

# The importance of debate in society

One of the most disturbing current trends is the stifling of informed public debate on many important forestry issues in this country. And the lack of foresters speaking out on these issues.

It is more than just sad – it attacks the basis of our society. The future generations of foresters will judge us by how we conduct ourselves at this time.

Am I exaggerating? What is the evidence?

Do you remember during the period when the debate on the dissolution of the Forest Service was under way how a senior forester was reprimanded in public by the Minister of Justice for speaking out against Government policy? What a good way of stifling debate. Other public servants weren't going to follow suit. And the effects still live on. Just recently, I was asking a Department of Conservation person for a comment on a topical issue – the quick negative response was followed by the statement that this was not possible by a public servant.

At last September's Institute of Forestry general meeting in Rotorua this suppression of freedom of public servants was alluded to by one speaker when commenting that a public servant involved with the Institute "had been fingered". Understandably, this member, because his job depends on it, has asked that the details not be made public.

This lack of freedom to speak out also occurs with foresters working for private companies. This was pointed out by our Institute's President during the debate on the sale of State forests at the same general meeting.

Lack of freedom to speak out in a debate is one part of this stifling process. Another, just as disturbing, trend has been how the Government, perhaps in their haste, have handled matters in a manner that discourages debate. Take the Crown Forest Assets Bill, for example. Without first asking for public comment, it was introduced in the July Budget, where the Government took urgency on it. This effectively meant that it did not have to go through the select committee stage, and so again public comment was denied. This Bill was passed on October 20, some 12 weeks after its introduction!

Again this is not an isolated incident. Another forestry example is the Government's discussion paper on an indigenous forest policy. Basic forest policies need careful consideration, yet the public have been given less than eight weeks to respond. It suggests that an informed debate is not really wanted.

The now common practice of the Government to sell its policies through advertising campaigns, using tax-payers' money, also has bad overtones. It feels as if the Government is interested in trying to control public opinion rather than encouraging debate.

It's rather ironic that our current Minister of Forestry, the Hon. Peter Tapsell, now believes that one of the big defects of the former Forest Service was that it did not realise the importance of public relations campaigns, and so lost the support of the people. Otherwise, he said, the Government wouldn't have been able to do what it did. I wonder what the environmental movement would have thought about such tactics by a Government Department. There are differences between information transfer, publicity and persuasion that need to be clearly differentiated.

However, it is critical, at this time of change, that the forestry profession ensures an active informed debate occurs, even if it is divided on an issue. Or we will again stand accused.

If the public servants are stifled and foresters in the industries do not feel free to speak out, or perhaps either of these groups may be seen to be compromised in some way, how can the debate be stimulated?

The staff of the School of Forestry at the University of Canterbury have more freedom to speak out. My own opinion, as a staff member, is that we have not been active enough in this role. Perhaps like other people we have been overwhelmed by our own problems. However, academics currently have the freedom and therefore should try to enter the public debate more often. But doing so would not release other forestry professionals from their responsibilities.

The Institute of Forestry certainly needs to be speaking out. When the President or other designated members speak out on behalf of the Institute they

are, at least partly, putting themselves at a distance from their employer. If there is any pressure on the spokesperson then the Institute needs to stand behind him or her.

The Fellows of the Institute and the branches also could structure themselves so they can enter into debates or provide others with the information required. It has been excellent to see some of the older retired members speaking out; this is to be encouraged for they often have more time and energy, as well as being free to act.

This magazine also has a role. It can bring issues to the attention of readers. It can also act as a forum for discussion and opinion. The Editorial Board have tried to foster this and would welcome more debate. But while this may sometimes help clarify issues this magazine has only a limited distribution – it does not take the debate out to the wider public.

But in the final analysis it is a responsibility for all of us. Remember what Jack Westoby\* said in Christchurch back in June 1977:

*"Here we come to grips with what I consider is the worst crime that can be laid at the door of foresters: they have conducted themselves as conscientious, loyal and obedient public servants or company servants.... and in doing so have failed their civic responsibilities."*

*"The forester like any professional, scientist or technician has a responsibility to the hand that feeds him. But that is not the end of his responsibilities. He is also responsible to the community-at-large, to society, to the public. On many issues that engage the public interest, the scientific and technical complexities are such that the public has great difficulty in disentangling them and in discerning the appropriate solutions. The forester, like his colleagues in other professions, has a responsibility for ensuring his expertise is made available to the public in matters of public concern in terms in which the man in the street can understand. The fact that he sells his brain power to a private employer or Government Department for 40 hours a week does not mean he*

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\* Westoby, J.C. 1978. Forestry, foresters and society. N.Z. Journal of Forestry 23: 64-84.

