Reform and devolution

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Public servants have long suffered at the hands of so-called humorists. Some of the recent batch of funny stories at the January 1987, There are a couple about the decline in the Department of Conservation and Ministry of Forestry on page 12 of this issue suggests that working for the Government is now high risk. In the post-crash era it is not only the employees of Judge Corp or Rada that have had to contemplate looking the dole clerk in the eye.

Clearly those in Government's employ who thought that the trauma of change had climaxed on April 1, 1987, with the formation of new forestry and land management agencies, couldn’t have been more wrong. It is now apparent that existing functional responsibilities and staff changes might pale by comparison with those waiting in the wings if present modifications to resource management legislation and local government organization come to fruition. Changes to resource management statutes, and to local government administration, have the potential to radically transform central government involvement in land use planning and management.

“One of the country’s most ambitious law reform exercises” is how the current resource management law reform exercise has been described by Deputy Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer. The official outline of the exercise embraces all laws covering the management of land, air, water and minerals, and indicates a need for a fundamental “zero-based” review of affected statutes. Under consideration are 20 laws. The Town and Country Planning Act, the Water and Soil Conservation Act and the Mining Act are included on the list of those to be overhauled.

Developers and environmental interests have both, over recent years, acknowledged that existing resource statutes are lengthy, complex and cumbersome. Conflict resolution has been the basic model upon which present laws have been founded and operate. Today,
with clarity of purpose and accountability being in vogue, resource management laws are seen as lacking clear objectives and priorities. Lawyers, planners and interest groups have had a heyday promoting conflicting views and trying to achieve a consensus position. The process has been bureaucratic, slow and costly.

Geoffrey Palmer leads an eight-member Cabinet Committee trying to simplify and co-ordinate the resource management law reform exercise. Although he has on occasions talked about the exercise being "zero-based", meaning it would address fundamental issues - a sort of back to basics consideration of resource management - he has not been averse to dropping strong hints, from time to time, about the direction in which he wants the task to proceed. He has made some pointed comments about his desire to give local government more power over environmental planning issues. "We don't want central Government involved in making decisions under these laws," he told the National Business Review on January 28, 1988. He is reported further as having said that Rogernomics might indeed be the panacea that New Zealand seeks and suggests that he and his Cabinet colleagues would be focusing on basic issues such as whether or not environmental planning was needed at all and whether market mechanisms could be used to resolve planning issues.

Whilst Mr Palmer's calls for greater consistency and a reduction in complexity are laudable the reform work to date has failed to demonstrate any adherence to an environmental management ethic that embraces the principles of sustainability and wise use. Interestingly enough in an attempt to convince one and all that he has not been entirely sucked in by the Douglas doctrine, Mr Palmer finally qualified his comments about his desire to give local government more power over environmental planning issues. "We don't want central Government involved in making decisions under these laws," he told the National Business Review on January 28, 1988. He is reported further as having said that Rogernomics might indeed be the panacea that New Zealand seeks and suggests that he and his Cabinet colleagues would be focusing on basic issues such as whether or not environmental planning was needed at all and whether market mechanisms could be used to resolve planning issues.

The practical courses have been altered. Students will have a basic skills training team. The School of Forestry has also trained themselves as an emergency fire-fighting team. Several significant changes are likely to occur in the B.For.Sc. degree. It has been agreed that an introductory forestry course (Forestry and Societies) will be taught in the first year and open to all students on campus. Year three will largely be taught at Lincoln College. This will allow students to take some Lincoln courses as well as making available some forestry courses to agricultural students. Also jointly taught 'Agroforestry' and 'Resource Based Recreation' courses will be offered. In the fourth year there is a proposal to teach a new course called 'Land Resource Policy'. There are other smaller changes.

Practical Courses

The practical courses have been altered. Students will have a basic skills course in their second year and before entering their third and fourth years will have month-long practical courses in February. The first of these will be held next year and is to be run at the Forest Training Centre in Rotorua. Compulsory vocation work experience has been dropped until the School can be sure sufficient employment is available. The students, with the help of Timberslands, have also trained themselves as an emergency fire-fighting team.

A careers video describing the B.For.Sc degree has recently been produced. It is available from the School of Forestry and will be of particular help to those talking to senior secondary school classes or career evenings.