

COLUMN FROM MAYOR TIM SHADBOLT

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This year's Local Government Conference almost ran the risk of being entertaining. During a passionate speech on youth crime, Judge Becroft gave an example of the problems caused by inflexibility.

He told the story of the US Enterprise as it was heading for Midway. Suddenly a blip appeared on the ship's new state of the art radar screen. The radio operator immediately informed Admiral Nimitz that their ship was on a collision course with the blip. "And do we have a contact code number for this blip?" asked the Admiral of the young rating. "Yes Sir!" he snapped proudly handing his Admiral the coded numbers. The Admiral was immediately on the phone. "Nimitz here, US Enterprise. We are presently on a collision course so could you change course 12 degrees to starboard". "Sir, with all due respect, could you change course 12 degrees to port", replied a very young, and nervous Naval Officer. "What?" exploded the Admiral, "the US Enterprise is the largest warship in the United States Navy and there's no way I intend changing course for you!" "Well Admiral, as the senior officer of course it's your call, but we are a lighthouse". It was an interesting parable about the power of man when compared to the power of nature. The dialectics of authority and its endless conflict with reality.

The unfortunate Phil Goff found himself in a similar situation to Admiral Nimitz when he decided to defend the unemployed by focusing national attention on the plight of a redundant worker in John Key's own electorate. But when Phil Goff tried, with a theatrical flourish, to pull a skinny little redundant rabbit out of his hat, there emerged instead a big fat hare wearing a mink coat. For the rest of the week he was goaded and heckled in Parliament because of his 'dole for millionaires' programme.

The Mayors' gathering in Christchurch also got away to a bad start. On the first day we met the news broke about a group of New York Mayors and Rabbis who operated a crime syndicate specialising in fake Gucci handbags and black market kidneys. It seemed too bizarre to believe. Imagine coming home from a Local Government Conference and giving your wife a Gucci handbag. Then, just when she gleefully unwrapped it, you called out, "wait, there's more!" And inside the handbag was an exquisitely wrapped, black market, kidney. Lovely.

The other strange aspect of the conference was listening to Rodney Hide give a speech without once mentioning the phrase 'cap on rates'. It was as though the entire concept had simply vanished off the face of the Earth. Another stock phrase missing in action was 'core business'. To be honest I'd be happy to be restricted to core business. Roads; sewerage; rubbish; water. That's fine with me so long as the Government takes responsibility for all our non-core responsibilities. Libraries? Well I'm sure Eric Roy has plenty of time to run the Library. Parks and museums? Yep, there's another job for Eric. Brothels and liquor control? Yep, Eric's our man. Tourism and economic development? Are you free Eric? Swimming pools? No problem for Eric. Organising events; helping build velodromes; theatres and sports facilities? Building permits? Civil defence? Environmental health? Public transport and cycle ways? The list goes on and on.

Local government spends 80% of the rates on core services, but we spend 80% of our time on community services. Does Central Government really want to inherit all these non-core services? I doubt it. I believe that's why young Rodney has discarded his canary yellow jacket and is now whistling a very different tune.