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‘Reframing’ the big issues for a transformational government

MICHAEL HANNE

Prerequisites for transformation

It is widely agreed that, while Jacinda Ardern’s first term as Prime Minister achieved many positive social and economic changes, her Labour Government has not yet proved to be the transformational administration that was promised. (In the Speech from the Throne, delivered to Parliament on 26 November 2020, the government reiterated its commitment to deal with child poverty, homelessness and the climate crisis [New Zealand Government, 2020].) A number of commentators, including lawyer Cat McLennan (2020) and economist Colin James (2020), have suggested that Ardern may not have the courage to carry through on her promise to make the radical moves that a serious focus on wellbeing for everyone would require. On the other hand, Anne Salmond, in a wonderful article for the online newspaper *Newsroom* immediately after the election, argued that Jacinda Ardern is not the cautious leader that McLennan, James and others see – rather she is “bold and visionary,” while understanding “the need to take New Zealanders with her on the wild ride ahead” (2020, para. 6).

I suggest that activists seeking to persuade our politicians about the major challenges we want them to address and the policies we want them to adopt have an obligation to build into their proposals formulations of those challenges and policies that ministers can present to the New Zealand public that will recruit a majority of the population for that “wild ride.” Whether the issue is child poverty or climate change, trade training or mental health, cleaning up rivers or housing, Māori health or immigration, every proposal needs to be ‘framed’ in a way that makes it easy for ordinary people (and

the ministers themselves) to see its merits. (See the work of an outstanding New Zealand think-tank called The Workshop, which has set itself the task of "improving lives by changing how we talk about complex issues" [https://www.theworkshop.org.nz/], such as climate change, poverty, and crime.[1] A Washington NGO, FrameWorks, has for many years assisted activists and social and political institutions around the world to 'reframe' the messages they want to put out to politicians and the wider public on such issues as immigration, housing, schools, crime, education, etc., using metaphors and narratives, which both reflect current research and will be acceptable to most people. Whatever subject area you are focusing on, I warmly recommend you explore their website, https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/.)

This paper represents a very preliminary attempt to illustrate how such framing and reframing may be done in the New Zealand context.

Working with people's 'social imaginary'

Researchers in many fields have concluded that simply providing the information that we think people are lacking on a topic – what is called "the Information Deficit Model" (McDivitt, 2016) – is not usually enough to persuade them of what needs to be done. Each of us holds in our head a bundle of information, ideas, attitudes and assumptions about how the world works that some sociologists call the 'social imaginary,' and when we come across new concepts or data, we mostly tend to fit them into our existing social imaginary (Taylor, 2003). For some of us, our social imaginary will contain considerable resources of theory, information and experience. But for most people, it is a rough-and-ready, by no means entirely conscious, template against which we measure ideas and information that are presented to us. It is made up very largely of simplifying metaphors and stories, some on a grand scale, others on a more limited, even personal, scale (Bougher, 2015). Different elements of this template are linked to, and reinforce, each other – for example, assumptions about why people commit crimes and the extent to which we have free choice. Nevertheless, there will also be contradictions that the individual is usually not aware of. A key example of such a contradiction is the desire so many people express for better provision of public healthcare, education, roading, etc., which sits alongside an insistence that there should be no increase in taxation to pay for them. However thoughtful and well informed anyone is, their understanding of areas in which they are not specifically expert will take this sort of simple schematic form.

Reframing issues to educate the public

Obviously, the social imaginary of an outright neoliberal differs markedly from the social imaginary of a progressive. Importantly, the social imaginary of most people who have not thought through social and political issues much

1
Co-director of The Workshop, Jess Berentson-Shaw has published a fine article "The power of words to tap into the best of us," https://www.newsroom.co.nz/the-power-of-words-to-tap-into-the-best-of-us

for themselves tends to be built of second-hand items (mostly metaphors and stories) gleaned from sources (media, public institutions, anecdotes from friends and their own experience) that have a generally neoliberal slant.[2] For instance, ask many people how they imagine the incidence of crime being reduced and you are likely to hear simplistic suggestions about increasing police numbers, imposing harsher penalties, etc. By and large, progressive thinking involves greater complexity than neoliberal thinking. Whereas neoliberals talk constantly of their 'rights,' progressives see that 'rights' need to be balanced against 'obligations.' And while neoliberals focus primarily on the 'individual,' progressives insist on the relationship between the 'individual' and the 'collective.' This relative complexity makes it harder for many people to view the world through a progressive frame.

