**8. Ethics – the Air we Breathe?**

Ethics are a way of thinking, a worldview, a set of goals which shape the things we value and the decisions we make. Just as we breathe the air as a natural process, so every action or decision we take is governed by a framework of ethics which we usually apply without conscious thought.

But what kind of ethical air do we breathe? Is it the ethical air of consumerism? Or success, prosperity and the good life? Or the ethics of corporate or political advantage? Is it Ayn Rand’s virtue of selfishness? Or the heady world of global finance? Or tribalism, or nationalism? We are surrounded by people or groups whose lives are shaped by one or more of such ethics. Which begs another question: what sort of ethic shapes our own life?

An invitation soon after returning to Auckland in 2000 took me right into this question. A Member of Parliament rang to ask if I would consider joining a Royal Commission on Genetic Modification (RCGM). The RCGM was to address questions such as whether genetically modified crops would enhance food production, or eliminate possums, or lead to more effective therapeutic outcomes in medicine, all without harm to human wellbeing or the environment.

Another phone call next day from a government official asked the same question. I replied that I was not a scientist, having abandoned such studies after scoring only 53 in School Certificate Chemistry 45 years earlier. ‘No problem,’ each replied, explaining that science was to be only one part of the commission’s work, other essential features including ethics, economics, environment and the Treaty of Waitangi.

I was stimulated by the challenge, and two months later joined three other commissioners in a large empty room in a Wellington high-rise office building. Our Chair was former Chief Justice Sir Thomas Eichelbaum. The other members were Dr Jacqueline Allan, a South Auckland GP with Maori heritage from Kati Mamoe in the South Island, Dr Jean Fleming, a senior scientist at the University of Otago specialising in reproductive biology and anatomy, and myself. The two women carried the science, Sir Thomas the legal and oversight concerns, while my brief was vaguely described as ethics, a topic that seemed equally vague to many who later made submissions.

Also at the first meeting was a government official with a guide-book on Royal Commissions, and the two-page mandate from the Government which asked us to recommend strategic options for New Zealand regarding the use of genetic modification (GM) in crops, food and medical applications. We were charged to take into account such factors as risks and benefits, liability issues, intellectual property, the Treaty of Waitangi, opportunities for New Zealand, global developments, human health, environmental, economic, cultural and ethical issues, and regulatory processes in New Zealand.

We employed a manager and staff, and decided on five modes of consultation: meetings with the public and on maraes throughout New Zealand, formal submissions by Interested Persons (IPs)[[1]](#footnote-1), written submissions from the public and a telephone survey. The public meetings began on a bleak winter’s afternoon in Invercargill. Only a handful of people showed up but Mayor Tim Shadbolt got us away to a cheery start.

The pace quickened as news of the process spread. The Nelson meeting was particularly lively with a large crowd and some very creative contributions by children and young people deeply concerned about the environment. A school class presented in Manukau with some well-prepared graphics. Public meetings were generally not attended by GM supporters, so the overall message was strongly green and in support of a GE[[2]](#footnote-2)-free New Zealand.

At each of twelve meetings on marae around the country we were formally greeted, and Sir Thomas had asked me to reply. I am not a fluent Maori speaker but had learnt enough over the years to respond appropriately. Maori were concerned about changes that might affect native flora and fauna, such as the manuka tree or the tuatara lizard, but some Maori farmers saw benefits from GM in crops and animal farming. The final marae meeting was at Turangawaewae in Ngaruawahia. Some of us slept overnight on the marae, being woken for prayer on the mattresses at 5am.

The formal submissions from IPs were received over twelve weeks in a court-room setting in Wellington. About 300 groups applied for IP status, but status was strictly limited to those with a perceived background and expertise in the topic. We had decided that no political party could gain status, but the Greens argued successfully that they were an environment movement, of which the political party was merely one arm. We selected 117 groups for IP status including primary producer boards such as wool and meat, scientific research groups, medical groups, consumer groups, religious groups and environmentalists.

The hearings began with producer boards and scientific groups, followed by medical users, religious and green groups. Each IP had its day in court, during which it was open to cross-examination by any of the other 116 IPs. Careful management of time was required and Sir Thomas allocated a set time for each presentation, followed by a set time for questioning divided among those wanting to cross-examine.

