SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: NEW ZEALAND SOLUTIONS FOR TOCQUEVILLE'S PROBLEM

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Abstract

The 19th century French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville described democracy as a two-edged sword, noble in its embrace of equal human dignity but always in danger of descending into ignoble servitude when the rigours of liberal egalitarianism became too great. This paper draws on Tocqueville's scenarios of democratic deterioration to formulate a model of unsustainable social and political life. It then considers some distinctive and enduring features of New Zealand political culture and social practice that have protected this country from the perils of unsustainability, including a compound idea of equality, a willingness to subordinate private property arrangements to the goal of social harmony, and an unwillingness to succumb to mediocrity. These features begin to sketch a New Zealand model of social and democratic sustainability that social policy analysts can use to guide their advice to government.

INTRODUCTION

I believe New Zealand can aim to be the first nation to be truly sustainable – across the four pillars of the economy, society, the environment, and nationhood. (Prime Minister Helen Clark 2007)

Most of us probably have some understanding of what sustainability means in the environmental realm – i.e. do not extract natural resources faster than they can regenerate and do not produce more waste than the planet can safely absorb. Economic sustainability is also relatively clear – i.e. do not take the easy road to a high-employment, low-wage, economy by pursuing only short-term opportunities and failing to invest in future innovation and knowledge-led growth. More mysterious are the concepts of social sustainability and sustainable nationhood. What could

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sustainability mean with respect to these "pillars"? By embracing social and nationhood sustainability as goals, the prime minister has set the challenge of defining them and then designing public policies that contribute to them.

This paper aims to shed a bit of light on the first task of defining what sustainable society and nationhood might mean in contemporary New Zealand, and it does so by appealing to a rather unlikely source – a French aristocrat who died nearly 100 years before our current prime minister was born, never visited or paid any particular attention to New Zealand during his lifetime, and did not use the term "sustainability" in his writings, so far as I can tell. Despite these facts, Alexis de Tocqueville's analysis proves highly relevant for the task at hand because his concept of "the social state" captures the rich and complex relationship between a nation-state's socio-cultural life and the health and fitness of its governance regime, thereby offering a framework for examining society and nationhood in their broadest senses. The result is a model of social and political sustainability in everything but name.

Tocqueville's analysis provides a framework for thinking about social sustainability, broadly understood, as well as a foil for examining selected elements of New Zealand social thought and practice. Based on this encounter across countries, cultures and times, this paper constructs a working definition of social sustainability for contemporary New Zealand. The argument proceeds as follows: in the next section I describe Tocqueville's doomsday scenarios for democratic un-sustainability and decline, and the factors that contribute to them. The subsequent section explores elements of a New Zealand model for warding off decline and building sustainability, and identifies features of this model that correspond to and diverge from Tocqueville's ideas. The concluding section is a call to action to use the core elements of the sustainability framework as criteria for social policy analysis.

TOCQUEVILLE ON DEMOCRACY'S SELF-DESTRUCTIVE IMPULSES

To better understand social sustainability, let us start with *un*-sustainability. In his masterpiece, *Democracy in America* (2002), Tocqueville famously examined the American model of democracy to determine how the United States managed to dodge the kinds of social and political evils that transformed the French Revolution into a reign of terror. The book's importance extends far beyond its American setting and historical boundaries, however, because it presents Tocqueville's vivid and logically systematic account of the natural sources of instability and decay that perpetually plague all egalitarian democracies. Of course, the purpose in studying democracy's perils was to find methods of counteracting them, and toward that end, Tocqueville identified from his experiences in the United States a list of social, cultural, and institutional factors which, he argued, had protected the Americans against democratic decline.

They were not the only possible remedies, however, as Tocqueville himself acknowledged: "I am very far from believing that they [the Americans] have found the only form of government that democracy can give itself" (p.12). The specific American remedies that he identified are broadly of interest and potentially transferable across nations and historical eras, but they are also somewhat culturally bound, and for this reason, the present paper focuses instead on his analysis of the universal threats to egalitarian democracy – i.e. his problem definition rather than his suggested solutions. In so doing, we are better placed to ask what kinds of distinctive solutions New Zealand might offer to the generic problems of egalitarian democracy.