When we come to look at the challenge of convincing the bulk of the population to understand the more intractable issues in ways that make progressive solutions acceptable, there's generally no point in taking on the whole bundle of ideas and attitudes any person holds to. We are most likely to get someone to 'change their mind' on a given issue by dislodging some of the individual metaphors and stories that comprise the structure of their 'social imaginary' and substituting new ones. At the same time, we need to be aware of the adjacent 'bricks' in the structure that support, and are supported by, the ones we are aiming to shift.

Talking about poverty

Let's take the example of poverty, a topic that is widely acknowledged in New Zealand to be a serious problem, but which progressives and neoliberals understand and make recommendations on in fundamentally different ways.

A neoliberal frame presents poverty as a distinct issue and the poor as a distinct group. It separates out a section of the population as having (or *being*) the problem, rather than viewing that group in relation to the population as a whole. More broadly, it views society in terms of individuals, competing for resources, achieving prosperity and success in most spheres primarily by individual effort, with the implication that "people are (economically) where they deserve to be" (Project Twist-It, n.d., para. 5). The FrameWorks Institute refers to a dominant and mistaken belief in "self-makingness" (Volmert et al., 2016, para. 13). There is widespread use of the metaphor of a social 'ladder,' which it is assumed individuals may climb to better their situation. Associated with this narrative model is the assumption that we are all exercising 'rational choice' and that we all have the same opportunities. It is as if opportunities are laid out in front of us all on a tray and we have more or less equal agency in taking or not taking them. In this metaphor, poor people are as free as everyone else to make rational choices – and consistently make bad ones (Rashbrooke, 2018).

These frames and models clearly favour the interests of those with wealth and privilege, and are consistent with a 'free-market' conception of social as well as purely economic life. Indeed, within a free-market frame, the existence of poverty in a society is essential as a stimulus to enterprise. Jesus' words

2
American linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff spent many years working with progressives to shift the dominant language of political discourse in the US from its 'status quo bias.' He argues, for instance, that progressives should replace the term 'tax burden' in general usage with 'tax justice' (Lakoff, 2004).

"the poor you will always have with you" (John 12: 8, The New Testament) may be read as validating the assumption that poverty is 'natural.' Generosity towards the poor, in some form of charity, is ethically commendable, but benefits paid to the poor should be significantly less than a living wage to encourage them to seek paid work. "Welfare payments should be a net not a hammock" is a phrase often used by people on the right. They are likely to pick up the very few cases where individuals have been found guilty of defrauding the welfare system by double-dipping (working while receiving a benefit, claiming an accident or sickness benefit they are not entitled to, etc.) and inflating such anecdotal narratives into a belief that 'lots of beneficiaries are scroungers.'[3] (They also tend to ignore the fact that there are many more – and more serious – cases of the rich defrauding the system.) To the extent that poverty can be alleviated, neoliberal policy-makers claim that the poor will benefit from increasing GDP – increasing the size of the economic 'cake' or 'pie' – as they will get a bigger 'slice' of it.

