

PANZ, truth, and the news media

By Brian Turner

All lobby groups face difficulties in getting their point of view across in the mainstream media. Supporters won't be surprised to hear that PANZ has had some problems in this regard, so for that reason I was interested, when speaking recently with a prominent journalist, to be told that bodies lobbying on behalf of 'private interests' had managed to persuade a substantial number of media staff that PANZ was too radical. He said that although it was clear that we had been speaking the truth for the last three years or more, our timing had been wrong. What we've been saying, he said, is okay now that others have at last cottoned on. In other words the truth is of lesser or little importance; it's who says what, when, and how you say it that counts most.

As with many words, radical has shades of meaning. One is to do with thoroughness – we try to be thorough, fair and accurate. But radical is also used pejoratively, especially by our opposition, to mean extreme. In other words, they are saying that they are reasonable – pure as the driven snow – and we are unreasonable. Oh yeah? All that we do is lobby and work hard to try to ensure that the public estate is retained for the use and benefit of all the citizens of New Zealand. As a general rule we oppose those who seek to privatise public lands with recreational and conservation value. Occasionally we work, too, to see if we can persuade authorities to add bits of such value to the estate.

But generally, contrary to what our opponents say, we do not set out to 'grab' land, we try to stop them from grabbing it principally for private gain.

What our opponents don't like about us is that we are committed to resist private predation of the public estate. We don't mealy-mouth; we ask for public consultation and open debate. Our opponents are loath to come out into the open, to come clean.

Recently I was reading a book by an American journalist called Howell Raines. In it he wrote of a friend who, while out fishing one day, said that, "The problem with Republicans is that they would run roughshod over human values in order to protect property values. The good thing about Democrats is they would run roughshod over property values in order to protect human values." Those remarks got me thinking about the situation ideologically in New Zealand, how confused it has become, and how the drive to privatise so much threatens to ride roughshod over the traditional values and expectations of people with a deep interest in recreation and conservation.

Media people throughout New Zealand are only just beginning to wake up to the attachment very large numbers of New Zealanders have to public lands, and to the depth of their desire to retain them.

So much of the negotiation relating to matters crucial to the future of the public estate takes place in Wellington and is conducted, in secret, by people who have no public profile at all, and who will avoid – or are instructed to avoid – telling the public what is proposed until it is a fait accompli. Conspiracies do occur. One of the dangers faced by Wellington-domiciled lobbyists on behalf of recreational and conservation interests is

that they can become too chummy with Ministers and MPs. When this occurs – and the slippage is infectious as all who have lived in Wellington will attest – they begin to feel that they know best and that people who live in the regions should leave them alone and accept what emerges from the back-room politicking.

Well, no. PANZ doesn't think it's supporters want us to mealy-mouth, kowtow, cower. Every year we make dozens of detailed, well researched and reasonable proposals. We examine legislation; we try to uncover the truth. We try to make MPs and bureaucrats release information and consult with the public who treasure access to the glorious outdoors.

We're sorry about the smear campaign by some of our opponents. It does them no credit. As for members of the mainstream media: it's good that more of them are waking up and have begun a more rigorous examination of recreation and conservation issues in an effort to get at the truth. It's good, in other words, that they are at last beginning to act like a fourth estate: Well, some are.