

## **Tomorrow's Schools Today**

### **Part 1: Department of Education to Ministry of Education**

I was recently interviewed by a visiting Japanese graduate student who is preparing to write a thesis on New Zealand's education reforms. He had also interviewed a few principals to get their interpretations. What struck me in the course of these discussions was that a substantial number of principals have quite incomplete knowledge, experience or recollection of pre-*Tomorrow's Schools*, let alone what the reforms themselves were intended to achieve. Moreover, amnesia seems to be setting in! In some respects this concerns me, because without understanding or knowing the background to the reforms we risk acquiescing to ongoing mini subcutaneous reforms that can infect and chip away at the founding intentions, principal among them being localisation of decision making, self-management, the self-managing school, and accountability.

Pre-*Tomorrow's Schools*, education was governed substantially by the Department of Education through the device of "regulations". Regulations, unlike Acts of Parliament, yet nonetheless possessing the full force of law, are decreed essentially by a Minister via an "order in council" and can be popped out almost at will. An Act of Parliament demands a much more rigorous process, although the outcome may not necessarily reflect that (take, for example, the legislation on planning and reporting).

A significant structural change introduced with *Tomorrow's Schools* in 1989 was the disestablishment of the Department of Education and its replacement with a Ministry of Education. The Director General of Education (a senior educationist – Beeby, Renwick) was replaced by a Secretary of Education (O'Rourke, Fancy). The significance of this structural change was sharply impressed on me when I sojourned to employment with the Ministry of Education. During my induction (having previously worked in the Department of Education as an Inspector of Schools) I was instructed that working in the Ministry required that I should *think* as the Minister would think, *write* as the Minister would have it written, and *do* as the Minister would have it done! In other words, be prepared to leave my professional educational soul outside the door (but only a fool would throw away the key). Things might have changed since then but, looking around, I don't think so.

So, given that the State has inescapable responsibility for the provision and operation public education, and that under the reforms the local community was to have considerably increased powers of self-management, how were the two to be reconciled (centrism and localism)? For a start, running the country's schools via regulation would be a blatant contradiction. Regulations, as a controlling device, would have to go. Yet controlling devices never fully go! Hence, the National Education Guidelines.

Next instalment: Regulation to Negulation.