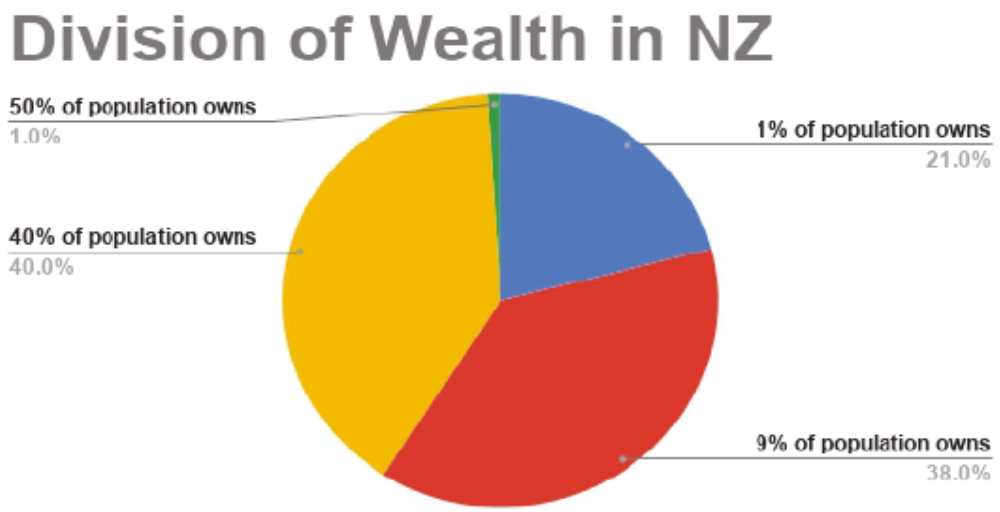
Unfortunately, at least some of these ways of thinking about poverty and the poor are to be found lodged in the structure of most people's social imaginary, even those who would regard themselves as quite progressive. Crucial to any attempt to achieve radical social and economic reform must be the dislodging of some of these bricks and their replacement with images and stories that are more valid. A first move involves shifting the frame from a focus on 'poverty' to a focus on 'inequality.' This is much more helpful in that it locates the poor in relation to the rest of the population (Rashbrooke, 2018) and makes clear that poverty is a whole-of-society problem. It also suggests that, far from being a natural phenomenon, poverty results from identifiable social and political policies[4] and that there is, therefore, no reason why we should always have the poor with us. A publication of the NZ Child Poverty Action Group is appropriately titled *Our Children, Our Choice* (Dale et al., 2014).

3
A revealing piece of research in the UK showed that, on average, people thought that 27% of the British welfare budget was claimed fraudulently, whereas official UK Government figures stated that the proportion of fraud stood at 0.7% of the total welfare budget (Welfare fraud, 2021).

4
See, for instance: https://www.oxfam.org/en

Metaphors and visual images for inequality

The image used by neoliberals of the wealth of a country as a 'pie' can be readily subverted when it is used to show how unequally the total wealth is divided up amongst different groups or classes at any moment. See this image for the division of wealth in New Zealand in 2018 (statistics from Rashbrooke, 2018, p. 23):



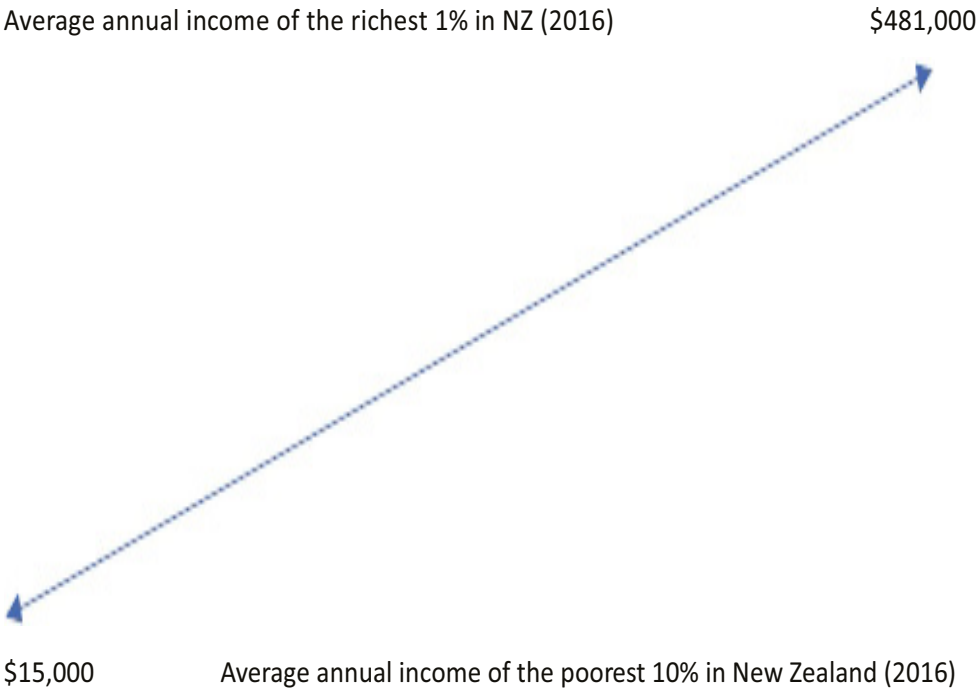
Metaphors and visual images for inequality

