

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

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THE HOTSEAT

As you read this column I'll be flying to India in search of aviation students. I may not have been able to develop an international airport but if we can establish an international flying school that would be a great alternative.

The other surprise has been the mature yet passionate debate that erupted over the Gaza Strip and the battle of the kebab. Four separate points of view have emerged and they are all correct.

It all started when Mustafa Tekinkaya refused to serve two Jewish customers as a protest against the war in the Gaza Strip. There are those who argue the right to protest is what defines us as a democracy. The first right that military juntas and communist dictatorships deny their citizens is the right to protest. If you break the law you must face the consequences, but freedom of political expression must also be protected. Those who picketed Mr Tekinkaya also have the right to protest but they should be aware that not all Muslim Turks support Mustafa. In fact, his own cousin, Adam Tekinkaya, will serve anyone and has actually employed two Israeli students in his kebab shop.

Yet another faction in the debate believes that property rights are the key to democracy, that the paramount right of all property owners is that they can demand any person to leave their property for any reason they wish. If a kebab shop owner refused to serve patched members of an ethnic gang in his shop then that's his democratic right to do so. According to the Sunday papers this view prevailed in bloggerville.

The fourth point of view and central government's official view on the matter is that human rights should prevail over property rights or the right to protest by any faction. The Human Rights Act of 1993 is enforced by our Race Relations Conciliator, Joris de Bres. I'm sure his judgement will be fair and balanced. Ironically Joris himself was far more radical than I was during our University days together.

Overall it has been a healthy, vigorous debate, a good example of a robust democracy at work. The wars in the Middle East have been going since the Roman invasion of the ancient world and the crusader wars of the middle ages, and there is no way Invercargill can resolve 2000 years of constant conflict. They say there is no middle ground in the Middle East but as Mayor I've tried to find it by expressing tolerance and sympathy to all those involved. It has been a new experience for the city and has helped us all become a lot more educated about the issues involved.

In the meantime a revolution is taking place in local government with the conclusion of hearings to the Royal Commission on Governance in Auckland. If anyone thinks Rodney Hide's election as Minister of Local Government means everything will remain the same and it will be 'business as usual' they are in for a rude awakening. The 3,537 submissions to the Royal Commission expressed anger toward CEO's. They were usually described as bloated bureaucrats with too much power who acted in an arrogant fashion.

The submission of Susan Pocket was typical according to the New Zealand Herald (19/1/09) "We are effectively ruled not by our democratically elected representatives but by a bloated bureaucracy of unelected and completely unaccountable functionaries with a culture of arrogant disregard for the will of the people."

The Royal Commission is considering turning local government upside down. Instead of Mayors being glorified ribbon cutters or colourful figureheads they will actually be given executive power. Instead of having one vote, or exactly the same political power as a new Councillor who has been in office for a week, a Mayor will have the power to hire and fire all senior staff. It's not that I have a fetish for power or have become a rabid cynic, but I have observed after 21 years in office that senior officers are far more responsive to the aspirations of those who hire and fire them than the chairman of a board that is only responsible for policy.

The Royal Commission is inspired by the former Lord Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, who with visionary leadership and executive power solved London's traffic jams overnight with an electronic toll gate for central London. Mayors are usually more bold and innovative because they have a direct mandate from the people, whereas CEO's are usually cautious accountants who have gradually with the passage of time worked their way up the corporate ladder.

Without question 2009 is going to be an exciting and challenging year.