

## Investigative journalism in the age of media meltdown: from National Party Headquarters to Afghanistan

Bruce Jesson Memorial Lecture  
Maidment Theatre  
Auckland  
31 October 2012

Nicky Hager

Kia Ora Tatou,

Each time I go walking near my home I pass an old war memorial inscribed with the words "*magna est veritas, et praevalabit*": Truth is great and will prevail. The words date from 1917, in the middle of the First World War, and were obviously attempting to reassure the locals that their sons and brothers were dying in a noble cause. But for me these words can apply equally to a very different subject: the motives, and the inherent optimism, of the activity known as investigative journalism, which is the subject of my lecture today. Investigative journalism includes, for instance, the public service of investigating truthfulness in politics and of seeking facts when the truth is disputed, twisted or hidden. It can also involve a different kind of truth: trying to discover and illuminate what is right and wrong. In essence, it is about investigating and challenging the activities of the powerful, the opposite of course of what the war memorial was proposing.

The second part of the lecture will be specifically about investigative journalism. But before that, I want to use the opportunity of this lecture to talk much more widely, sharing some thoughts about the state of politics in New Zealand today. A Bruce Jesson Lecture is the ideal occasion in New Zealand to pause and look at the big picture. Why are things like they are? How do they need to change? What will it take for them to change? This first part will set the scene and, I hope, logically lead on to the subject of investigative journalism.

The Bruce Jesson Lectures are an ideal time to talk about politics because that is what Bruce himself was so good at. When I was at university I was strongly influenced by his writing, in particular his analysis of New Zealand society. It was a time when quite a lot of progressive people subscribed to millennial socialist beliefs — the idea that one day the workers would inevitably overthrow capitalism and good times would follow — beliefs that caused a lot of heart ache and confusion when the realities of China and the Soviet Union became apparent and particularly when the Berlin Wall fell. But Bruce argued that these theories had always been ill-fitting for describing and understanding New Zealand society. He talked instead about an independent, New Zealand-grounded left. He devoted himself to analysing power as it actually was in this country. My first attempt at

researching and writing a book, while I was still a student, was inspired by his investigative writing about New Zealand politics. The last time I visited Bruce before he died, he talked about the book he was finishing and the main words that stuck in my mind were him saying, with great satisfaction, that he was averaging 1500 words of writing each day. I quite often think of these words. The word count could sound much less important than the contents, but it is all about the persistence and plain hard work needed when you try to produce something of value.

Late 2012 is a good time to analyse politics in New Zealand. For the first four years of the present government, politics was calculatedly dull and deadening, and the government seemed immune to serious scrutiny and challenge. But that has changed now and it is an interesting political moment to look ahead.

First, in this survey of the state of politics, we need to look at the environment in which political discussion and journalism occur. I will not repeat familiar predictions about the supposedly imminent demise of journalism and news media. I believe that societies need journalism and also need mass news media, and that they will find ways to provide it, even though the highly commercialised news media corporation model may well be driving itself towards extinction. But the news media's internal problems have drawn attention away from more serious problems.

Two generations ago New Zealand had hardly any paid public relations people. There was of course a PR person working for the alcohol industry (and probably had been since about the time of Christ), and there were PR people for perhaps the Manufacturing Federation and one or two others. But in total it was a small handful.

By one generation ago various private PR companies had appeared and PR staff were starting to be hired by politicians and all sorts of organisations. But today it has changed out of all recognition. The public space in which politics can occur is crowded with huge numbers of well paid PR and "communications" staff. The news media can sometimes do independent and even spectacular work, but most of the time, on nearly every issue, the PR people are better resourced and more numerous. Most news, and often the angle, timing and quotes, do not come from journalists' observations or journalists' questions, but from the calculated efforts of PR and marketing people, media advisors, professional speech writers, ad agencies and so on, with journalists racing to rewrite the materials pouring in hour after hour in time for deadline.

I wrote a paper on this called "Imagining a world where the PR people had won". In it I drew a comparison with water in New Zealand, which for generations we assumed would always be abundant and clean. When there are only one or a

few dairy farms in a valley, the river systems can probably handle it. But we have seen that as one after another industrial farm arrives, the river beds quite suddenly turn slimy, the water becomes undrinkable and so much water is taken that some rivers run dry in summer. It is a good analogy for what's happening in the democratic sphere.

