

Parliamentary leadership in promoting peace and development in the age of innovation and technological change

Hon Anne Tolley, New Zealand

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Tena koutou katoa. Greetings colleagues.

I am Anne Tolley, Deputy Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives. It is an honour and a privilege to be here today to join you in discussing this very important topic.

As many of you know, New Zealand is a small, somewhat isolated nation. We occupy a unique place in this world, both culturally and geographically. Nonetheless, we face the same challenges many other countries face when it comes to harnessing the potential of science, technology, and innovation for the benefit of our nation.

We ask the same questions that many of you ask. How do we ensure science has an active role in guiding policy? Conversely, how can parliamentarians promote scientific engagement among the public? And how can our parliament foster mutually beneficial relationships with business, academia, and other stakeholders who deserve a say in the future of our country?

These questions are important because science has a part to play in addressing virtually all of the challenges in today's society.

In addressing these questions, and the many more the future will bring, it is essential that we take a pragmatic, informed approach. There are several ways we can do this, by not only listening to objective, evidence-based advice, but proactively seeking it. The New Zealand Government has, as many others do, a Chief Science Advisor. Our Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor is a team of dedicated scientists bringing a collective wealth of academic and industry experience, with several roles. It advises the Prime Minister on science policy issues and promotes public engagement with science.

For instance, the previous Chief Science Advisor released a report earlier this year recommending a new approach to reducing youth crime and reoffending. This was borne out of the previous Government calling on science advisors to research ways to address growing mental health and youth suicide numbers. The report acknowledged that it is a highly political issue, but brought robust scientific evidence to the table and called for strong government leadership.

We regularly draw on recommendations from other experts as well. One such example is the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, an independent officer of Parliament. Our previous Commissioner produced a high-profile report on the use of the 1080 pesticide. This pesticide is used widely in New Zealand to protect our native wildlife and their habitats from introduced mammal pests, such as possums. New Zealand's Department of Conservation notes that 80 percent of our bird species are at risk of extinction. In addition to being a serious threat to our native flora, these pests carry diseases such as tuberculosis.

Despite its effectiveness, we've seen a small, but increasingly vocal and aggressive, group of protestors calling for a ban on 1080. Researchers, as well as the Department of Conservation, have consistently agreed that there are no practical alternatives to air-dropped 1080; it is simply the

fastest, most affordable, and most effective solution we have. Moreover, there is strong evidence that birdlife, temporarily affected by 1080, returns following the control, so there is little reason to be concerned by its long-term effects.

In fact, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment's report not only agreed that it is the most viable solution, it recommended increasing its use. In examples such as this, we see the value of a robust, independent, and educated voice shining a scientific light on key contemporary issues in New Zealand.

We also need to strike the right balance between short-term electoral goals and the long-term implications of our policies on future generations. To do this, we need to actively engage the public and the policy community in scientific discussion to gain a good cross-section of insights.

An initiative called the National Science Challenges has been set up to promote this. It consists of cross-disciplinary programmes that bring together academic institutions, Crown Research Institutes, businesses, and non-government organisations to tackle New Zealand's biggest science-based challenges.

The challenges are organised into 11 streams, one of which is the "Sustainable Seas" National Science Challenge, hosted by the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research. It focuses on enhancing the use of New Zealand's marine resources within environmental and biological constraints, with the vision that our marine environment is understood, protected, and used wisely. The panel looking after this challenge is made up of five of New Zealand's top universities, a Crown research institute, and our country's largest independent science organisation.

Meanwhile, a more public-facing initiative, our Nation of Curious Minds, is designed to encourage New Zealanders to better engage with science and technology. It has three main action areas: enhancing science teaching and learning by supporting our educators, increasing science and technology engagement in communities, and growing connections between research and society.

Finally, parliamentarians need to take a leading role in shaping public debate. Technological developments have forever changed the media landscape. Ongoing debates in New Zealand, such as over the use of 1080 I mentioned earlier, demonstrate how easy it is for minority groups to take control of news narratives.

Only a couple of months ago, 1080 protestors launched coordinated social media campaigns, exaggerating the perceived dangers of 1080 and spreading a misleading photo of dead kiwi birds, claiming they were killed by 1080. In actual fact, these birds had been killed by other animals and cars, the photo was two years old and repurposed without permission, and the Department of Conservation has not had a single recorded instance of a kiwi being killed by 1080.

There is no doubt that we live in an exciting time. Disruptive technologies are introduced every year, posing new challenges and threats but at the same time, presenting opportunities to cross unprecedented barriers. I am proud that New Zealand continues to punch above its weight and make strong, meaningful contributions to the global science community.

As parliamentarians, we have a duty to take a leading role in leveraging the power of science and innovation to shape stronger countries and brighter futures.

Thank you.