Many of the green groups saw Monsanto as the bête noire because of its production of GM crops in North America. A flurry of opposition IPs put their hands up to cross-examine Monsanto and were allocated seven minutes each. However, the appearance of Green Party MP Sue Kedgley always had an electrifying effect on the hearing. Her delayed arrival on this occasion produced a chorus of voices to the Chair: ‘Ms Kedgley can have our seven minutes, Sir’, and her time for cross-examining was considerably extended.

The producer boards made well researched power-point presentations on the benefits of GM in farming and food production. Some proposed GM grasses to minimise the need for artificial fertilisers, thus reducing chemical runoff into rivers and waterways. They called for more funding for research into innovative technologies.

The interaction between supporters and opponents of GM had some amusing moments. On one occasion an IP advocating sustainable earth policies was cross-examining the CEO of a producer board, suggesting that current levels of resource use and pollution could mean that two earths might be needed to sustain our consumerist lifestyles. ‘Would you regard that,’ he asked, ‘as a viable world-view?’

‘Viable world-view’ was clearly not a category familiar to the CEO, who was somewhat stuck for an answer. ‘Ye-e-e-s, perhaps so,’ he cautiously responded. His cross-examiner then put to him another scenario that with careful stewardship of current resources, the one earth we had could adequately provide for all our needs. ‘Is that,’ he asked, ‘a viable world-view?’ Experienced now with the concept of viable world-views, the CEO agreed more confidently that it would be.

Sustainability came in for the kill. ‘Well, now,’ he asked, ‘how can there be two viable world-views completely opposite to each other?’ Totally flummoxed, the CEO sat head in hands for some long moments. At length his female deputy leaned across and whispered in his ear. His face brightened at once. ‘Our organisation,’ he beamed, ‘believes there can be more than one viable world-view.’

The medical groups presented evidence supporting GM therapies to deal with intractable illnesses. Mention was made of one family with a genetically transmitted cancer gene that had already claimed many lives. GM options to eliminate such a rogue gene were canvassed.

The week before Christmas 2000 turned out to be the most moving week of the hearings. Several parent groups spoke passionately of their experience caring for children with extremely rare diseases, many of which I had never heard of. Some of these diseases have a strike rate of only one in thousands of live births, so that in a small population there are only a handful of such sufferers. Most of the children had a shortened life expectancy but required 24/7 care from parents who were physically exhausted and lived daily with deep grief and emotional trauma. Could there be GM options to help?

A later week was set aside for religious groups, and I had a good time cross-examining colleagues on their biblical theology. Several presentations were based on the biblical story of Creation in *Genesis 1* which balances the use of God-given talents and opportunities for human wellbeing with careful stewardship to preserve the earth’s life-giving capacity for future generations.

The green groups presented their concerns with passion. Possums and gorse were cited as examples of introduced species that run rampant and destroy other flora and fauna. Thalidomide and asbestos were named as products considered beneficial but which had tragic unforeseen consequences. That, they submitted, could be the case with GM.

Organic farmers feared crop contamination by GM seeds blown from neighbouring fields, or by bees transmitting GM characteristics from one plant to another. It was also emphasised that GM-free food would be of positive economic advantage in global trading in a world seeking safe and healthy foods. This could be New Zealand’s niche market, it was suggested, and part of our ‘clean green’ brand.

The telephone opinion survey came up with divided views on GM, while the call for written submissions from the public produced more than 10,000 responses. Around 92 per cent of these opposed GM, violently so in many cases. Many were of a form-letter variety with succinct two-word messages scrawled across the page. Each was read by staff and comments of substance noted.

By the end of March 2001 the consultation process was complete. There had been thousands of pages of data and a multitude of conclusions and opinions. We took a week off to let things settle. The following week we four commissioners met by ourselves for a first review of our conclusions. Impeccable jurist that he was, Sir Thomas had established a protocol that we would not discuss conclusions until we had heard all the evidence.

So it was that we ended up for a two-day retreat at a secluded guesthouse in the South Wairarapa. After morning coffee we sat around in comfy chairs and addressed a central proposition that had been made to us again and again during the consultation process: ‘New Zealand should declare a total ban on any use of GM.’ What did we think? It took only a few minutes to establish that none of us supported such a proposition. Human advancement proceeds by way of innovation in science and technology, and it was a Luddite approach to ban any technology out of hand.