There have been many visual images to convey the notion of social and economic inequality. In the early 20th century socialists drew a 'pyramid' to illustrate the oppressive dynamics of inequality, showing the mass of working people ("We work for all" and "We feed all") crushed by the weight of the bourgeoisie ("We eat for you"), above whom the police and military serve to maintain the status quo by force ("We shoot at you"), above whom are the clergy ("We fool you"), above them monarchs and aristocrats ("We rule you"), and, at the top, Capital itself.

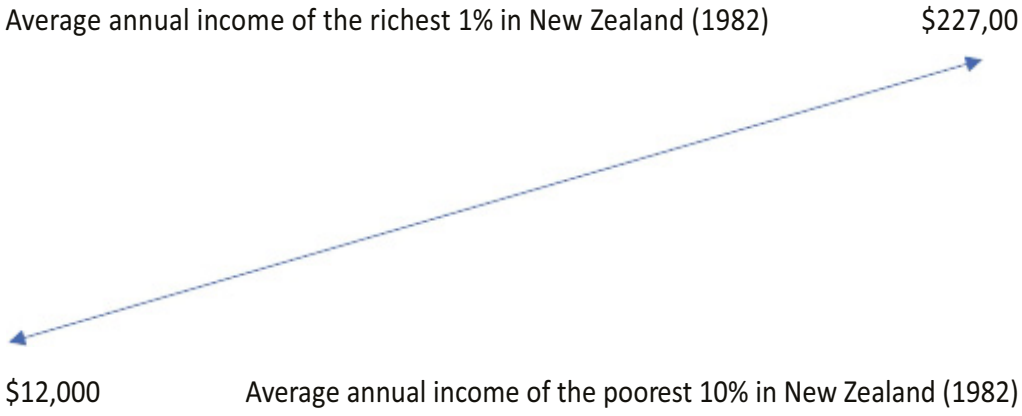
While we may feel there is still much that is valid in this image, especially its pyramid structure, it is unlikely to capture the imagination of modern workers. Among many contemporary images for inequality is the 'ladder/shelf' image (which has many apples on the top rung, fewer on each of the lower rungs, and none on the lowest rung) used by health economists to illustrate the unequal distribution of resources (nutritional, educational, medical, etc.) among people living on the different rungs.

This image (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health, n.d.) is effective in that it highlights the wealth of resources available to the tiny number of people on the top rung and the limited resources of all kinds (not just economic, but educational, cultural, nutritional, etc.) available to those who were born, or find themselves, on the lowest rungs. We can use this image to subvert neoliberal usage, which implies that it is easy to 'climb' the socioeconomic ladder. Activists on poverty in Quebec have proposed a revealing variation on the 'ladder' metaphor for social mobility. In most societies, they say, there is a 'dual escalator' system, which to a certain extent allows those on the lower floors of society to move up and down between the floors they occupy, but does not allow them to transition to the upper floors, where there is another mechanism by which those who live there move up and down within their privileged environment (National Collaborating Centre for Health Public Policy, 2011). People in the middle class struggle to keep their place and may show little empathy for the poor because they are afraid of stepping on the 'down' escalator and always hopeful that they can get on the 'up' escalator. This perhaps explains why people in the middle generally show little sympathy for policies that will tax higher incomes more heavily (e.g., resistance to the New Zealand Labour Party's 2020 policy of raising tax rates for those earning more than NZ$180,000 and the US Democratic Party's policy of taxing incomes over US$400,000 more highly). A related image from banking is of the compounding advantages for the wealthy and the compounding disadvantages everyone else experiences. Chuck Collins writes of the "wealth-building train" by which rich families accumulate and pass on wealth (Project Twist-It, n.d., para. 24). There is a strong tendency for people holding a neoliberal view of poverty to suffer from almost complete amnesia about how certain groups have come to be rich and others poor. In suggesting that people get to be rich simply by individual enterprise and hard work, they firstly neglect the part played in the history of New Zealand and many other settler societies by colonisation and decades of discrimination in building privilege for some and deprivation for the Indigenous people. Secondly, they ignore the role of inheritance in wealth accumulation. Thirdly, they fail to recognise that those (like myself) who have prospered over the last 50 years owe so much to the educational and other subsidies they received in the 1960s and 70s, which are no longer available to young people today. When the neoliberal metaphor of human social and economic existence as a 'race' is examined critically, it becomes clear that it, too, may be reworked to a progressive purpose. It is, after all, a race in which runners start from different points, with some runners starting way ahead of, and others way behind, the 'official' start line.[5] American progressives often say that the child born to a rich family "starts the [baseball] game on third base" (Project Twist-It, n.d., para. 2). Most useful in the current New Zealand context, I suggest, is the simple image of the 'steep slope' of income difference on which the poor and the rich exist.