We live in an era where the public spaces are cluttered with paid spokespeople and commercial agendas: where lobbyists for foreign-owned banks are more likely to be heard commenting on economic news than community groups, where legions of other PR people vie to promote their clients' interests and where the public spaces available for real democratic activity are shrinking. This is about the *cumulative* impact of an ever-growing, professionalised industry for political and media manipulation: more and more paid manufacturing of news, more and more paid voices in so-called public discussion, greater influence of corporate election donations, fake community groups, more scripting of politicians by unseen advisers and so on; all of it tending to crowd out ordinary people or citizen groups that don't have a PR company and a large advertising budget. If we have more and more and more of this stuff pouring into the public spaces, at what point do we realise that the river is no longer fit to swim in or to drink?

These profound changes to the way politics occurs have unfortunately coincided with the multiple crises occurring within the news media. Exactly when better journalism is needed to compensate for so much organised manipulation of news and politics, highly commercialised media organisations have (with notable exceptions) become more superficial, more susceptible to vested interests and less thoughtful about what counts as legitimate news and commentary. In recent years, for instance, two major news organisations have published regular political and election columns by David Farrar, without telling their readers that he earns his living as the chief pollster for the governing party, the National Party, including being the person who regularly briefs the prime minister on the poll results. He has also appeared regularly as a "political commentator" on Newstalk ZB and breakfast television. A good measure of media organisations is to look at the balance in their choice of political commentators. Most are not balanced.

In my book *The Hollow Men*, when the ACT Party campaign manager Brian Nicolle was privately coordinating a leadership coup for Don Brash within the National Party, he identified private radio as especially sympathetic to the right. "We need to target key talkback hosts in [Newstalk] ZB and [Radio] Pacific," he wrote to Brash, "there are plenty sympathetic." The plan was to "produce some common lines that become the 'mantra' on your journey to become leader of National and the country" (p. 47).

The more that these commercial media organisations cut resources to journalism the more they become susceptible to organised manipulation. An under-

resourced, reactive news media naturally tends to give prominence to the ideas pushed by well resourced and vigorous interest groups. The result is that the conventional picture of politics we get through the news media is often distorted and inaccurate.

The starting point for any sensible political journalism and news is to know where you are. Is New Zealand, as many talk-back hosts casually assert, a Nanny State where the government tries to interfere in every aspect of people's lives? Is the National Party "centre right", the Labour Party "centre left", the United Future Party "centre" and so on, as political commentaries glibly assert? The answer is that much of this is inaccurate and unhelpful, and if we believe it nothing about the country we live in makes any proper sense.

The Nanny State idea goes together with claims that the country is over-regulated, that businesses are strangled by the red tape of bureaucracy and that individuals and the economy will only be able to thrive when they are unleashed from these stifling restrictions. This rhetoric has been highly influential in New Zealand for a whole generation. But is it true?

The obvious test is to lift our heads and compare New Zealand to the rest of the world. My reference point for this is the far right think tank in Washington DC called the Heritage Foundation. For decades it has lobbied the US government for policies such as more nuclear weapons, less social security and lower taxes. Each year the Heritage Foundation produces a world-wide survey that ranks 184 countries according to how close they are to its preferred economic policies. Known as the "Index of Economic Freedom", it judges each country according to its "financial freedom", meaning how free banks and finance companies are from local laws and regulations; its "labour freedom", meaning things such as how free companies are to pay low wages and end employment without compensation; its "investment freedom", meaning how few restrictions there are on foreign companies; and also business freedom, trade freedom, monetary freedom and so on. More "free" means good, less "free" means bad. It's clear where they stand.

Each year since 1996 Hong Kong has come Number 1 on the freedom index and Singapore has come second. Notice that democracy is clearly not part of the definition of freedom; this is about freedom for businesses, which is what the Hong Kong and Singapore islands were set up for.

So, understanding the scale, where should we assume that Nanny State New Zealand ranks out of the 184 countries on the Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom? About half way, maybe? Or maybe the Nanny State label means we are a little lower than half way?