But significant questions had been raised about GM, questions to which there were as yet no answers. We felt that GM usage should not be adopted in New Zealand until those answers were found. We saw the need to ‘preserve opportunities’ for the use of GM, but also to ‘proceed cautiously’ with further research of both field and medical GM options. We made 49 recommendations to strengthen existing environmental legislation, all but one of which were implemented by Government. Fourteen years down the track I am not aware of any GM usage of crops in the open field, or of GM uses in medicine.

We reached that overall conclusion in a short space of time, but it took another four months to assemble a huge volume of material into a coherent report. We summarised the key issues under three headings: strategic and economic issues, health and environment, and cultural, ethical and spiritual concerns.

The latter heading raised questions about underlying values. I had suggested we develop a set of values as a measuring rod for any conclusions we reached. The others were not so sure about this. Who were we to decide what values were appropriate? And in a nation of great diversity could there be any consensus about underlying values?

I pointed out that a range of values was implicit in the 17 factors that were part of the RCGM mandate. Values were also expressed, implicitly or explicitly, in many of the submissions. But the ethics box was often left empty in the template we produced for submitters, some IPs simply stating: ‘we always seek to act in an ethical manner.’ Others, especially in the medical area, tabled organisational codes of conduct which addressed important items such as patient confidentiality or transparency of information, but did not cover macro-questions such as whether it was ethical to use GM at all.

We decided to give the values question a go. One morning over coffee the four of us sat down in front of a blank whiteboard and brainstormed possible underlying values. Surprisingly, we quite quickly reached consensus on seven:

* Preserving the uniqueness of Aotearoa/New Zealand, finding our own tailor-made approach
* Preserving the uniqueness of our cultural heritage, enshrined in the Treaty of Waitangi
* Ensuring the sustainability of our environment for future generations
* Recognising that we are part of a global family, and hence cannot be isolationist
* Ensuring the well-being of all citizens, avoiding winners and losers
* Providing for maximum freedom of choice within established guidelines
* Ensuring effective participation in decision-making, as befits a democracy.

From there we developed a strategy for ethical decision-making whereby any decision or choice being considered was tested against the seven values. A proposal to genetically modify sheep, for example, or to release GM crops in the field, required not only all the relevant information but also had to be tested for congruence with the values. A diagrammatic outline of this process was included in our report.

The 14 months on the RCGM was a significant time in my life. I felt privileged to work as part of a team with three colleagues from other disciplines. Some of our views differed but we were able to debate and reach consensus without any final dissenting opinion. It was a privilege to visit many parts of New Zealand and absorb the wide range of submissions made. I was impressed by the integrity, expertise and commitment of those we met, whether scientists sharing their knowledge and research objectives, or green groups passionate about the environment, or young people expressing their hopes for the future.

The consultation process sparked some remarkable dialogue. In the early weeks of the hearings much of the interaction between IPs was adversarial. It would be naïve to suggest all differences were nicely overcome – they were not. But a mood of negotiation which showed listening was going on was apparent in later weeks. One IP might say, for example: ‘we know that … is very important to you, but could you live with … which is important to us?’

Ethical decision-making based on values is fundamental to public and private life. Operational values such as honesty and transparency are the glue for fairness and trust in any organisation. But ultimate values are to do with the overall purpose of any organisation, be it a business, trade, profession, government, church or community body.

This was clear in an all-day planning session a colleague and I ran for the Board and senior officers of Christchurch Hospital in the 1990s. Those were the days of ideological madness when the nation’s public hospitals had been renamed Crown Health Enterprises, demonstrating that the concept of public service had been replaced by that of profit-making enterprises.

During the day we sought to establish a set of goals for the hospital as a basis for policy-making. By day’s end we had listed twelve goals, two of which appeared to be in conflict. One was an operational target ‘to work within our allocated funding’, while the other identified the fundamental purpose of the hospital ‘to provide a health service for the people of Canterbury’. In a time of severe funding constraints and heavy pressure to live within their budget, hospital managers felt the tension keenly. They had already severely pruned expenditure, and further cuts would reduce services to those in need.