5
For a great little video clip illustrating this race, see Privilege/Class/Social Inequalities Explained in a $100 Race: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4K5fbQ1-zps



This image is particularly helpful when compared with an image of the slope of inequality as it existed in 1982 in this country, to demonstrate just how much the steepness of the slope has increased over 34 years.



The source for these images is a graph in Rashbrooke (2018, p. 28), which shows not only the spectacular rise in the incomes of the richest 1% over 34 years, but that the top 10% have also doubled their real incomes, whereas the incomes of the remaining 90% have risen only slightly.

Helpful connotations of these images for inequality

The steep slope image has many helpful connotations. The increased steepness suggests that New Zealand society as a whole is becoming more unstable and raises the question of what will happen if this trend is permitted to continue. Moreover, as a nation devoted to sport, in which 'fairness' is valued highly, we may be reminded of the unfairness of competing on a playing field that is not level. This image also links to the body of recent research that shows that countries such as the US (and, sadly, New Zealand), where economic inequality is greater, are much more vulnerable to poor health, high infant mortality, low average educational attainment and high crime rates than countries such as Japan and the Scandinavian countries, or even Cuba (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). (The ladder/shelving image with apples on each step referred to above illustrates vividly why that is the case.) If we are born low down on a steep slope, our capacity for free rational choice is, contrary to the view of many neoliberals, extremely limited. The frame through which we view the world and, especially, our own options is very narrow. We need resources of all kinds – economic, educational, cultural, and of information and health – to be free to make well-informed rational choices. The amount of control poor people see themselves as having over almost every aspect of their lives is minimal. People living in poverty need to use most of their energy and attention just to hold on. In the words of Helen Clark, when she was the United Nations Development Programme administrator, many people live precariously on "a precipice of steep decline" (Clark, 2013, p. xi).

Whereas the frames employed by those who hold to a free-market conception of society emphasise individual rights and capacity for independent action, we need to search for metaphors and frames that highlight *both* our individual identity *and* our collective identity. The image of society as a 'body' has a very long history and has been used for a host of different ideological purposes, some of them pretty appalling (Hanne, 2015). Even so, I insist that it has real value when we consider it in this way: if one part of your body (society) is sick, injured, or undernourished, it must be treated urgently or the health of your whole body will be threatened. Assertions about a clearly unequal society being 'unhealthy' may be quite persuasive. To use another metaphor, if the population is referred to as 'a family,' the implication is that, when a member of the family is in difficulty, they should be given unstinting help. Both metaphors serve as prompts for us to take collective responsibility for the welfare of all individuals within our society. A key argument from progressives should be that gross inequality is dangerous for all members of a society. Phrases that capture this point well include: "inequality is a corrosive force, like rust"; big wealth and income imbalances "eat away" at trust and empathy (Inequality, n.d., para 1); "economic inequality is like blood pressure: too high could mean disaster, too low and the economy or the patient is sluggish" (Dobbins, 2016, para. 1, summarising the views of James K. Galbraith). We could also consider other metaphors: like air pollution, poverty affects everyone; poverty is an infectious disease; if anyone lives in a leaky house, the whole structure of our society is leaking. Underlying all these images is the ethical assumption that we all have a right to good food,

housing, education, medical care, etc., alongside the argument that reducing inequality is in the (enlightened) self-interest of all of us.

