



SPEECH NOTES

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Elim Christian Community Centre
159 Botany Road, Howick, Auckland, at 1.00 pm

Distorted priorities

— Principles for immigration

Just yesterday police issued a warning to jewellery shop owners throughout New Zealand concerning a group of Vietnamese. These people had been permitted to enter New Zealand as refugees — allowed here, in other words, as an act of charity on our part — and had proceeded to travel from one end of the country to the other stealing gold jewellery and sending it to accomplices in Auckland, where it was melted down and sent back to Vietnam.

Despite presumably arriving here as penniless refugees, they'd even hired a car to take them as far south as Timaru, stealing as they went.

If you listened to the reactions to our 'State of the Nation' address, delivered in advance of Waitangi Day this year, you could be forgiven for assuming that such an incident would be seen as manna from heaven by New Zealand First.

Just as when we launched, early last year, our policy on foreign ownership, there were uninformed cries of 'xenophobia' and even 'racism'. There was also criticism that we had not been specific as to how we were going to alter the present immigration regime. Those critics obviously do not accept that to solve the problem you must first of all understand it. So let me first explain why our 'State of the Nation' address focused on the problem and not the practice.

We did so for two reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, because if you understand the problem, the principles which must underlie any solution become obvious. But in their haste to defend the policies of the present government, the critics didn't bother with the principles — such concepts being foreign to many of them anyway.

Secondly, we omitted too many specifics because in this equation, it is not the would-be immigrants who matter — it is New Zealanders. Whether those New Zealanders are descended from Kupe or Cook, or whether they arrived here only decades ago or days ago, it is they who matter.

The fact that the Immigration Service permitted a group of Vietnamese jewel thieves to embark on a nation-wide spree of stealing is not cause to criticise Vietnamese people, or Asians, or immigrants generally. One only needs to look at the offshore activities of a few of the 'Winebox' companies to see that there are New Zealanders who will plunder another country for more than a few gold trinkets, especially if indolent politicians do nothing to stop them.

The anger such a story will no doubt engender should be directed where it belongs — at the government which presides over an immigration system so lax that people of obviously unsound character can fill the places on something as important as our refugee programme.

We wouldn't want New Zealand business people travelling abroad to be treated with suspicion and mistrust because of the actions of a few of their countrymen. Nor should the actions of a few immigrants or refugees provide any grounds whatsoever for calls to toughen our stance on immigration. Such thinking not only amounts to prejudice — which, however much our critics wish it were so, does not motivate our judgement on this issue. Not only that, it distorts what really does matter — in fact it shifts the focus 180 degrees from where it should be.

For we believe that New Zealand's immigration policy should focus not on the number, or nature, of immigrants, but on New Zealand and the people who live in it.

We live in a world where technology breaks down new barriers every day. A few years ago, no-one had heard of the Internet. Now, my office uses it every day to send messages around the world in the blink of an eyelid and, even more excitingly, to retrieve information on almost anything you can think of. It's still in the early stages of growth, yet this huge network of interconnected computers has yet to draw a complete blank on any request for information we have put to it.

When it grows — which it will — the Internet will develop into a vast communications and information medium which in some form will touch the lives of almost everyone. How can we be so sure? Our children are using it at school, and that's a sure sign that the rest of us had better catch up, or be overtaken.

Other technology makes it possible for a specialist surgeon to direct a delicate operation from across the city or across the globe.

The tradition started by radio broadcasts from the Correspondence School that most of you will remember from your own schooldays has already grown into university and polytechnic courses which use early morning television, not a lecture theatre, to deliver their lessons. Soon, that will develop into a two-way process with the arrival of interactive TV.

With such technology comes change. Since the industrial revolution we've known that advances in mechanics can have a devastating effect on employment. Now we're facing the information revolution, and we need policies to cope with the demands which that will place upon us. For New Zealand, it's an exciting time. What has been aptly described as the 'tyranny of distance' need matter no more. **We could, if we wished, be at the forefront of the technological revolution while continuing to enjoy the lifestyle and benefits of our home in the South Pacific.**

Indeed it seems that New Zealanders know this already. With no support or even encouragement from government, our growth in Internet use per capita is second only to that of the United States.

But we need to know what we're doing. We need innovators who can look beyond the merely possible and see the way forward. And we need people who can master the technology and make it work. We need to re-evaluate our training, our education, and our business development policies to make sure we're positioned to win. It's an exciting future, and one in which New Zealand is poised to succeed.

In a speech which purports to be about immigration, I haven't mentioned the term for several minutes. But I have been talking about immigration. I've been talking about the future for New Zealand and it's people, and that is what should drive any intelligent immigration programme.

At a time when we know — or should know — that we need to ensure that our children leave the education system with the skills which will help them — and us — succeed in the next millennium, we're bogged down with concerns over teacher numbers and lack of classrooms.

When those people who do have the skills we need could be used to train others, on-the-job training amounts to what the Americans call "following Joe around" — a few hours, or maybe days, looking over someone's shoulder.

When other countries are giving tax incentives to those firms who invest in research and development, we're giving special treatment to those who are represented by one Auckland law firm.

And instead of investing thought, time and money into a national plan to ride the wave of technology, we're standing on the beach waiting for it to wash over us. Certainly, schools are making exceptional efforts to introduce children to computers, and even the Internet.

But essentially, technology is being taught as a subject, which is much like teaching hammering instead of carpentry. Technology is a tool which can shape our future if only we know how to grasp it. But with one computer for every ten — or maybe every hundred — children, it can never be more than a curiosity.

