

# Talking Cents

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*Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This issue is contributed by David Hall, a member of the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Working Group.*

## There is No Alternative – TINA is back

### Or has it never gone away?

Margaret Thatcher will be remembered for many things but perhaps the most dogmatic contribution she made to the political landscape was TINA – there is no alternative.

Although we have very rarely heard these words as such since the 1980s the attitude of TINA has certainly been below the surface, particularly in New Zealand politics, and in some parts of the church.

As I have been closely following the debate over the TPPA it has been interesting to see how the advocates of the TPPA, mainly government ministers and MPs, appear to be reluctant to actually address the issues raised by those opposed to the so called Trade Agreement. Instead the proponents appear to be saying “if we don’t sign and ratify the agreement New Zealand will be very adversely impacted – in other words there is no alternative to the TPPA.

When I made the Social Justice Groups verbal submission to the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade the only question from the National MPs on the committee was “did I support Free Trade?” My response was that this agreement was nothing to do with free trade – Canada, USA and Japan will continue to have very substantial barriers to trade in Dairy Products – neither was the Agreement Fair nor Just. TPPA is all about protecting the multi-national corporations that increasingly control the New Zealand economy. It is all about concreting in the neoliberal ideology for the future.

In a recent speech to the New Zealand Institute of Foreign Affairs, Prime Minister John Key paints a picture of a dichotomy between those who support TPPA and those who oppose the agreement. He sees those who oppose the TPPA as wanting to put the clock back. He said that opponents wanted to return to a time when:

*“We sought shelter in tariffs and subsidies because we believed that’s what we needed to do to survive. We tried to protect our businesses from the full force of international competition and our citizens from such evils as cheap imports.”<sup>1</sup>*

He also states that the opposition to TPPA is against immigration, that they want a “Fortress New Zealand” policy. I am not sure who is briefing the Prime Minister on the issues raised by those opposing the TPPA but in my research into the issue I have not seen any suggesting that tariffs and subsidies should return to the levels of the 1970s, nor opposition to immigration and the establishment of a Fortress New Zealand policy.

Barry Coates, a former Director of Oxfam NZ makes the following comments on the Prime Minister’s speech:

*1. 'TPPA = free trade = good'. Ignoring the fact that most of the TPPA is about stronger monopolies on intellectual property; maintaining agricultural trade barriers in the US, Japan and Canada; freedoms for multinationals but restrictions on local business and the local*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://itsourfuture.org.nz/pms-speech-to-nz-institute-of-international-affairs/>

economy; and removing government's right to regulate - these are not what most people would understand as free trade.

2. *'It's just like the China FTA'. Ignoring the fact that China has been growing at around 10% per annum and every commodity exporter has been experiencing growth, whether or not they have an FTA with China, and ignoring the experience that trade agreements with the US usually end in tears - as Australia found when its Productivity Commission found new risks and no net benefit to Australia from its FTA.*

3. *'We haven't been sued by China and Korean companies and therefore we won't be sued under the TPPA'. Ignoring the fact that the multinationals in countries we have signed FTAs with have launched only 11 trade disputes, whereas the US and other TPPA countries have launched 161 cases to sue governments and overturn democratic laws. We are about to open ourselves up to challenges from the most litigious companies in the world.'*<sup>2</sup>

According to the Prime Minister it is essential that we have the TPPA so that overseas investment will come to New Zealand but, according to the PM it is already coming without the TPPA *"We also want people to invest here. Almost \$100 billion in foreign capital was invested here last year."*<sup>3</sup> If Overseas Investment, according to the PM, is already approximately 35% of GDP, then do we need anymore?

Although the Prime Minister did not actually say "There is No Alternative" the underlying message is just that – *"Opposition to TPP tends to flare up then fall away again pretty quickly because nothing much of substance is ever raised."*<sup>4</sup>

What is behind TINA? Why did Margaret Thatcher and her Ministers continually say it? Why do John Key and his Ministers adopt the TINA position on nearly every issue facing New Zealand? Of course there are alternatives; to say

there is no alternative is saying "We know best so please shut up".

As Christians we are taught that God loves us and gives us the freedom to choose. Jesus in His teaching helps us decide what choices to make, but never says that we have only one choice, that there are no alternatives that we can choose. So why have we been confronted over the last 30 to 40 years with leaders who insist that there are no alternatives?

Lord Acton, a 19th century British Catholic politician is probably best known for his statement: *"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."*<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, Acton made these comments in a letter about Papal Infallibility in 1876.

People in power should be making decisions based on a thorough examination of all options and an acceptance that there may be viable alternatives. A decision intuitively means that there are alternatives and choices have to be made. A reasonable person will accept that alternative choices exist and respect those who would chose an alternative. A sign of absolute power is surely the situation when a person cannot accept that there are alternatives to their decisions.

Acton also says in his letter *"There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it"*<sup>7</sup>. He was referring to the Pope and the move to make Papal statements infallible but the statement is just as true for Prime Ministers, Presidents or anyone who holds an office of influence in society, an office that requires decisions to be made that will affect others.

This is why "there is no alternative" is so dangerous, it conveys a sense of infallibility, a form of sanctification – "I know best and I don't want to discuss any other possible alternatives."

**It is time for us to ask the question "Are we sanctifying our leaders?"**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/barrycoatesnz/posts/1001030510010899?comment\\_id=1001364163310867](https://www.facebook.com/barrycoatesnz/posts/1001030510010899?comment_id=1001364163310867)

<sup>3</sup> <http://itsourfuture.org.nz/pms-speech-to-nz-institute-of-international-affairs/>

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<sup>5</sup> Letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, April 5, 1887 published in *Historical Essays and Studies*, edited by J. N. Figgis and R. V. Laurence (London: Macmillan, 1907)

<sup>6</sup> id

<sup>7</sup> id