The answer is that, in most years since 1996, New Zealand came third, straight after Hong Kong and Singapore. We are currently fourth out of the 184 countries in the most deregulated, business-friendly stakes. Moreover, these results cover nine years of the "centre-left" Helen Clark Labour-led Government, which was endlessly attacked for its Nanny State policies. But for most years of the Labour-led government New Zealand was sitting in the rarified, extreme free-market third position. Labour did slide minutely to 5th and 6th place out of 184 in its third term of government, but that is still far, far away from the picture of New Zealand policy and government provided by mainstream political commentators and journalists.

We should not be surprised at the Heritage Foundation approval. New Zealand, despite being a country with a deeply embedded national belief in fairness, has had the fastest growing economic inequality of any OECD country in recent decades. This doesn't come from nowhere. It is the utterly predictable consequence of a highly deregulated economy. Stripping away social protections, labour protections, financial regulations and the rest can usually be directly measured in increased inequality, as well as the resulting social damage and strain. The economic freedom worked, with huge transfers of money to banks, uncontrolled house inflation and ample "freedom" for companies with economic strength to increase profits including in ways that were harmful to the environment and public. The only way this can change is for governments to change the policies.

But my point here is that most journalism and commentary about the position of New Zealand policy on the left-right spectrum have been profoundly wrong. As the ACT Party campaign manager had explained to Brash, the way that usefully biased ideas are established is by producing "some common lines that become the 'mantra'" and then, as the National Party's Australian strategy advisors told them, you just have to "keep repeating it endlessly" (THM p. 165). This is a good summary of politics in New Zealand through the free market years and still today: endless hectoring from the business lobby groups and free-market politicians. If the public and opinion leaders understood that New Zealand is a bizarre policy outlier, then there would naturally be political pressure to move back to a less extreme position. But if repetition paints a picture of an extreme Nanny State, then the political pressure is naturally in the opposite direction. This is of course the purpose of this political distortion: it suggests that nothing needs to change.

This shows a huge failure of independent thinking by the news media and not only the news media. If the public and decision makers have no better than a cartoon caricature of the state of their own politics, how can the country understand what it needs to do to thrive and survive in future? But, also, how can so many people have got it so wrong? I'm coming to that soon. It is all about the state of New Zealand politics and why things are like they are.

But, just before that, there's a related subject worth mentioning that I thought about while writing *The Hollow Men*. This is the ubiquitous habit of talking about political parties, policies and political beliefs as if they sit on a straight line from right, to centre-right, then centre and centre left going out to left. This one-dimensional view instantly creates absurdities. The politician Peter Dunne, for instance, is a hard-line free market politician from the 1980s, a moral conservative and a friend of the alcohol, tobacco and gambling industries. He is called "centrist". The New Zealand Labour Party maintained most of the 1980s free-market policies when it was in government twenty years later but was called "centre left" — making it hard for the party to understand why its policies are contradictory and what it needs to do to realign with its constituency. The "centre-right" National Party is also a very confused place. Its free-market policies sit uncomfortably with its traditional conservative policies, and its big-business friendly policies clash badly with its small-to-medium sized business constituency. The label "centre right" doesn't help understanding or progress on these issues at all.

A related issue from *The Hollow Men* was party strategists trying to win over supposed blocks of people along the imaginary left-to-right line: a bit of xenophobia or racism for traditional Labour blue collar workers, a bit of beneficiary bashing for people in poorly paid jobs. This sort of political strategy sometimes gets political results but it is not clever. It hurts innocent people, it underestimates and insults the target people and it limits political possibilities. In the real world people are multi-dimensional: some of the so-called blue-collar workers or rednecks will also be a parent, and care about the river where they go fishing, and be generous within their community, and be suspicious of money men who seem happy to sell everything to foreign companies. The art of political leadership should be about recognising and appealing to the best of people. The art of political management is often about appealing to the less worthy parts we all have.

I believe that many progressive and conservative people are paralysed politically, or lose themselves in political management rather than leadership, because of philosophical confusion. They actually know what they believe in, but it is not matched by clear ideas and inspiring policies. National certainly appears to have no ideas to address the country's problems apart from the tired free-market catechism; and Labour, while it clearly wants to be different, lacks confidence and is fearful of making big changes.

