# TEACHERS AS DEFENDERS OF DEMOCRACY FOR ALL IN HARD TIMES

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## Introduction: The story so far

Prior to 1984 teaching was a valued commodity in New Zealand. Teachers were, in general, strongly supported by successive governments and by the Department of Education, which was largely staffed by ex-teachers and consulted closely with the profession on most matters. For example, both unions were heavily involved in planning school curricula. It was another world; a different political settlement.

However, since the new right revolution, brought in by the third Labour government, teachers have been seen in a different light. Not just teachers, in fact, but the whole public service. Under the new right model, agencies and public servants were viewed as self-interested 'free riders' whose only goal was to get more and more resources for their own area. This led, it was argued, to bloating of the government sector, inefficiency and 'provider capture' of resources. Teachers and the education system were identified early on as the worst example of a feather-bedded system (Treasury, 1987).

The suggested answer to these ills, of course, was privatisation of everything, and especially of the education system. In a proper free market, self-interested players would act in the most efficient way possible to maximise profits, so feather-bedding would disappear (Treasury, 1987). These are the underpinnings of the schooling system that we still have today, driven by notions of individual choice and competition (Codd, 1999). Why is choice important? Because it is supposed to drive up the quality of schooling and keep schools and teachers on their toes. Has it worked? There is no evidence that New Zealand schools offer a better overall education for their students than in the past. The relative position of choice-based schooling systems, including New Zealand, on international PISA rankings has continued to decline over time (Gordon, 2012).

Of course, privatisation of schooling was not possible (although this did not stop successive governments trying all kinds of schemes to bring aspects of the private into public education). Instead, the government sector adopted models of devolution and steering 'at a distance' to control the work of schools and teachers. The model of so-called 'agency theory' (Boston, 1991) created chains of accountability and brought models of managerialism into the sector (and arguably whole new swathes of inefficiencies). There was a professionalisation of the public service, including a particular discouragement for the new Ministry of Education to be staffed by educators. At the school level, the position of teachers shifted from collegial professionals to a proletariat subject to increasing external judgement (Gordon, 1992).

The 1990s were a very important time for teachers with the threat of bulk funding of teacher salaries. That fight was won by teachers. If it had been lost, then by now the teacher unions would be weak shells with fewer members, every school would have to negotiate pay and conditions with each teacher (with the unions unable to support all such negotiations) and the government would have used the funding mechanism to bring teacher salaries down as a matter of policy, while pinning the blame on schools. If you don't believe me, just look at what happened in the tertiary sector, where it is a constant struggle within each institution to make ends meet while universities, in particular, have spawned huge marketing departments to attract students and funds. Today's teachers have a lot to thank the teachers of the 1990s for—and not just the teachers, as many non-teachers marched alongside you to save education.

Many elements of new right policies continue to operate in schools, but the huge threat to the teaching workforce was beaten back. Last year's proposal by the Minister to reintroduce a bulk funding model was quickly and efficiently quashed by good union action and the work of teachers, and had the

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interesting side effect of bringing the two teacher unions closer together than they had been for many years (including a joint website: betterfunding.org.nz).

## New politics

But now bigger threats, emanating from beyond these shores, have emerged. It feels now much like it must have felt in the 1930s, with Germany, Italy and other countries beginning to make the case for the promotion of a racially 'pure' population within their borders and the removal of all others. Hitler's argument was basically that all the problems of German society at the time—unemployment, inequality, immorality, inter-nation difficulties, family problems—could be boiled down to the Jewish people. On the second tier, homosexuals, socialists, teachers, trade unionists, people with disabilities, the chronically ill, persons of colour and many other groups were all viewed as symptoms of a society which is sick. It was argued that only in a pure nation—Germans for the German—could the problems of society be healed.

These views come and go throughout history. The eugenics movement, led by Francis Galton, was a very popular strand of thought in the early decades of the twentieth century. The notion of a hierarchy of racial superiority (with white Europeans at the peak) was widely held, including here in New Zealand. Indeed, the founder of the Plunket Society, Frederick Truby-King, believed that women were becoming too well educated and that this was causing them to have excessive pain in childbirth (along with a wide range of other problems) (Tennant, 1986). His whole scheme of infant care was based on the need to encourage such women to make white babies; his solution to limit the education of women.

