Science in Policy, Diplomacy and Society (SciPoDS, www.scipods.org) will be an apolitical think-tank devoted to long term issues outside the political cycle. We will be considering what deliberative citizen engagement means in the context of our unique bicultural foundation.

Trust is central to ensuring a resilient society and trustworthiness must be constantly earned. Robust knowledge must inform effective dialogue where decisions about our long-term futures must be made. If honest conversation is inhibited or reduced to rhetorical one-liners, democracy cannot work in the interests of our citizens. We face many long-term issues and existential challenges, and unless the facts and values are both on the table for an honest discussion of what we do and do not know, then our future is more likely to be compromised.