Why are things like they are? Part of the story is well known: the Labour Government of 1984-1990 and the National Government of 1990-99 pushed through free-market reforms with a speed and intensity unprecedented in the western world. That is how our small South Pacific welfare state manages to be

so close to the top of the Heritage Foundation index. If you are too young to remember the 80s and 90s, but you care about politics, you can watch Alister Barry's documentary *Someone Else's Country* for the overview and read Jane Kelsey's book *The New Zealand Experiment* for the detail. Bruce Jesson's book, called "Only Their Purpose is Mad: The Money Men Take Over New Zealand" unpicks the flimsy philosophy but explains how it managed to prevail.

The free-market reforms did not have public support and neither the Labour nor National Governments announced their plans before being elected. Introducing the policies was only possible with brutal political tactics, tactics that have had lasting effects as much as the policies themselves. The chief tactic was speed and riding over all public opposition. Labour Finance Minister Roger Douglas boasted about this later, saying that "once you start the momentum, never let it stop rolling". He said "speed is essential it is impossible to go to fast", for "otherwise the interest groups have time to mobilise and drag you down". Interest groups meant most of the public and speed was about not leaving space for democratic politics. Community groups, unions, churches and others were left shell shocked and disillusioned. I can remember when I realised that most people I had seen involved in politics before the reforms had disappeared from being active in less than ten years. Much of what is called civil society was broken or demoralised and a crucial layer of political life — the experienced organisers and spokespeople who provide the means for ordinary people to engage in politics and for new people to learn how it's done — had been decimated.

It was the same for journalists, economists, public servants: anyone who criticised the new policies was marginalised and risked being squeezed out their job. Economics departments at universities lost many of the staff who did not preach the free market philosophy. When state television current affairs reporters produced a programme called *In the Public Good*, exposing vested interests behind the reforms, they literally lost their jobs, their office was closed and a chill went through the rest of the media. The politics in this country is still damaged, and only gradually recovering, after the loss of so many critical, public-interest-focussed people during those years.

However, while critical voices were marginalised and pushed aside, other people who went along with the reforms were being rewarded, rising up in the public service, in universities and many other parts of society. This is another very important legacy of the free-market years. Two decades after public opinion turned against the reforms, these people are still in positions of authority in public and private organisations throughout the country. Their presence is a large part of the reason why, despite what the public would choose, New Zealand is still fourth in the "economic freedom" stakes. They are, for instance, the senior public servants who leap in to advise governments against, heaven forbid, using regulations — meaning the normal government rules and regulations seen in

most countries — and recommend alternatives such as laughably ineffectual voluntary industry codes. This layer of people, the ones promoted during the free market years and other people they have in turn appointed to senior positions, is a major feature of contemporary politics and as long as they remain in charge it is going to be hard to change.

Another legacy of those years is more insidious. When I became active in politics in my teens and twenties, many of the most active people around me were public servants, teachers, scientists: people who were well informed and motivated about public issues. They would finish their work as suitably neutral public servants or whatever and then go to a political meeting as a citizen. But this has changed. Today many public servants believe they are not allowed or that somehow it may hurt their job to be involved in politics. The public service code guarantees their rights as citizens, but other more or less subtle messages have discouraged or frightened most of them. It is the same with scientists and other professionals. Too many ordinary people also feel uncomfortable about sticking their heads up in politics, wondering if it might hurt their job or maybe stop them getting a visa when they travel overseas. None of this should be happening for people in a democratic country.

The result has been a loss of people from democratic politics at exactly the same time when political activism by paid corporate spokespeople, lobbyists and PR people has never been so vigorous. These shifts naturally affect the types of people seen and heard most often in the news and politics, which in turn directly affects what happens and what is possible in politics. If a new social or economic policy is announced and most people who comment ridicule it, it is much less likely ever to be implemented. If it is welcomed and discussed positively, it is far more likely to happen. It matters tremendously who is empowered and who is discouraged in political debate.

These are all important aspects of the state of New Zealand politics and why things are like they are.

