

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

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THE HOTSEAT

Wow! What do you say when the earth moves under your feet? I've been through plenty of earthquakes before and they're usually nasty, but so short and sharp they're over before you know they've begun. This was oh so different – like trying to snowboard on a waterbed.

You suddenly realise just how mortal you are and how little control we actually have over our fragile environment. We stutter and slosh around on this razor thin crust of earth that covers the molten iron tech-tonic plates that hiss and spit and dictate our future. Or lack of it.

Being hit by an earthquake as severe as that which devastated Napier certainly wasn't in the Long Term Council Community Plan. This can't be happening.

Without question the earthquake was a metaphor. A challenge to our endless quest for security. Emails came flooding in from our sister city in Kumagaya as tsunami warnings went international.

The following day we erupted in intellectual thought and stimulation when John Key launched the highly successful SIT conference "Preparing for the Upturn". Dr Ganesh Nana, the Chief Economist for BERL spoke about the electronic brain being only 10 years away. He invited us to imagine what the world would be like if we could build a brain that was superior to our own and could work 24/7 because it didn't need food or sleep. The Minister of First Church, Richard Gray, suggested that we would have to become the sole representatives of spirituality and humanity because robots would do all the work.

There was also humour watching the Minister of Education, Honourable Anne Tolley turn white as a sheet when Fred Tulett, the Editor of this paper, introduced her. Fred just couldn't help making a reference to MPs' expense accounts. For most of us its old news, but obviously newspaper editors are still salivating over the massacre of British MPs when their expense accounts were revealed in the press. There's nothing an editor enjoys more in life than catching a politician with his pants down. Last century it was Christine Keeler, Mandy Rice-Davies and the Profumo affair. This century it's a British MP cleaning his castles moat and Italy's Casanova Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi running around with a 17 year old "family friend" what has sent the tabloids into a frenzy. And as every politician knows, when the tabloids point the bone you know your days are numbered.

The conference, however, also had its moments of compassion. When young Peter, who now works for the Southland District Council and is a martial arts champion, approached Professor Bob Elliot and thanked him for almost curing his diabetes with pig cells almost 30 years ago, I found it quite moving.

Professor Elliot had just shown a film of pig cells actually being injected into a Russian's stomach. I had expected Penny Simmonds, the catalyst for the conference, would be

looking a little squeamish. But no, she seemed quite animated and excited about this journey through the intestines. Life is full of surprises.

The entire conference was a credit to the SIT and Southland. We can all feel proud of the ability to share knowledge and ideas as we strive toward a healthier, happier and more prosperous future for our province.