They could see clearly that service reduction would help them meet a financial goal, but would also undermine their basic raison d’etre. In the end they decided that when all avenues of fiscal prudence had been exhausted, their task was to become advocates for more funding to allow the hospital to continue to fulfil its purpose.

This illustrates what in my experience is one of today’s fundamental ethical issues. Core purposes and responsibilities can be undermined by a preoccupation with lesser operational objectives. Christchurch Hospital had not lost sight of its core purpose, but corporate bodies with profit as their de factoprimary objective can easily lose their focus on public service. I am not suggesting profit-making is inappropriate. Profit is essential for investment, growth and development, but profit should be pursued in a manner congruent with serving the public.

In recent years the concept of stakeholder responsibility has developed within the corporate and public sectors. Stakeholder groups include owners, staff, suppliers, customers, community and the environment. Groups such as the Sustainable Business Council emphasise such a holistic approach to business. Stakeholder responsibility is a measure of best practice in ethical investment which involves not just the avoidance of ‘sin stocks’ such as tobacco, military armaments or pornography, but works proactively to invest in companies committed to sustainability.

I have worked hard on such issues over many years, but progress can be slow in the face of prevailing attitudes that profit-making for the shareholder is the only ethical requirement. Milton Friedman, for example, has written[[3]](#footnote-3):

Few trends could so thoroughly undermine the foundations of our free society as the acceptance by corporate officials of a social responsibility other than to make as much money for the shareholders as possible.

Contrast the words of business leader Rodman Drake:

The advanced thinking on ethics is that a company is not just there to make money; it is there to make money as an end product of serving society well. Corporations which do this in an ethical manner are the ones that will succeed over time, and create wealth and pass wealth from one generation to another, and be living evidence of creativity and a contribution to society.

Too often a narrow focus on profit-making goes hand in hand with a view that addressing the needs of other stakeholders such as staff or the environment will reduce profits. The alternative view is that when staff and customers feel well treated by a company tangibly committed to environmental and community goals, there is a payoff in loyalty to the company as one that is good to do business with. Stock-market data over many years shows that companies operating with a broad stakeholder ethic perform just as well if not better than companies with a narrow focus on the bottom line.

Judge Mick Brown[[4]](#footnote-4) of Auckland is another leader who distinguishes between operational and ultimate purposes. Addressing an Anglican synod one day he lamented the fact that each day in his court he faced a procession of petty offenders charged with theft, vandalism and other minor anti-social acts. He noted that they were mainly young, often brown-faced, and almost always poor and unemployed.

Waxing eloquent, he said: ‘I know there are many people who like to go home at night, draw the curtains, and settle down in front of TV with a nice meal and a glass of wine. I have some advice for them: DON’T SIT TOO CLOSE TO THE WINDOWS!’

Judge Brown stated that until the nation was prepared to address the underlying social and economic structures that gave rise to poverty, injustice and alienation, there would be no end to criminal activity. He did not say that such activity should be condoned, but rather that unless basic causes of crime were addressed the courts would forever be dealing with symptoms. Here was a man who was not satisfied simply to carry out his prescribed role in society, but was committed to explore and speak out about the deeper roots of a problem.

In 1991 in Auckland, Professor Karen Lebacqx[[5]](#footnote-5) addressed a conference on *Ethics at Work*[[6]](#footnote-6). Her topic was *Justice as a Norm for the Delivery of Health Care.* Many of her audience expected an overview of complex ethical issues in western medicine, but Karen opened up a far wider perspective:

During the hour that I am speaking to you, 50 children will die in Africa of disease and malnutrition. Disease and malnutrition are the causes of these children’s deaths, but not the reasons for them. These children are dying because their governments are redirecting funds much needed for social services into the repayment of loans to wealthier nations….Their health status has to do with the systemic factors of justice and injustice around the world.

It was the same message as Judge Brown’s: preoccupation with business as usual can blind us to the larger issues of justice. Karen introduced the parable spoken by the prophet Nathan to King David[[7]](#footnote-7). The parable tells of a rich man who, although he had many flocks and herds of his own, took a poor man’s only ewe lamb to provide food for a guest. Her reference to Hebrew scripture had no sense of religious preaching about it. Having painted starkly the realities of the gap between rich and poor nations, she drew on an ancient prophetic voice to illustrate precisely a major contemporary injustice.

