



THE GLOBAL CHALLENGES FACING NEW ZEALANDERS

The Boxing Day tsunami tragedy in South East Asia quickly become the riveting concern of the world community, simply because of its enormity and also because citizens from over sixty countries were affected by it in some way. However, it also starkly demonstrated that, yes, we are a global community and when our humanity is threatened it overrides various forms of difference and distinction.

Modern means of communication ensured that news about the devastating catastrophes quickly was relayed around the world. The positive global response to human loss and suffering is in itself a good news story which demonstrates the fundamental goodness of people when they are starkly faced with others' suffering. People everywhere felt connected, one with the other, in the tragedy.

The question has to be asked from a New Zealand perspective, just how much do we know about what is going on in the world and are we keeping up with the significant developments that will continue to change our lives? Are our young people seeing themselves as international citizens and taking up international civic obligations?

Being a small nation of four million people at the bottom of the world can give us a false sense of security, particularly since we have had nearly ten years of better than average economic growth with all the positives that this has generated.

Since education is the engine that delivers the skills and attitudes which are indispensable for life success, families and young people have to be challenged to become more familiar with the trends and changes occurring in the world and impacting on their lives.

Many New Zealanders have only a scant knowledge of the countries of Asia, Latin America and Africa, yet these are the continents which are home to a large majority of the world's population and are the action centres in the foreseeable future.

New Zealand will become a more dynamic international player and will become even more attractive to live in when all of us adopt a healthier outward-looking stance to the world.

To the Government's credit, the free trade bilateral agreements that continue to be forged with other countries are solid steps in the right direction, as is the nation's participation in regional peace keeping arenas.

However, if we are going to properly prepare our information age generation, there is need to educate our young much better about the world, its peoples, its geography, its history, its cultures and most importantly, about international issues of wealth distribution and international affairs.

The digital superhighways make the achievement of these goals relatively simple providing a structured approach is taken to making it happen. Unfortunately, ignorance and prejudice thrive simply because individuals are not exposed to facts, and we still have too much of this.

To prepare New Zealanders to participate as significant, respected niche players in the world, we need easy access to the developments that are occurring; to know about international trends and standards of all kinds, which in turn will serve as bench-marks to ensure international competitiveness and participation. Our news media have a significant role to play here.

Since our children are growing up in a whole new world, adults have the responsibility to see that they better understand their world. This will only occur when leaders in schools, polytechnics and universities encourage our young people to seek out the world and be proud of being international citizens.

There is a place for a subject called international studies. Likewise, there is a place for international companies and corporations to offer prizes for Excellence In International Education and bring some incentive to this sort of education.

If you did a simple test with a fourteen year old asking him/her where the Pearl River is, or where Uzbekistan is, you would find blank responses in ninety per cent of cases – responses symptomatic of a lack of world awareness.

Most importantly, creating an awareness of how to learn about foreign peoples, about international best practice in business, innovation and standards of all kinds, are good places to start. Knowledge is a tool. Without it an individual cannot make sound progress.

Many of our young people responded generously to the South East Asia tsunami. They are hungry for knowledge about the wider world that they inhabit. Planned, effective use of digital technology will ensure that they are able to access international information which will make them better informed about the world and therefore will enable them to become stronger contributing international citizens.

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