



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Forging new pathways

Rachel Mackintosh © 23rd October 2022

Ki te kahore he whakakitenga ka ngaro te iwi

"Without foresight or vision the people will be lost."

This past week a colleague of mine who lives in Taranaki mentioned the town of Patea, which he described as being “nothing since the freezing works closed”.

For 100 years from 1883, the local freezing works had been the heart of the Patea economy. In 1982, the works closed. That’s 40 years ago – 40 years of “nothing”.

The freezing works closed without a vision or a plan for what else could be at the heart of the local economy.

Forty years on, the damage from that lack of foresight can still be felt.

At the 2013 census, the median income in Patea was \$19,000, compared with a national median of \$28,500. In the 2018 census, the median income of Patea had inched up to \$19,500, against the national median of \$31,800. Patea continues to be a place of material poverty.

In the 1980s in this country, we had an economic revolution. Rogernomics meant major and rapid deregulation, underpinned by an ideology that held that an efficient free market would provide for people’s needs and that the freedom for individuals to pursue their own interests would lead to great enterprise and growing wealth that would trickle down. Rogernomics had its international siblings in Reaganomics and Thatcherism. Roger was more extreme.

Trickle down doesn’t work. After our Rogernomics revolution, inequality in New Zealand grew faster than anywhere else in the OECD.

Patea is only one town among many who had their economic heart ripped out, as capital was allowed to flow wherever an increasingly wealthy small elite could send it to maximise their wealth.

Patea, rather than any of the other towns, became emblematic of the damage done by Rogernomics because of the song Poi E, released in 1984. The Patea Māori Club and Dalvanus Prime made a hit record. The publicity for the song allowed the Patea Māori Club to tell the story of the devastation of the economic lives of the people of Patea.

Patea is an illustration of what happens when there is no justice in transition; an abrupt closure and mass unemployment, laying down poverty for a generation or more.

When there are big changes in society, we can ask: Who benefits? Who pays? And who decides?

Patea has paid.

The owners of capital have benefited – [just under half the world's wealth is in the hands of just over 1% of the population.](#)

Who decides?

This is where the title of the talk, “Forging new pathways” comes in.

There is more than one origin story of the Just Transition movement but the best amalgam of the stories I can find goes something like this: in the US in the 1970s, environmental regulation started to increase as human damage to the planet became evident. Employers resisted the regulation, as it would interfere with their business. Environmentalists were seen as the enemy of business. Workers needed jobs, and were often supportive of their employers – and environmental degradation – for the sake of their livelihoods.

Ki te kahore he whakakitenga, ka ngaro te iwi. Without vision and foresight, the people will be lost.

In response to the tension between environmentalism and polluting employment, vision and foresight among a few people led to the beginnings of the Just Transition movement. Indigenous people, environmentalists and unions joined together to talk about the importance of justice in any transition, understanding that a “jobs vs the environment” binary understanding of the world would lead to the people being lost. The people *and* the planet.

There was an example from history of vision and foresight. In the US after World War II, the federal government passed a “GI Bill”, to cushion the transition back into society of soldiers returning from the war. The Bill invested

in that transition. Benefits included low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business or farm, one year of unemployment compensation, and dedicated payments of tuition and living expenses to attend high school, college, or vocational school. By 1956, 7.8 million people had taken advantage of the Bill.

The incipient Just Transition movement advocated for a similar model to this to cushion transitions for workers. A formal group – the Just Transition Alliance – was founded in 1997.

Fast forward to 2022, cross the Pacific Ocean to this country. Just Transition is now a phrase that is routinely used: in the Sustainable Business Network, in the Tripartite Future of Work Forum, and across the union movement.

The principles of Just Transition include engagement of people who will be affected by change. To have a just transition requires vision, planning for the vision, and investment in achieving the plan. The vision needs to be developed by the people whose future is at stake. We ask workers likely to lose their jobs, not just what is their vision for their own futures, but for the futures of their children and grandchildren. Communities in Just Transition forge new pathways.

So, who benefits? Who pays? Who decides? A Just transition requires that the answers to those questions are that the benefits are justly distributed, the costs are justly paid, and that people affected have a say in the decisions.

At the far end of the country from Patea, just outside Bluff, the Tiwai Point Aluminium Smelter has been a major employer in the Southland region since it opened in 1971. Tiwai is likely to close, possibly in 2024.

Without a Just Transition, Southland could become another Patea.

This time, there is hope. The government has not passed the equivalent of a GI Bill, but it is investing, particularly in the engagement part of the Just Transition.

We have a full-time organiser who is responsible for fostering relationships and creating places for the voices of the community to be heard. Local employers, community groups and union members participate in conversations about their own futures.

We have a service called “Job Match”, which is a union-run mechanism to ensure that people looking for work and people looking for workers can be

connected up – with a requirement that jobs on offer be good jobs, providing decent work as a basis for decent lives.

We have a formal agreement with Murihiku Regeneration, a project run by Runanga of Ngāi Tahu, the local mana whenua. That project is focused on the future for local Māori, and the pathways for rangatahi.

With these three initiatives, all supported by government investment, all the communities that have a stake in the future of Southland work together for their own futures.

We don't yet know exactly how Southland will look after the smelter closes, but the communities are not being abandoned to 40 years of poverty. Instead they are forging new pathways.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

How do we **all** benefit from Just Transitions?