Metaphors and narratives for complexity

The 'society as a body' metaphor, where we are attending to both the part and the whole, is a good example of the importance in progressive thinking of paying attention to two or more social factors at the same time. The social imaginary of most people (you only have to listen to talk-back radio or follow many threads on Twitter to see this) treats many issues in terms of a single cause and a single solution (e.g., 'bad parenting' as the main cause of crime and 'longer prison terms' as a prime solution). This oversimplification leads to binary thinking: people insisting we understand causes and solutions in an 'either/or' format. One of the challenges for progressives is to coin metaphors that embody a degree of complexity, such as 'tributaries feeding into a river,' or 'webs,' as metaphors for multiple causation of problems such as poverty, or crime, or poor health, and 'wraparound care' as a metaphor for multiple and comprehensive interventions. So, if we are to address poverty in New Zealand, concerted action is needed in terms not only of increasing minimum wages and benefit levels ('raising the economic floor'), but of healthcare, education, housing and community facilities in deprived areas, etc. In the words of the Auckland City Mission's 2014 report: "there are eight key drivers that keep people trapped in a state of constant financial hardship. These relate to the following areas: Debt; Justice; Housing; Employment; Health; Food insecurity; Services; Education" (quoted in Dale et al., 2014, p. 6).

Countering the dominant metaphor of the market

It is widely, if mistakenly, assumed that the term 'free market' refers to a concrete reality, a mechanism existing in its own right, and that it is the only, or at least unquestionably the best, way for the economy and, indeed, most social interactions, to be organised. The implication of that assumption in relation to wealth and income inequality is that those who get rich have met the demands of the market most successfully, whereas the poor consistently fail to engage successfully with market mechanisms. By contrast, progressives recognise that the 'free market' is just one ideological device amongst many others, used by the privileged to shape economic and social interactions in their favour. There are two major challenges here for progressives: the first is to show that the 'free market' is *only* a metaphor, not an objective reality (Dean, n.d.), and that its selection as a guide to public policy is a political choice, not an inevitability. The second is to propose alternative metaphors for the kind of mixed economies that most of us favour, which have built into them features embodying: collaborative (as well as competitive) enterprise; sustainability and concern for the environment; contributions to the wellbeing of all, rather than a select few (Lane, 2013).

Reframing imagery around poverty and the distribution of wealth

There are many specific phrases commonly used around poverty and distribution of wealth, which need to be questioned and countered. The terms 'intergenerational poverty,' 'intergenerational unemployment,' and 'intergenerational welfare dependency' are widely used, and correspond to real and intractable social phenomena. However, the shift from a focus on poverty to a focus on inequality generates some other revealing terms, such as 'intergenerational wealth' and 'intergenerational privilege' (Collins, 2013). These two sets of terms are, in a sense, mirror images of each other and progressives do well to link them in their discussions, to show that they are causally linked, that the one makes the other possible. The processes by which segments of a society become richer and richer are well captured in the metaphors used below about the tools they have available to them.

While few neoliberal economists explicitly prescribe the 'trickle-down theory' for the distribution of wealth, whereby tax relief and other measures to favour the wealthy would eventually flow down through the whole society, there can be little doubt that many governments essentially employ it in their policy-making and that many citizens intuitively hold to it. Economist John K. Galbraith (father of James K. Galbraith quoted above) helpfully illuminated its absurdity by reframing it as the 'horse and sparrow theory' – feed oats to the horses and sparrows will gain some nourishment from picking over their droppings (Galbraith, 1982). Other phrases used by progressives to illuminate the unfair distribution of wealth include: "the poor have to subsist on the crumbs left over from the tables of the rich."

Individual accounts of poverty and disadvantage

Most of the metaphors and mini-narratives, whether neoliberal or progressive, that I have cited above are used to refer to poverty and inequality on a large scale and from the outside. They are not, for the most part, the way people experiencing poverty talk about their own lives, and if the population as a whole is to understand what it is like to be poor and the urgency of the need to eliminate poverty, it is crucial that they hear the voices of individuals clearly. It is only then that many people will see answers to the question they have in the back of their minds: Why don't poor people do something to get out of poverty?

