

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

SOUTHLAND TIMES, 28 MARCH 2009

THE HOTSEAT

First of all, a warm southern welcome to all the delegates and partners attending the New Zealand Association of General Surgeons' Conference held at Ascot Park. As part of the conference we had offered a couple of mini tours around the city, but these didn't seem to arouse much interest. I volunteered to organise a 'Mayor Tim's Tour' of the city with assistance from Venture Southland and it will be interesting to see how many visitors take up the challenge. We will never compete with the mega conferences held in Queenstown, but I believe our 'point of difference' is that our hosting is more personal, folksy and friendly. We may not have a pristine lake and snow capped mountains in Invercargill, but our hospitality is second to none.

I've never organised a Mayor's Tour for a conference before so it will be interesting to see how it all works out. If it is a success we could offer such a tour to all visitors attending conferences in the city. It may turn out to be a chaotic shambles, but in this era of fiscal restraint there will be stiff competition to attract conferences. We have to pull out all stops if we are going to get our slice of the conference cake. So if you see me wandering around town with a group of bemused and bewildered surgeons, please give us a friendly wave. At least we've got highland dancing in the Civic Theatre and netball in Stadium Southland, so there's plenty of action in town this weekend.

Invercargill's economy is surviving the recession relatively well. Ireland has the same population as New Zealand, but they have 330,000 people collecting unemployment benefits, whereas we have 35,000 in the same predicament. However, we still need to work intelligently to keep stimulating our production.

I'm a little saddened therefore to see that Tony Ryall, the new Minister of Health, is going down exactly the same road as his predecessor, David Cunliffe, when it comes to our Auckland Island Pigs' Project. We have the cure for one of the greatest epidemics in the world yet we are being thwarted by mountains of red tape. The message I keep giving to Central Government is simple and direct. We don't want handouts – we just want you to smash the shackles of bureaucracy. We are quite capable of generating wealth and we are intelligent enough to launch innovative industries. All we require is freedom from constraints and compliancy costs.

What worries me is that the company developing our Auckland Island Pigs' Project, Living Cell Technologies, will simply throw up their hands in disgust and set up shop in China or India. New Zealand will end up simply becoming a consumer and we will have to buy our medicine off Asia. If this happens the bureaucrats won't care. They'll still receive their handsome salaries regardless of what happens. They are not required to create anything or manufacture a product. They can just relax, sit back and say no, no, no, to every proposal that lands on their desks. It's always safer to say no because it absolves you from all responsibility. What this country needs is politicians and bureaucrats who have the courage to say yes. Let's give it a go. Let's take the risk. Let's fly by the seat of our pants. We've had year after year of due diligence, human trials, peer reviews.

Eventually someone has to actually make a decision. Yes or no will do, but no company on Earth can withstand a relentless barrage of maybes.