The Ministry’s view of forestry

The Secretary for Forestry has released the briefing papers that his Department prepared for the incoming Minister of Forests, Mr Peter Tapsell, to acquaint him with the main aspects of the forest sector in New Zealand. Such a release, which represents a break in the traditional confidentiality imposed on such documents, is to be welcomed. An effort has also been made to keep up with the times in terms of the changing commercial and economic climate: this overwhelming emphasis may be welcomed at least in part by some, while others will be disappointed by the contents of the presentation as well as the neglect of other matters such as native forests and education. I find myself gravitating to the latter group for reasons that will be explained later.

The briefing is in five sections:
I background data on the sector;
II analysis of the nature and performance of three major forest companies;
III the changed operating environment for the sector today;
IV the role of the Ministry of Forestry;
V key issues identified that need resolving.

The text identifies problems, but often no indication of the Ministry’s views or criteria for assessing them is given. This stance is unfortunate, as it is uninformative for some, it may mislead others (particularly those with a little prior knowledge) and raises more questions than answers.

The first section could have been much more helpful than it has turned out to be. Diagrammatic representation of trends and comparative characteristics is to be encouraged provided that it is helpful. In many cases, it is not. Other aspects found wanting included no reference to any forest policy, nor indeed for any need for one, an inadequate explanation of the role of forests and forestry in New Zealand and a surprising view of the sector’s acknowledged “distinctive features”. One notable statistic that was presented without any comment was the low valuation of wood-processing assets throughout the country – 114, 667 and 65 million dollars for all sawmills, pulp + paper + paper board, and plywood + veneer + board plants respectively. Surely if there are these constraints on such an important sector development, the Ministry should be making loud calls for specific actions that need to be taken; but no, there is no later follow-up except comments like this:

"New Zealand’s relatively static wood supply over the next five years will make market developments difficult as it will constrain the ability to:
(a) develop an acceptance of Pinus radiata in new markets,
(b) promote correct utilization and new uses of this species,
(c) encourage confidence in New Zealand’s ability to provide quality products at a competitive price, and
(d) develop effective distribution systems."

Surely if there are these constraints on such an important sector development, the Ministry should be making loud calls for specific actions that need to be taken; but no, there is no later follow-up except a number of platitudes in the same vein. The sector will rue the day the New Zealand Forestry Council was dissolved, unless the Ministry of Forestry starts to encourage a really vibrant and co-operative national marketing promotion, one that the Forestry Council was indeed in the process of fostering most strongly.

S.D. Richardson

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Department of Conservation’s ministerial brief
August 1987

This document of 100 pages gives a good superficial overview of what this very new government department is all about and the main issues it faces. Despite the document’s size, there is no summary of key points and many of the statements have so little elaboration that they can only be described as tantalizing.

The first 40 pages profile the Department, and a major part of this is concerned with finance. In a budget of about $100 m for this financial year, $32.5 m is allocated to personnel, $48 m to operating costs, $35 m to capital and $6 m to grants and loans. There is no discussion on why the ratio of operating costs to personnel costs is so high, whether the figure for capital is considered normal or whether there are special circumstances this first year, and where the grants and loans are going to. Half the latter are allocated under Science and Research, so presumably they include payments to FR1 and others for research, but this is not mentioned.

An equally large section of the departmental profile is devoted to senior staff (with photos) and is very informative. The next dozen pages are devoted to profiles of the component directorates. These profiles are brief but adequate, and are followed by a one page description of the general functions of a region.

The final section, almost one-half of the document, is given over to ‘issues’.

These are listed under the appropriate directorate, but are otherwise a very mixed bag. Of almost 100 issues listed, one-third are really only statements of function. Of the remainder, only half a dozen have clear position statements indicating the Department’s views, although in many others opposition to changes in existing land use is implied. One of the clear statements expresses opposition to removal of export controls on indigenous timber, but again the issue is not discussed.

Other Issues

Other issues of direct concern to forestry which are mentioned include the proposal for a port at Shakespeare Bay to allow export of timber from the Marlborough Sounds, and protection of indigenous forest on private land (mentioned twice by different directorates).

One of the major issues facing FR1 is the future of research (and its funding) presently being carried out for DOC under a loop funding arrangement which expires in 1990. Apparently this is not even considered to be an issue by DOC, let alone discussed.

In short, this document is too long to be a useful summary, and too short to be an adequate statement of what the Department’s current concerns are; what it intends doing about them, and why. However, it is well presented and looks impressive — perhaps it is an ideal ministerial brief.

Dudley Franklin

The QE II National Trust’s ministerial brief

This short document very adequately describes the Trust’s background, its functions, its achievements and its problems. The latter consist mainly of a greatly increasing workload (33% increase last year), a huge backlog of applications for open space covenants (currently six years’ delay in processing to completion), the loss of goodwill with prospective clients these delays could engender, and grossly inadequate resources. The document would have been enhanced by a concise punchy summary and a slicker presentation, but perhaps their resources were already overstretched!

Pertinent Questions

Few people could question the worth of having the Trust work efficiently and effectively. In view of this, perhaps the brief could have asked the Minister a few pertinent questions such as: “Does the Government accept the value of the Trust?” “Is it content to accept the present situation?” “Will it do anything about it?” Perhaps the Opposition could be prompted to raise these issues.

Dudley Franklin