

# All generalisations are true in the absence of evidence to the contrary

Murray Parrish

The NZIF endeavours to represent the interests of professional foresters on a broad range of issues. We have been actively involved in many of the topical debates in New Zealand and, less regularly, internationally. There are many concerns we could and should be involved with, but for many reasons including the limits on voluntary effort by members, we must prioritise.

As with all other professions involved in complex decision-making, the NZIF cannot claim to always get it right. There are many reasons for this, primarily among them that it is not always clear what right is. Forestry, as with other biological and many social systems, is in dynamic equilibrium. The correct answer is frequently a function of time, place and circumstance.

The solution to a concern about deforestation and biodiversity protection may be to stop logging. This achieves the desired result in the short term, but in the longer term discourages most landowners from having forests at all and could reduce biodiversity. The solution to a concern about the cost of housing may be reducing the costs of materials by increased logging, again a trade-off between the short and long term.

All of this is self-evident, but it is worth reflecting on when deciding what position we want to advocate to the wider community. The nexus between the NZIF as champion of all things forestry and real world complexity can be summed up in the adage that 'all generalisations are false'. It highlights the reality that complex systems are just that, complex.

Why the long introduction? Because of my increasing concern that complex and scientifically robust arguments are viewed as unnecessary and potentially suspect. New Zealand is no more immune to fashions in policy than any other country. At their core, many policy fashions are legitimately aiming to solve serious and complex problems, such as unsustainable levels of emissions of greenhouse gases. A problem with complexity is that the popular debate can be easily swayed by seemingly simple logic and superficially attractive solutions. The political difficulty of reducing emissions from fossil fuel use cannot be over-stated. It may be overwhelming, as progress on a meaningful international consensus on climate change suggests.

Those wanting to discuss solutions which might work politically, practically and over the long-term, risk being drowned out of the policy debate by superficially attractive media sound bites. Who can argue with 'let the polluter pay' and 'industry should be held accountable'. The fact that we are ultimately all polluters is happily hidden behind our collective blind-spot of self-interest. The future generations who logically have more at stake than today's voters are poorly represented, if at all.

This is important because the NZIF prides itself on contributing to matters significant to our sector in an informed and technically robust manner, and with an eye to the future. Our detailed knowledge of forestry matters should see our view sought out and rated ahead of the opinion of others where specialist forestry knowledge is applicable. The fact that our advice might be complex, and based on more than common knowledge of forestry problems, should be seen as a positive. Just as society and popular culture accept complex specialist advice from brain surgeons or rocket scientists in their specialist area, so contributions from forestry professionals should guide and shape debates directly relevant to forestry.

It is not acceptable that debates on green building, biodiversity and climate change be limited to the superficial understanding readily accessible to those on the Clapham bus. Questions of vested interest or lack of background knowledge by the decision-maker are addressed by obtaining the necessary skills, or finding qualified second opinion rather than simply ignoring the advice provided.

Where does this leave us? The NZIF has a responsibility as professionals and as members of the community to contribute to the debates which shape our sector and society more generally. The 850 or so members represent a considerable body of knowledge on things forestry in New Zealand. Combined with our international connections, there are few if any forestry-related matters on which we could not provide some useful and expert opinion.

As individuals and professionals we have a responsibility to our sector and the community to offer an opinion. It is an obligation which is not onerous if divided willingly between the membership. While I cannot guarantee our efforts will always be respected, I contend that society has an obligation to take account of the advice we may offer and to weigh that advice seriously. I am hopeful that the more we take the initiative, the more readily our advice will be respected and sought, but the initiative is with us.

The Dark Ages gave way to the Renaissance because people were willing to question and to test, regardless of established orthodoxy, and the apparent complexity of explanations beyond 'God knows'. Your individual decisions to leave it to others or to get involved could be the difference between enlightenment and the hopefully well-intentioned but misguided witchcraft of myself and others. I look forward to your suggestions of matters which the NZIF should be involved with and your offers of help to ensure that involvement.

*Murray Parrish is the Convener for the NZIF Council Submissions and Policy Committee.*

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Mike Power, Forest Manager for Crown Forestry (photo), uses PF Olsen containerised tree stocks and has this to say:

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- » Advocating for fairer government and council policies
- » Standing with other growers as part of a better co-ordinated industry

- » Promoting wood in the Christchurch rebuild

Please encourage your forest owner clients and contacts to take part in the upcoming Forest Voice referendum. Reminder cards are enclosed with this issue of the Journal for you to circulate.

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