

# Dysfunctional – I don't think so

Ian Hinton

The other day while drinking my morning coffee and contemplating the drive to work, my wife Rachel commented that there is something familiar about listening to the music you grew up with. Radiohead was playing at the time ... but more about that soon.

Later that day (23 May 2016), I opened my weekly email from the Institute of Forestry to be greeted by the word 'dysfunctional'. Spellbound I thought I have to read more, and after much searching I found my password and logged onto the NZIF website to read the rest of the President's column. Having read the column (twice) I came away convinced I was reading a transcript from talk-back radio about what's wrong with the industry and, if those of us still in the industry had any pride left, what we should be doing to fix it.

Is this industry really dysfunctional? Do the industry players have no awareness, or concern, for those around them. Are we so bad that those of us who still work in the industry have no pride in what we do or have done? I can only speak for myself, but I wonder if I'm working in the 'same' forest industry.

The industry has gone through much change since 1985, when Radiohead first formed, and that change continues today. The Forest Service went in the late 80s, we saw the demise of the big integrated companies in the late 90s and early 2000s, and since then there has been a period of relative stability and consistency in management, the benefit of which should not be underestimated. Owning a forest is better than putting your money in the bank. One might also note that this period of relative stability has coincided with equity investments from the dreaded 'overseas absentee' owners.

I've managed forests for one of those 'absentee' owners for close to 12 years. Over that time:

- The value of the forest asset has trebled
- Forests have maintained FSC certification
- Standing stock has increased by over 50%
- The sustainable harvest level has doubled
- Supply to domestic mills has increased to 70–75% of annual harvest (on a doubled harvest)
- Business has invested in a forest genetics company
- Business has invested in increased nursery output and in a container facility
- R&D is now a buzz word rather than an expense that doesn't meet a hurdle.

I for one happen to think it's a good thing.

In recent times there has been substantial capital investment in the sawmilling industry in the Central North Island. This hasn't happened because sawmillers have found an extra bob or two behind the couch. It's happened because these sawmillers, and their bankers, think they can make money in the political, economic and social environment that exists today. It happens because they think they can access the volume of logs they need, of sufficient fibre quality, competing with and winning against the export market.

At an industry level we now have Wood Co, we have a forest levy, we have a Science and Innovation Plan and we almost have a National Environmental Standard. R&D spend is increasing every year and the industry is working closer with Scion than it has for many years. Much of the R&D spend is on future crop performance, not near-term goals. Engagement with Farm Foresters, Crown Research Institutes, MPI/MBIE and other stakeholders is growing all the time.

Are we perfect? No. Is there room for improvement? Absolutely. Are industry players, government, local authorities and NGOs all perfectly aligned? Of course not, and nor should they be exactly aligned. Is the industry, and by association the people who spend their professional lives working in it, dysfunctional? I don't think so, and for an executive of the body that purports to represent current, and past, forestry professionals to suggest so is disappointing, inaccurate and possibly damaging.

I, for one, am proud of the small difference me and my colleagues have and continue to make in the industry we still work in, but for now I'm off to see Tim at Red Stag to demand my \$10 premium for supplying him with environmentally certified logs. I may or may not take our President's advice to stick to my guns. Perhaps the theme of his next column should be relevance rather than alienation.

Back to Radiohead; if you only listen to the music of your time you will be stuck in your time. You don't have to like the music of your parents or your kids, but just because it's different to what you grew up with doesn't make it bad. Take the time to understand, really understand, rather than listen only to what you hear from the disaffected. Then maybe you will realise that yes it's a work in progress, yes it could be better, yes it is different from what it was in your day, but perhaps it's not that bad or just maybe it's good.

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