In 2008 I was appointed to ACART[[8]](#footnote-8), a government health ethics committee. Assisted reproductive technology (ART) is an area of great complexity with the potential for deep-felt and long-lasting trauma for those unable to conceive and carry a child in the normal way. Many have family members or friends who have gone through the pain of creating embryos artificially, having them implanted and then enduring the long wait to know the outcome. If unsuccessful they go through the process again, prolonging the trauma.

The care of the medical and counselling personnel at fertility clinics is impressive. Their approach is seldom narrowly clinical, but blended with a strong pastoral sense of each person’s need. One doctor said, for example, that the pain to a woman of not giving birth naturally was not eliminated by the eventual birth of a child via ART. Often there could be a sense of failure which endured for a long time.

ACART’s role is to develop guidelines for ART procedures in accordance with the government HART[[9]](#footnote-9) Act 2004. The Act names seven principles to be followed, priority being given to the wellbeing of any child born as a result of an assisted procedure. Other principles include the wellbeing of women involved, the preservation of the health, safety and dignity of present and future generations and, in the case of donors of eggs, sperm or embryos, access by offspring to information about their genetic parents. Ethical and spiritual perspectives, including those of Maori and other cultures, are also highlighted.

The HART Act allows eggs, sperm and embryos to be frozen for future use. Sometimes genetic tissue is removed from very young people facing treatment for cancer and stored for later use. Similar procedures may be used for women wanting to defer child-bearing.

At times ethical principles clash. Should there, for example, be some upper age limit for a woman to carry an embryo sourced from a donor? There was a case in England where a woman in her late 50s gave birth to a child from a donor embryo. Before the child had started school the mother said she regretted her decision, citing her health and energy levels, her feeling of being a grand-mother alongside other parents, and the recognition that in her child’s teenage years she would be in her 70s with diminishing energy.

The HART Act lays down no guidelines for the age of a prospective birth mother. Avoiding age discrimination is often cited today, but the Act names the wellbeing of child and mother as over-riding principles. Age takes second place to wellbeing. This raises another question: who speaks for the unborn child? Prospective parents have the opportunity to demonstrate their suitability to a fertility counsellor, but the long-term wellbeing of a prospective child can only be guessed at.

Another ethical conundrum arises with the creation of what have been dubbed ‘saviour siblings’ or ‘spare parts babies’. Where parents have a child with some debilitating or life-threatening condition, it is now possible to select an IVF embryo which is a genetic match for the existing child and transfer stem cells at the birth of the new infant to ‘save’ its older sibling. The advantage for the existing child is clear, but could the younger one be left with feelings of ‘they only wanted me to help save my older brother or sister?’ The ethical principle of giving and saving life is a clear one. But it is also ethically desirable that any child born should be loved for its own sake. Ensuring this latter principle is fulfilled is a vital factor in ethical decision-making.

ACART decision-making processes are lengthy, causing great distress to parents who see their period of optimum fertility shrink and their hopes diminish. Much of the background work falls on a very competent but over-worked and under-resourced Ministry of Health secretariat. Draft guidelines go out for public consultation and might also be referred to other groups for comment, or sit on a Minister’s desk awaiting attention. There is little political pressure on governments to increase resources, but the delays are devastating on would-be parents. I was greatly stimulated by my time on ACART and would like to see greater priority given to this work.

Dwarfing all other ethical issues in recent times was the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008. How did the US housing finance giants, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, get into such trouble? In retrospect we can see how it happened, both in America and in New Zealand. Many people wanting no more than a basic family home were pressured by rising house prices and tempting mortgage deals to buy properties at inflated values. Then when the housing bubble collapsed they were forced into mortgagee sales as their mortgage exceeded the reduced value of their home.

There’s a significant difference between a house and a home. A house provides a home where people live, grow up, raise children, and know the love and security of a family. But move along the spectrum a little and a house can become an investment, or a bit further and house-trading can become a way of life. Further along the spectrum again there develops a frenzied maelstrom of buying and selling characterised by greed and reckless dealing by banks and other financial institutions.