When people living in poverty describe their lives, they mostly do so in narrative form and in very specific terms. They refer to the experience of hunger, living in a cold and leaky house, children feeling despised, having the power cut off, parents not eating to ensure their children are fed, making choices between paying the power bill and buying food, of family and community solidarity, and family and community breakdown. These accounts will differ in detail from one location and time to another, even if overall there are many similarities. It is often only in retrospect that people who have suffered poverty are able to take an overview. They may refer to the 'cage of

poverty.' Rita Templeton writes of her experience: "Poor is a state of being, but it's also a feeling; an invisible but oppressive mantle you carry around your neck at all times. It's feeling beaten down, every damn day, even on 'good' days when you don't notice it as much"(2017/2021, para. 6).

Progressive frames around inequality

One of the short-term goals that activists seeking to develop policies to end poverty in New Zealand should be aiming for is to establish progressive metaphors, narratives and frames as the standard discourse for public discussion. Among the main shifts required are:

- There is a tendency to view *the poor* as a distinct group and *poverty* as a distinct problem. This tendency needs to be replaced by a recognition that *inequality* is the larger problem, in that it is not only unfair but corrosive of social cohesion, indicative of a society that is unstable, unhealthy and wasteful.
- The traditional view of the GDP of the country as a 'cake' or 'pie,' whose growth is for the distress of 'the poor' to be alleviated, may be usefully modified to represent rather the distribution of wealth in society. The image on p. 101, which shows that the richest 10% of the New Zealand population owns almost 60% of the wealth and that 50% of the population owns only 1% of the wealth, illustrates very clearly that the current division of wealth is grossly unfair, that 'the poor' are not a small unfortunate group, and that 'growing the cake' is unlikely to benefit them.
- The economy is widely understood to be a market-machine to which the rich have accommodated better than the poor. A progressive vision views the economy as a social project that we design and constantly adapt, to ensure that it contributes to the wellbeing of the whole population and of the natural environment.
- Other misleading images are of society as a collection of individuals in a fair race or on a ladder to individual success. These may be helpfully replaced by the metaphor of society as a body, all parts of which should be kept healthy, or as a team in which all should be enabled to play their part.
- It is particularly helpful to introduce images of inequality as a steep and dangerous slope or as a ladder or set of shelves, where the tiny number of people on 'the top rung' have enormous resources and the people lower down have minimal resources to improve their wellbeing.
- The neoliberal view that poverty is natural and even that gross inequality is a necessary spur to enterprise needs to be replaced by a recognition that these are systemic failures, unhealthy, and socially destructive.
- The widespread 'amnesia' about the historical factors which have brought about such an extreme economic division (including not only colonisation and racial discrimination, but fiscal policies since 1980) needs to be

remedied, along with reflection on measures that might be introduced to ensure a fairer division.

- When we talk about the problems of 'intergenerational poverty,' 'intergenerational unemployment,' and 'intergenerational welfare dependency,' it is important to acknowledge that 'intergenerational wealth' and 'intergenerational privilege' are problems, too, and that remedies for the former require corresponding attention to the latter.
- Rather than looking for single causes or single remedies for poverty, it is vital to highlight the many causal tributaries which feed into it and develop a suite of policies relating to the 'living wage,' adequate benefits, housing, education, nutrition, community development, etc., which will contribute to resolving it.
- In designing policies for the redistribution of wealth, it is vital that they be understood and accepted by a majority of the population. They will necessarily involve such devices as wealth tax, inheritance tax, capital gains tax, etc., which will begin to reduce the steepness of the income slope. It is vital that the population at large be recruited to use their imagination to conceive of ways of achieving that end.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have taken the specific example of talking about poverty, and the ways in which it can be framed, to illustrate the broad argument that, as we present policy recommendations to the government on **all** the major challenges we face as a country, it is vital that we include formulations that government ministers and others may use to convince the wider public of both the seriousness of the issues and the potential for change.

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