It doesn't have to be that way. Here, quickly, are some examples of the government actions needed for democratic renewal; that is, for making it easier for citizens to have influence in politics and harder for money to. 1. Radically restructuring the public service, from the top down, into a genuine, independent public service; 2. the same for science; 3. radically restructuring universities as well, pruning the managerial levels and refocussing on students and academics; 4. reassuring people on public salaries of their right to be active citizens in their own time; 5. ending secret and anonymous donations in politics; 6. actively pushing back commercial advertising and messaging from public spaces; 7. strengthening freedom of information laws and extending them to Parliament and the courts; 8. requiring all central and local government politicians to declare their



income, assets and tax paid each year; and 9. declaring that news media are an essential public good like education or police and introducing long-term funding and statutory independence for non-commercial television, radio and, eventually, print public news media. Independent public media are an essential defence against media and politics being filled with messages and agendas based primarily on ability to pay.

Those are some first steps for the government. As for personal political action, this is what my big sister would say: just stop making excuses and do it! Much more change is born and progress made in politics in the hard times than in easy times. Now is a good time. Everything changes, and after a generation of free-market excesses and corrosion of democratic government, the pendulum is swinging back.

Finally, before I finish this survey of the state of politics, I want to dispense with a few unhelpful and wrong political ideas.

One of the most unhelpful and the most wrong ideas, that I hear often, is people declaring that young people don't care about politics any more. Well meaning people ask why young people don't march and protest like in the good old days, and suggest the problem is that they are self-obsessed. This is terribly insulting to young people. There are just as many and probably more idealistic, well informed, principled young people today as in any other supposed golden age. This includes the young journalists. I've been talking about some of the reasons why New Zealand generally has less political activity than it normally would. Probably the main problem for young people is that the older people are not being politically active enough.

Next, there seem to be a lot of people (on the left and right) who have lost confidence about their place in politics. This is understandable considering the decline of post-war socialist and conservative ideas and the generation of free-market politics. In the jumble of labels and confused thinking that counts for a lot of political discussion, it can seem that there aren't clear, motivating beliefs to guide people any more. But I don't think it's actually very hard at all. I think people really know what they feel and believe. Here, for example, are some of the essential ideas that sum up what it means to be a progressive person:

A belief in resolving conflicts using peacekeeping and international law rather than resorting to war, independence in foreign policy, a belief in human rights and that they must be universal, a reaction of distaste to racism and prejudice, a belief in democracy (something we shouldn't take granted is shared by everyone in politics), care for the environment, an understanding that freedoms and rights are for people not businesses, care for people less privileged than ourselves and, underlying everything, compassion, altruism, humanity and empathy; what my

refugee father summed up when he would say about people in need: there but for the grace of god go I.

This is a good description of what people mean when they say they are left, without the need for old-fashioned-sounding dogma. But, interestingly, many of these also apply to people who see themselves as conservative. In fact, all or some of them apply to the majority of people in New Zealand, including people in all parties and sectors of society. We see this in public debates. When issues are well explained and debated — be it the Iraq War, nuclear issues, privatisation, support for public health and education systems, mining and rainforest logging and so on — opinion polls generally come out with 70% or more of people on the public interest side. This basic orientation explains why New Zealand political leaders such as John Key feel a constant need to present themselves as centrist, to declare their support for an independent foreign policy, and to appear concerned about poverty and inequality, and the environment (even when their actions and plans suggest otherwise). They know well that they do not have a natural majority for policies like privatisation or going to war. It infuriates the leaders of the 1980s and 90s reforms — the richest ones often watching from their homes in other countries — that they have had so little effect on the basic beliefs of most New Zealanders.

These people comprise, to borrow John Ralston Saul's words, "a colonial, non-intellectual business elite that does not believe in New Zealand," meaning many of the distinctive things about New Zealand that the majority holds dear.

There is a crucial moment in my book on the National Party, *The Hollow Men* — where private strategy discussions of the party leadership team have been preserved for all time in leaked e-mails — when the leader's main strategist, Peter Keenan, explains why they have to play down and hide their political beliefs until after they have won the election and are safely in government.

--

"I'm a core supporter," he wrote, but if the party leader Don Brash "did all the things I personally like to hear, [he] would be unelectable." Keenan said the public perception of National was substantially negative: "a worry that National [would] return to the days of major reform, with privatisation, welfare cuts, spending cuts on core services and another round of employment law reforms that will drive wages down." Brash wrote a reply e-mail to Keenan saying that those were precisely what he had in mind: "I'd much prefer to go and do something enjoyable, and more lucrative, than being a Prime Minister of a status quo government," he said. Keenan replied that the policies they stood for "are not widely enough shared in the community to win an election." He said they had to face the reality that "an uncompromising freemarket liberal stance results in ACT [party] level of support" which, when Keenan was writing, meant about 4%.