Wisdom often proceeds ‘out of the mouth of babes and sucklings’ as I experienced one evening driving our grand-daughter Julia home. Only seven years old at the time, she asked about a land agent’s sign. I explained how houses were bought and sold, how people made sealed offers to the land agent, and how when the offers were opened the house was sold to the person offering the most money. ‘Why,’ Julia asked, ‘would the house not be sold to the one who offered the least money, because that person would probably be the one who most needed the house and could least afford it?’

‘The misdemeanours of the bankers will be paid for by millions of people in the real economy losing their jobs. And in paper money the trillion will be repaid in higher tax on people who have no responsibility for its disappearance. And the little tossers in the investment banks who’ve put away their two and three and four million in bonuses each year over ten years…they’ll hang on to it all. And they of course will be the only ones who don’t pay back a coin. Which is bloody odd when you come to think of it. Because really they ought to be in prison.’

*A Week in December,* Sebastian Faulks

What we saw in the New Zealand property market was a minuscule version of what happened in America. Of the several films on the global financial crisis, the one that shook me most was *Inside Job.* It showed graphically how the poor were ripped off at each end of the money-train. At one end they were conned into unsustainable home purchases, the debts on which were re-packaged and on-sold through a variety of shonky schemes and eventually purchased by pensioner funds or local school boards. The shonky schemers are the true looters in society: they clip the ticket at each stage of the transition, but when their schemes imploded it was the struggling homeless or retirees who lost out.

A second stunning insight from the film came from interviews with academics from prestigious US universities, some of whom served as trustees of the very banks that collapsed. When asked if they saw any conflict between their supposedly objective role as academics and their life as bank trustees, they were totally unable to grasp the meaning of the question. They had lost their moral compass to such an extent they could no longer perceive the moral conflict in their lives.

The academics would doubtless be outraged to be described as amoral or immoral, yet their blindness to the corruption over which they presided fits that category. This inability to discern evil has been graphically described by a Muslim novelist, Kamel Hussein, of Egypt, in his book about Good Friday, *City of Wrong.* Hussein writes:

The day was a Friday. But it was quite unlike any other day. It was a day when people went very grievously astray, so far astray in fact that they involved themselves in the utmost iniquity. Evil overwhelmed them and they were blind to the truth, though it was as clear as the morning sky. Yet for all that they were people of religion and character and most careful about following the right. They were endeared to the good, tenderly affected towards their nation, sincere in their religious practice, and characterised by fervour, courage and integrity. Yet this thorough competence in their religion did not save them from wrong-doing, nor immunise their minds from error. Their sincerity did not guide them to the good. They were a people who took counsel among themselves, yet their counsels led them astray. The people of Jerusalem were caught that day in a vortex of seducing factors and, taken unaware amid them, they faltered. Lacking sound and valid criteria of action, they foundered utterly, as if they had been a people with neither reason nor religion.

The Occupy movement in late 2011 was an international outburst against global financial institutions that allow the 1 per cent of the world’s population to grow fat at the expense of the 99 per cent[[10]](#footnote-10). In Wellington the Occupy movement made the city’s Civic Square their base. I was at the time locum priest at St Peter’s, my previous parish, and Occupy asked if they could hold their opening event in the church in the event of wet weather. The parish council agreed, but the weather was fine and the event held outdoors as planned. I went along to Civic Square and sat on the paving stones for a while, listening to the voices of many of the marginalised in Wellington. A few from government and business also attended and listened in.

It is not always easy to see how such movements contribute to positive change. Two years later the Wellington City Council agreed to pay a Living Wage[[11]](#footnote-11) to all its employees, and to expect the same from its contract service providers. One could not prove a direct connection between Occupy and the Living Wage but I believe movements like Occupy and the Hikoi of Hope help to make people aware of the realities of deprivation and hence are effective engines of change.

A must-read novel with a global finance theme is Sebastian Faulk’s *A Week in December*[[12]](#footnote-12), of which *Literary Review* writes:

‘Looking down the table at her guests now, Sophie tried to calculate their worth...but apart from Farooq al-Rashhid, who’d shifted tons of limes from the groves of Mexico and Iran via the steaming vats of Renfrew down the gullets of the masses…, none of them had engaged with anything that actually existed’.

*A Week in December,*

Sebastian Faulks.