# A Canadian forester questions New Zealand forestry

The Commonwealth Forestry Conference, September, 1989, Rotorua. The request posed by many delegates: please explain to us what has happened to New Zealand forestry. Slowly and carefully the numerous New Zealand delegates courteously explained the changes. Yes, the native forests have been taken away from the New Zealand Forest Service and locked up. But why? We heard stories of disastrous beech schemes, unregulated logging, lack of research on stand dynamics and regeneration processes, slow growth rates, complicated ecology and too little and too late multiple-use planning. We went to see podocarp forests and saw 19-year-old attempts at selection cutting with under-planting. More questions, many more questions. The Canadians were listening carefully, very carefully, especially those from British Columbia because there is a close parallel in some aspects. B.C. foresters have effective control over a vast native forest estate, including spectacular coastal rain forests. The environmentalists are pressing hard on B.C. Coastal forest issues. Would the B.C. Government take the forests away from the foresters because the public sees

them to be a destructive force rather than effective managers. Was this the problem in New Zealand? Did the foresters in New Zealand Forest Service fail the public, or did the history of massive native forest destruction in New Zealand make the lock-up inevitable? Must foresters be more outgoing and ensure themselves a broad basis of public support? Does multiple-use planning avoid the lock-up? What were and are the forestry students taught in school about these issues? We received answers and opinions. The lesson to Canadians seemed clear – smarten up our act.

New Zealand foresters are not registered professionals, but they are in B.C.; professional status is required for all forestry planning and silviculture plans must be signed by a forester.

Does forestry professionalism bring more rigour and avoid some of the problems? The B.C. Forest Service thinks it does because it has thrown the gauntlet of management into the hands of the profession and the licensees because it has been down-sized to the point where it can hardly manage it all.

The sale of the plantations. Extraordinary! How can a Government sell off its forest estate for two rotations cash for each to pay its foreign debt? Don't only third-world countries do that? Are there not multiple-use values attributable to these plantations which are endangered by selling them off? Do New Zealanders really think of radiata pine plantations as

a crop like cabbages? Why do they not just lease the forests or enter into management agreements like Canada? Canadians would never allow these forests to be sold off; never, but never! The Canadian forests are a public resource; there is even much public opposition to more leases. Why are radiata forests different? Why aren't the New Zealand foresters complaining?

When all the answers and opinions to the many, many questions are provided to the delegates what do they think about New Zealand forestry? This one thinks that, in the enthusiasm for national economic restructuring, it looks as if some serious mistakes will be made. Forests once sold are hard to buy back. It is clear that the public perception of forests and foresters is quite different in New Zealand and Canada; the practices are different. Gifford Pinchot's dictum "greatest good for the greatest number in the long run" can be interpreted in many ways. Those differences in public perception are very important – foresters should remember that. The price may be loss of your forests.

Yes, we enjoyed the conference. We really did learn a lot, probably as much about ourselves, our attitudes and institutions. That is the value of international travel and conferences. The New Zealanders were great hosts.

**G. Weetman**  
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## The importance of debate

(continued)

*should surrender either his rights or duties during the rest of his waking hours. Nor does it absolve him of his responsibilities towards his fellow citizens. And on occasions when what he conceives to be his responsibility towards his employer is in direct conflict with what he deems to be his social responsibilities, he has a moral duty to put the public interest first."*

Later, when speaking of the decisions that foresters are involved in, Jack Westoby said that they are "important for the community. They are often irreversible. Their effects can be much more long-lasting. This is why foresters should speak out.... Above all, they must continually remind contemporary society of its obligation to future generations: foresters are better qualified than most to act as society's conscience in this respect."

We all have a responsibility to become involved. It should not and cannot be left to a few while the majority just talk among themselves.

**D.J. Mead**  
Editor

### **New Zealand Forestry**

invites you to submit material  
for inclusion in this publication

We accept:

- articles on a wide variety of forestry topics;
- comment on forestry or Institute of Forestry affairs;
- items on current events;
- letters to the editor;
- items from local sections;
- advertising.

Comments, letters, news items, and Institute news need to be with the Editor at the beginning of the month prior to publication.