This is what *The Hollow Men* is about: all the tactics and political manoeuvring of a group of political advisers and senior politicians who were aware they did not have public support for their intended policies and set out to win power by stealth and manipulation. Thus their famous use of racism at Orewa and their attacks on poor people on benefits, while "de-emphasising" or hiding their real policy plans, their political allies and their secret donors.

Which leads to the final piece of unsound thinking I want to mention. This is the idea that the population is divided into right wing and left wing and centre citizens and that politics is a battle between these groups. The way real politics more often works was seen in New Zealand's decision whether to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

National and ACT party politicians urged that New Zealand join the Iraq invasion, but that was not because of public opinion. Over 80% of the National and ACT party supporters, like the rest of the population, were opposed to joining the invasion. The real politics had the public on one side, and on the other foreign pressures and the New Zealand military and foreign affairs ministry, which saw the invasion as an opportunity to work closer with their allies.

Other sorts of political issues are a struggle between commercial lobby groups and the public. This is the real nature of most politics, which should be no surprise since politics is about power: about the US agricultural lobby versus New Zealand farmers; about foreign service and utility corporations against New Zealand public services and so on. Not every issue is of this sort, but many are a battle between the public interest and elite or vested interests.

When politicians are principled, when the news media does its job and when the public gets organised, democratic politics works incredibly well. But many issues are dominated by well-resourced lobbies, public and private, and the political sphere is awash with their paid spokespeople and experts, their PR companies and lawyers, their media staff and the rest of the for-hire armoury; which leads us naturally to the subject of investigative journalism.

Controlling information, completely hiding information and long-term media management are prime tools used by powerful interests to gain political advantage. When information is the currency, it makes sense why investigative journalism, alongside good quality normal journalism, are so important for making democratic politics possible.

All points of view in political issues should be reported. But rather than pretending we are reporting two equal "sides", the profession of journalism should be clear that it is on the public's side. It is about redressing the obvious inequality of power and creating the possibility of democratic decision making. In effect, it is

the PR companies, industry lobbyists, spin doctors and the rest on one side, and the news media and sometimes community groups on the other. Investigative journalism is an important component of giving the public interest side a chance.

This is why every decent definition of investigative journalism emphasises its role of monitoring the powerful and holding them to account for their actions.

It is inherently a democratic activity, a public service. It can be satisfying and rewarding since a relatively small number of people doing investigative journalism can potentially make a huge difference to the issues they write about.

But there is a lot to do. Most major issues need much more scrutiny: what are the vested interests, who is having influence and is the public being told the truth? Many major companies and certainly all involved in controversial issues will be surrounded with unseen politics. Who is digging deep into the post-disaster politics of Christchurch? In fact, local government throughout the country is an example of what happens when people in positions of authority realise they face little media interest and scrutiny. The finance sector, comfortably grey and invisible except when things go wrong, likewise deserves far more scrutiny. They and many other subjects are blank areas on the map of public consciousness. Being invisible is exactly what most powerful interests prefer, exercising their influence privately.

In a small country like New Zealand, it can seem like investigative journalism is a very rare activity: endangered, if not heading for extinction. But it is a mistake to see it that way. If we picture investigative journalism as being Woodward and Bernstein working for the *Washington Post* in the 1970s Watergate investigation, then we have probably just defined it out of existence for New Zealand. But as soon as we see it more realistically, there is much more potential.

First of all, it is a mistake to see daily journalism and investigative journalism as separate occupations. It is actually a continuum. Take the current controversy over illegal intelligence monitoring of Kim Dotcom in New Zealand. Many journalists are only given time to report the latest news and reactions and, if no new news appears, they and the rest of the cavalry gallops off to the next subject. But obviously many questions were left unanswered and some people don't seem to be telling the truth. Each of those journalists who have kept digging, driven by wanting to find out the truth, are doing investigative journalism. The tools of good journalism — persistence, working out the right question, asking the right question and searching for solid evidence — are the same as the tools of good investigative journalism.