Vintage Books, 2009

The dark conclusion on which everything converges is that there are two types of terrorist in this country: one type universally reviled and against whom no measure is unjustified, and the other, one who arguably does more damage, who gets invited to dinner with the Tory party leader.

In August 2014 Nicky Hager launched *Dirty Politics,* a book which went viral overnight and dominated the period leading up to the September General Election. The book was based on a large number of hacked emails between Prime Minister John Key’s office and Whale Oil blogger Cameron Slater. Further emails showed a very cosy relationship between Slater and Justice Minister Judith Collins, who was forced to resign her ministerial portfolio prior to the election.

Hager’s theme was that the Government was using the Whale Oil blog to promote its right wing policies by leaking information to discredit other political parties, individuals or community groups, or even members of their own Party thought to be less than loyal.

No one looks to politics for a model of sweetness and light, but what shocked many New Zealanders was the extent and vitriolic nature of what *Dirty Politics* outlined as going on behind the scenes. Public Relations extend along a spectrum from providing information, to promotion of a point of view, to outright manipulation. Many felt Whale Oil was at the latter end of the spectrum.

Four basic ethical principles are undermined in the process. Truth becomes the victim of lies or misrepresentation. Personal attacks discredit individuals rather than debate the merits of what they are saying. Promotion of an ideology overrides any consideration of what that ideology might be delivering for the most needy and vulnerable members of society. And finally, democracy is undermined when misinformation deprives citizens of their informed decision-making role while political manipulators skew the playing field to their own advantage.

But while many were shocked by Hager’s revelations, others just shrugged their shoulders and said: ‘Well, that’s politics, what would you expect?’ Many media commentators took a similar approach, either ignoring or failing to understand the ethical significance of what was plainly before their eyes. It is a sad comment on a nation’s ethics when many of its politicians, journalists and the public at large have lost the capacity to see the difference between right and wrong.

In this chapter I have focused on the ethical air we breathe, and have linked it to organisational purpose. If the operating ethos of any company, government, church, public sector body or community service organisation is de facto narrow, institutional, profit-centred and self-serving, corporate practice will reflect that goal. I say ‘de facto’ because most organisations profess a mission statement claiming their aim to be of service to others, but that aim is too often over-ridden or ignored.

Some corporate leaders do so intentionally. Others go along with a prevailing self-serving ethic because they feel powerless to change it, and there are some for whom any wider purpose is not even envisioned. In many situations operational concerns such as cost-cutting or profit-maximisation take precedence over core values. I remember from my days as an industrial chaplain visiting a large company where everyone from the managing director down felt that, much as they would like to change, it was not in their power to do so. All too often lesser and meaner values become so embedded in a corporate ethos that any wider purpose vanishes from the radar.

The Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, wrote in 2012[[13]](#footnote-13):

A moral revolution is needed when capitalism is no longer a system for the common good but an end in itself...Instead of the market being framed by wider moral principles, it comes to substitute for moral principle. If you can buy it, negotiate it, earn it and afford it, then you are entitled to it – as the advertisers say – because you’re worth it.

Ultimately financial failure is the result of moral failure: a failure of long-term responsibility to the societies of which we are a part, and to future generations who will bear the cost of our mistakes. It is a symptom of a wider failure: to see the market as a means not an end.

Over the years I have been privileged to work with many people in the public and private sector who share that vision and have the courage and will to work to achieve it. They are people who breathe an ethical air that works for the common good and the wellbeing of planet earth. We need many more of them.

1. ‘Interested Person’ is the legislative term but submissions were all from groups or organisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The RCGM regarded the term ‘Genetic Engineering’ (GE) as synonymous with GM. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *Capitalism and Freedom.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mick Brown of Auckland was a District Court Judge who later became the Principal Youth Court Judge. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Theologian and teacher of social justice and ethics at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Organised by Dr John Hinchcliff of the Auckland Institute (now University) of Technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *2 Samuel 12.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Advisory Committee on Assisted Reproductive Technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Human Assisted Reproductive Technology. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. ‘We are the 99%’ was one of the slogans of the Occupy movement. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Living Wage campaign is global. In New Zealand a living wage (in 2014) was calculated to be $18.40 per hour, about $5 per hour higher than the legislated minimum wage. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Vintage Books, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Has Europe lost its soul to the markets?, The Times,* 31 January 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)