So what's being done about it in the Beehive? Where's the bold national plan to see New Zealand lead the world? The truth is, there isn't one. Little or no thought is given to this topic, except by Maurice Williamson, whose interests tend to begin and end with what's on his own desktop.

Instead of focusing on what New Zealanders need to do to triumph in the technological race, this government holds up it's own inadequate planning as an excuse for immigration. They focus on bringing in people from overseas to fill the gaps that they have created.

Certainly, there is an argument for the importation of skills. But the very technology which we are trying to master provides countless opportunities for students here to interact with teachers anywhere — using the technology as a tool at the same time as they learn about it.

But what we have now is a distortion of priorities. If we're importing people to fill the gaps left by our own lack of a national development strategy, what do we do in the long term? Train New Zealanders to fill jobs which are already occupied by the people we've imported? Or use those people for so long as they're useful and then get rid of them?

In fact we do neither. We continue to turn out people who don't have the skills to compete for the best jobs, and we leave them at the bottom of the heap to chase the unskilled jobs — which has the added benefit — to some employers and to the Reserve Bank — of keeping wages down.

There are other arguments — equally fallacious — advanced to justify the present level of immigration under other criteria. We need investment, we're told. But we don't have a national savings strategy to ensure that New Zealanders will ever be able to invest in their own nation. We need a larger population for its own sake, they say, and then they tell us our schools and hospitals can't cope with what we've already got.

But I wanted to speak to you at greater length about the assertion that 'we need their skills' because it is this reasoning which, of all the justifications put forward, will do the most long-term damage to New Zealand. Not because we're importing Asians; or Britons; or Americans; or Scots; or anyone else.

Xenophobia has nothing to do with it. It damages us in two ways — because it denies opportunities to New Zealanders, and because it tells us, insidiously, that we can't do it. That we're second rate. That we've got to look overseas for people who can do it for us. And the price we pay is citizenship.

So what we're proposing is a fundamental change to the principles underlying the immigration criteria, and thus to the way in which that criteria is applied. We will continue to allow in people who bring us skills we do not have at present and desperately need. But part of the covenant they will make with this country is that they will pass on their skills to New Zealanders. That will mean an intelligent policy which rewards employers who train, and maybe even compensates employers for permitting immigrants to offer their knowledge outside of the workplace during working hours.

We will still encourage immigrants with money to invest in New Zealand. But not in real estate. Apart from the seller and the agent, no-one benefits from such a transaction. And not in farming. That is one subject about which we can teach the world. But those people who want to come here and invest in sunrise industries, who want to employ New Zealanders and teach them new skills, and who want to develop rather than exploit our resources, will find us welcoming. We want, in other words, people whom we need, not people who need us.

Having said that, however, perhaps the most important principle of immigration policy is that the people we welcome into this country must have a fundamental commitment to it.

While family reunification will still operate, it will be slowed. When you leave your homeland to start a new life, for whatever reason, you know you will leave some things behind. One of those things is extended family. The equation which balances what a migrant brings to this country versus what we as a society provide to him or her rapidly begins to unbalance when numerous family members are added in.

It was announced yesterday that Howick is to get two new schools next year — testament to the rapid population growth in this area. It's a growth the Minister of Education describes as 'phenomenal' and there is no denying that much of it is due to his government's immigration policies. But the Minister of Immigration says current policy is right. Policy which sells citizenship to the highest bidder, while casting refugees adrift with negligible support. Policy which sees rows of ostentatious homes in this very suburb, occupied in some cases by children whose parents have no ties to this country other than the price they paid for the house, and who prefer to remain outside it's shores.

Meanwhile, ironically, those very same house prices derail the government's circular efforts to hold down inflation via Reserve Bank monetary policy.

We will still continue taking refugees as part of our international responsibilities. The number will depend not on some quota set by agencies outside of New Zealand, but by our view, as a nation, of the numbers with which we can cope, and the life which we can offer them once they're here. While sitting in an already overcrowded school struggling to learn English is better than huddling in ruins awaiting the next mortar round, it's still not an adequate way to absorb a migrant population.

In short, New Zealand First believes there should be some fundamental principles underlying a sound immigration policy. There have been none in the recent past, during years like the last one, which saw over 65,000 migrants come to New Zealand. Now, with true unemployment well over 160,000, we want to go on importing 25,000 more, each and every year.

Like so much else this government does, immigration policy lacks vision. It focuses on money at the expense of real investment. It ignores the needs of New Zealand and it's people. And it will ultimately self-destruct. Howick is a marvellous place, but there are only so many foreigners who want to buy a house here. And when their children are educated, where will their hearts take them? To a life in New Zealand, which has paid to educate and care for them, or home, to the rest of their families?

There's a psychological technique called 'positive reinforcement', where you get up in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror and say things like "I'm happy, I'm successful and I like the way I look". Perhaps because such a statement would be a gigantic leap of faith for someone like Jim Bolger or Jenny Shipley, there's not much positive reinforcement goes on in New Zealand. We need to win a yacht race or a rugby game before we feel good about ourselves as a nation.

But we can win in other ways as well. Ways which could see us all taking part in the effort, and all reaping the rewards.

Later this year New Zealand First will publish a document that outlines our vision. We believe that with good government we'll have more to celebrate than just the new millennia when the year 2000 comes around.

Our immigration policy is a vital part of that vision. It relies upon us finding people who want to make New Zealand their home, who choose to live here and who want to contribute their special skills to helping us grow.

But it will always have one attribute which sets the policy no matter what the circumstances of the time — it puts New Zealand, and New Zealanders, first.

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