A characteristic of the pre-war beliefs and movements is that they had strong support, and even when these beliefs were translated into atrocities against persons and groups, populations did not always stand up for the oppressed, whether out of fear or because of belief in the principles. The lack of action was enshrined in this famous stanza by Pastor Martin Niemöller:

> First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist.
>
> Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
>
> Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew.
>
> Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

The view of who is the enemy of 'us' differs over time (as do, I suppose, views of who 'we' are). The 'other' can be constructed in a range of ways (Mutch, 2006). But, as I will argue, no one is safe. I fear that while teachers managed to weather and even win the attacks on their pay, status and working conditions brought about by new right policies, other ideas now form new threats to teachers, their students and school communities, not to mention our whole society.

## The predicament of the political present

This time last year, Brexit was not even a word and no one would have predicted that Donald Trump would now be President of the United States (if no one assassinates or impeaches him, he will probably still be President when you read this). Both movements on two sides of the Atlantic hold to a common set of values and beliefs: that 'we' (however we define we) are being cheated, over-run, stolen from and disempowered by 'them'/'the other'. 'We' will be much better standing alone and supporting ourselves against all of 'them'. I have noted above that there is nothing new about such views—indeed they have been recorded in political philosophy since at least Plato's Athens. Humans appear to need to rule not only the physical earth, the animals, the climate and the terrain, but also, from time to time, to construct stories of 'our' superiority over other parts of the human race. Women and people of different culture/religion/ethnicity are the most common targets.

There is also, of course, a common alternative discourse of humanity, characterised by openness, immigration, supporting refugees, women's rights and so on. Led by organisations such as the United Nations, these views became increasingly dominant in the post-war period. The development of the European Community was an attempt to heal differences emerging from two world wars in the pursuit of a better future for all. This had majority support for a time.

Both the Brexit and Trump votes appear at heart to signal a shift in the balance back towards an 'us v. them' view over a more globalised position at a political level. Friedman (2016) argues there are three main reasons that 52% of voters supported Brexit: economics (the belief that the EU was taking more from Britain than it was delivering), sovereignty (a desire for more national control of resources and a distrust of supra-national organisations), and political elitism (the view that politicians are out of touch with the real concerns of voters).

Similar factors were in play with Trump, with a focus on America for Americans, jobs, and against immigration. Arguably, Trump was elected as an anti-politician, vowing to clean up Washington, as well as against certain populations, vowing to shut down the borders (but only to the South) and stop Muslim immigration. While the 'them' in the United Kingdom is new immigrants from Eastern Europe and beyond, for Trump the 'them' is Muslims, refugees, people from Mexico and women, especially 'liberal women'.

Other countries may also vote for similar policies. In France, conservative populist Marine Le Pen of the National Front could pull off an upset victory in this year's election (you will know whether she has won by the time you read this). Australia's policy of sending people who have committed crimes back to their country of origin—even if the person has lived there all their lives, even if the offence is minor—is already in operation, as are their offshore detention centres. Examples abound.

## Poverty and inequality in New Zealand and the role of teachers

Could these movements travel to New Zealand? Unfortunately, I think the answer is yes, and very easily. For such a small and young country, New Zealand carries a large burden of 'otherness'. The first is anti-Māori sentiment, which Don Brash nearly bartered into a new form of government in 2005. The second is anti-immigrant sentiment, led by Winston Peters with his views that New Zealand has opened its borders to low quality immigrants and refugees.

Any society with large social and economic inequalities is vulnerable to divisive policies. Rashbrooke's (2013) work demonstrates the enormous extent of income inequality here. His work also demonstrates that the benefits of inequality have accrued only to the top ten percent of people since the introduction of new right policies. These are dangerous figures. The work of the Child Poverty Action Group and Boston's analysis of the numbers living below the poverty line (Boston, 2015) also reinforce the effects of economic inequalities. In short, in social and economic terms the very conditions to have sparked Trump and Brexit over there are operating here.