Also, there can be unnecessary vanity about who and what constitutes a "real" investigative journalist. Much of the best investigative journalism around the

world is done by people who wouldn't think to describe themselves with that label. For example, I am part of a community of people who research intelligence issues. It is a very small group and some call themselves journalists, others call themselves academics, and others still are researchers on their own or in public interest organisations; but we are all doing more or less exactly the same work.

I believe that the best way to have more investigative journalism in New Zealand and other countries is to broaden the idea of who can do it. The main people who do good investigative journalism already, without using the term, are documentary makers and authors. I look forward to the day when they are better linked, sharing skills, support and a sense of mission. What about academics? Or accountants, the perfect investigators for many subjects? And scientists, the perfect investigators for other sorts of subjects? What about the environment group researchers who do better research on fisheries or forest logging than the news media, and the human rights researchers who have done the best work uncovering and documenting human rights abuses? Part time, occasional, in retirement or when the kids have gone to bed: society needs investigative journalism and we need an inclusive enough definition so that there are enough people to do it.

As the economics of journalism change, media of the future need to be receptive to high quality investigative work by people who don't happen to have done a journalism degree. The employment conditions of all academics and scientists, and even public servants, of the future should include encouragement to produce socially important writing aimed at mass media.

In other words, investigative journalism should be defined by what it is and how it is done, not by who does it. What are the essential characteristics?

During the twenty years I have been involved in investigative journalism, I have met and worked with many investigative journalists from other parts of the world. The common feature I've seen time and again is about their motivations. All, or at least all the best, investigative journalists I have seen around the world are doing it to make a difference. There are much easier options if the goal is to be a media star or celebrity. They are sickened by the atrocities of war, or enraged by people who tell lies or hurt others. They may be upset by the corruption that undermines their country's government or by companies that ravage its natural environment. There is the personal challenge and pleasure of investigating things that are hard to crack, but there's no doubt that caring is at the heart of why most people do investigative journalism. That is why they are willing to do the hard work, accepting obstacles and disappointments, and keeping going anyway.

Working in the realm of secrecy and half truths, another essential tool in investigative journalism is self criticism: Have I got this wrong? Is there a different

explanation for the facts I have gathered. Also, am I being fair? And this is a good one: would I criticise these actions if someone I liked was doing them?

The stock and trade of investigative journalism are research tools: searching through official documents and obscure publications, hours on the companies office website, tracing people who might be willing to be sources, sending off letters to the Ombudsman making the case for information releases, or quiet meetings with PR people who are paid by the client but whose hearts are still in journalism. It is a creative process: like the long hours I spent tracking New Zealand and allied intelligence staff moving in and out of jobs in Afghanistan using Facebook. It is all about working out what information is most important to find (often the crucial step), strategising all the possible ways to get it and then worrying away at it until you find a way that works.

I have strong memories of cautious meetings in cars, in lonely places such as the edges of sports fields, as I built up the relationships that ended in my book *The Hollow Men*. And of another car on a hot Marlborough day: sitting on the dusty bonnet of a wrecked car in a dump near the Waihopai intelligence station, having a long talk with one of the staff from inside. And lots of stuff that many people would find boring, such as reading piles of very dry defence documents looking for nuggets and clues.

It is an inherently optimistic activity. Even where the subject is awful and grisly, investigative journalism is based on a belief in the decency and social conscience of others. First, this is about the public: that they will actually care and hopefully do something when issues are exposed. It is an optimistic activity in another way too, believing that, even with the most forbidding organisation, there will be people willing to risk their jobs to help me get information to the public. It doesn't on first impression seem all that likely. Why, for instance, would people in top secret intelligence jobs help me reveal those secrets? Yet my research on intelligence inside and outside New Zealand showed me that there are all sorts of people in every organisation, including surprising numbers who helped me write that first book. Part of that was that I was inviting them to work with me in the public interest and they responded according to their own sense of social responsibility. As I have worked my way through different major subjects, it seems to keep working.

My belief is that most secrecy is more cosmetic than real and that, for a determined and strategic person, there is nearly always a way to find something out. My personal saying for years has been that all the information in the world is accessible somehow; it just has a price tag of hours on it, meaning how much persistence is needed to get there.