Our political sphere also shows signs of a fall from popularity that a Trump-like character could easily exploit. Like many other countries still pursuing unpopular new right policies, New Zealand has not had a one-party majority parliament for many years. Politicians are not popular. It is not that hard to imagine that a Trump-like figure might do well here, under the right conditions.

New Zealand's schools are now increasingly racially divided, and this too is a growing trend. Schools in low-income areas are predominantly and even overwhelmingly made up of Māori and Pacific students (around 95 percent in decile 1 schools), while high decile schools have very few such students (Gordon 2015). This kind of ethnic segregation is quite dangerous, as people only get to know people like themselves. When writing about a bus ride from central Auckland to Otara (Gordon 2014), I observed multiple population segmentations occurring within a one-hour trip.

In summary, any social or economic analysis of New Zealand society must conclude we are vulnerable to our own brand of authoritarian populist takeover. Under the right conditions, a new movement of this type could emerge.

## The need for teachers to act to maintain democracy in hard times

So what of teachers, who fought successfully to maintain their pay and conditions and high levels of unionisation? The teaching profession as a whole lives with the effects of the social divide I have described every day. They have a range of views on it, its causes and consequences.

As a workforce which has been under attack, teachers know a threat when they see one. My aim in this short article is to present to you a clear danger and threat to our social fabric. And my argument is that teachers are uniquely qualified to act to overcome the effects of divisive politics. You can offer

sound, rational, knowledge-based commentaries to your school communities, peers and families about the dangers of these policies. As Niemöller implies, if we don't speak up, who will?

## The BLESS approach

I want to propose a five-point approach that teachers can use in their daily lives to counter the segmenting effects of this kind of discourse. Fortunately, they are all also aspects of good practice of being a teacher, and will make you a better, more responsive person with all your students.

- **B**—Be a moral agent for an inclusive society and world. Teachers should argue for social and educational inclusiveness for all, even when this is difficult. This needs to be argued as a moral position—that is for an integrated society and against inequality and ethnic injustice.
- **L**—Learn and teach the lessons of history. The twentieth century was the most violent in all of human history, and this century is not, to date, looking like a peaceful one. Learn about the triggers of dispute and war and teach these to others. Understand that political views have real effects.
- **E—**Educate your communities. Many of the things that brought Trump to power are real concerns in communities—jobs, lifestyle, housing, crime etc. It is important to always emphasise that we are all in this boat together—that pointing the finger at this group or that misses the point and is dangerous.
- **S**—Spend more time with your at-risk communities. It is very likely that you have migrants, refugees and people of a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds in your classes. How much do you know about them? Make an effort to get to know the families, suggest cultural festivals in your schools.
- **S**—Support your school, all local schools and your community. Competition between schools has caused barriers and walls to grow up between schools. Tear them down! Support all schools and all teachers. Make a difference together. March for democracy.

You may well be thinking by this stage (thankfully we are nearly at the end of this paper) that I am preaching to the choir. I know teachers have a good understanding of what is happening in general. What I would like to see for the next step is, just as the community supported you in your dark days, that you support the community back in what may well turn out to be our hour of need. When I attend marches and protests, as undoubtedly I will this year, I want to see you there too.

This may require some stepping out of your comfort zone. But it may also make you a better teacher in the end. Michael Apple (1993), one of the most highly respected critical education theorists in the world, noted:

> Among the things that influenced me were the years I spent as a young teacher … in the inner-city schools of one of the poorest cities in the United States. It was made strikingly clear to me then that unless we acted politically—both inside the school and in the larger society—to get less racist, sexist and class-biased curricula, more critically oriented teaching practices, and closer relationships between schools and the local community, neither I nor my students and colleagues would have much of a chance of widespread success.

Apple learned how to be a teacher in more benign political times. How much more important his words are in a period of uncertainty and fear. So when they come for people in your communities, I hope you are there to stand up for them.

## Biography

Liz Gordon is a researcher, academic, ex-politician and educational activist. She lives in Christchurch.

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