Also, in every area of life, how we do things is as important as what we do. The

most important part of having sources is not what they give you, but how you treat them. Having honest relationships with sources and genuinely looking after them, besides being right, seems to me the best explanation for why, project after project, it keeps working. I also like to believe that how I write, including trying to be respectful towards people I am criticising, helps people to want to be part of my work. Likewise, the more we try to be fair and balanced, the more we can expect people to listen to us. There are continuously ethical issues to be worked through and this is often crucial to the work we do. For instance, I think many secrets are an abuse of power and should be publicised. But I believe just as strongly in people's right to privacy in their private lives, something I wish the rest of the media thought harder about.

When one of my research projects comes together, the next part of the process is deciding how best to use the information. Sometimes that means a newspaper feature. But, with the big projects, they take so much effort that they demand being more than just a piece of news. I try to use them as an opportunity to illuminate some larger themes or subjects. My recent book is an example of this. The backbone of the book is a ten year history of New Zealand in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, and in the rest of the war on terror. Some of it shows New Zealand in a good light and it also reveals many actions that broke government orders and that would have appalled the public, had they been allowed to know. But also the book became an opportunity to open up a whole world that most people know almost nothing about: what a modern war is actually like, what the army, navy and air force actually do, what goes on inside the intelligence services and how senior staff of the foreign affairs ministry think and operate. I promise anyone who reads the book that they will gain more understanding of defence, intelligence and foreign affairs than have many of the people involved in those jobs. New Zealand needs more people who understand these issues.

The wars were another example of controversial politics being managed using secrecy and public relations. The officials were well aware that they did not have majority public support for going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq and so it became a game of going to war while trying not to look like they were going to war. A sanitised, friendly, peacekeeping picture was projected, while all potentially unpopular or controversial activities were hidden. The real story is far away from most of what New Zealanders were told.

The book's title, *Other People's Wars*, refers in part to the First World War, which brings us back to the war memorial at the end of my street. When the war memorial was unveiled on the 10th of November 1917, the Prime Minister William Massey turned up to give a speech. It was only a small suburban memorial, listing five dead ex-pupils of one primary school, but nearly a thousand New Zealanders had died in the trenches in the just previous four weeks and he

was there to defend the decision to send them to war.

"What is money," he said, "what is property, what is human life — and Heaven knows we have paid our share in the lives of men — compared with losing the war and allowing the world to be dominated by the Germans....? I would rather see New Zealand and every one of its people beneath the waters of the sea than under the heel of the Germans." (*Dominion* 12 November 1917)

In fact, the First World War achieved only massive waste and destruction and, like the Afghanistan and Iraq wars in our time, it sowed the seeds of ongoing hostility and war. It was not New Zealand's war and New Zealanders should not have taken part. As I described at the end of the book, this is what many of the war veterans came home thinking too. I think it is nonsense to talk about our nation being born on the shores of Gallipoli, but the First World War did have a profound effect on the evolution of New Zealand as an independent-thinking nation, which would one day be nuclear free and refuse to join the invasion of Iraq. There have been two currents of thought in New Zealand ever since — the disillusioned war veteran and the William Massey viewpoints — one essentially anti-war and preferring an independent foreign policy, including an increasing majority of the public, and the other one willing to use war a tool of foreign policy, a far smaller but influential group.

These two incompatible currents are able to coexist mostly because so much of what the military, intelligence agencies and foreign affairs do is kept hidden from the public. The more these things are revealed, the more they will have to change to be consistent with our national beliefs and character. This is the same dynamic we saw in social and economic policy, where it is a battle between the public interest and vested interests, but relies on people being able to see clearly what is going on.

In an age where sound information is crucial to democratic politics, but where PR people far outnumber journalists, we can't leave the job just to the existing media. We need politicians who will make a top priority of democratic renewal, including a major expansion of public news media, and we need to support and push them to do it. More of us need to be bothered to be spokespeople and commentators in the public interest, and not leave the space to the paid voices.

And, as I hope I have said clearly enough, more people with skills in research and analysis need to use those skills in the role of investigative journalism. Media manipulation works all too easily if we leave the job to breakfast television. But on issues where we do the work and discover the real story, and it is well researched information versus the spin doctors, I actually believe that truth is great and will prevail.