Separating the problem from the solution is easier said than done, however, because both boil down to equality, an idea that features as both hero and villain in Tocqueville's story. In the heroic role, *equality* lays the foundation for democracy, which Tocqueville ranked above other regime types because it is "more just, and its justice makes for its greatness and its beauty" (p.675). Democracy's justness stems from its embrace of the famously self-evident truth of equal human dignity. If people are truly born equal in worth, then it is difficult to justify any governance system that oppresses some while concentrating power in the hands of others. For this reason, Tocqueville welcomed the liberating trend toward egalitarian democratisation, which he perceived as the dominant political force and "providential fact" of his day.

Equality also plays the villain in this story due to its observed dampening effects on excellence and its paradoxical tendency to deteriorate into subservience. Tocqueville lamented the "universal uniformity" and mediocrity that seems inevitably to accompany egalitarianism's leveling influence (p.674). Across "the face of the new world", he observed, "almost all prominent points are worn down to make a place for something middling that is at once less high and less low, less brilliant and less obscure than what used to be seen in the world" (pp.673–674). He worried about equality's tendency to smother revolutionary ideas and passions, ossify thinking, and deprive democratic citizens of the will and capacity to "make a sudden and energetic effort when needed" to alter the course of their destiny. Weighed down by this incapacity, he gloomily predicted that "the human race will stop and limit itself", "man will exhaust himself in small, solitary, sterile motions" and "while constantly moving, humanity will no longer advance" (p.617).

Graver yet for Tocqueville were "the perils that equality brings to human independence" (p.672). Although the idea and practice of democratic equality began as a sort of liberation movement aimed at freeing people from economic, political, and intellectual bondage to traditional structures of authority, Tocqueville argues that equality also has a perverse tendency to undermine liberty. It does this by setting people adrift from traditional sources of authority, thereby isolating them, leaving them too feeble to exercise independent thought and too insecure to risk non-

conformity. At the same time that equality ostensibly empowers the individual against the mighty forces of oppression embodied in monarchy, aristocracy, and theocracy, it thus makes citizens acutely aware of their individual weakness. This weakness stems from the obstacles to success posed by economic liberalisation and "the competition of all" (p.513), as well as from the fact that political equality spreads power so thinly across the population that no one individual can ever acquire enough to accomplish anything. Without real economic or political power and without any superiors to turn to (since everyone is equal), the citizens in Tocqueville's unhappy scenario "feel the need to be led and the wish to be free" (p.664) and so they follow their "very contrary instincts" to place all trust in the central government, "the immense being that rises alone in the midst of universal debasement" (p.644). As the people willingly submit to the yoke of the sovereign, equality is stripped of its liberating and empowering value once and for all and becomes the "new face of servitude" (p.410).

Tocqueville specified three types of servitude to which equality logically leads: majority tyranny, mild despotism, and industrial oligarchy. As illustrated in Figure 1, the downward spiral toward majority tyranny begins when liberalism's newly minted, autonomous individuals quickly discover that exercising their own powers of reason on any and all matters of public concern is nearly impossible due to scarcity of time, energy, will, and intellect. Overwhelmed by the increased burdens of egalitarian citizenship, they long for short cuts to public decision making. These short cuts appear in the form of raw, reflexive, mass opinion, to which the beleaguered citizens flock as if it was the voice of reason itself. Popular sentiments and ideas eventually become self-reinforcing, because, in addition to offering a cheap and easy substitute for critical thinking and public engagement, they also carry the apparent moral weight of consensus. As Tocqueville predicted, "whatever political laws regulate men in centuries of equality, one can foresee that faith in common opinion will become a sort of religion whose prophet will be the majority" (p.410).

The power of the majority is nearly absolute at this point in the downward spiral, for the majority determines not only action but also instinct; it controls both "the deed and the desire to do it" (p.243). The condition itself, which Tocqueville (echoing James Madison) called "majority tyranny" is bad enough, but citizens easily sink to an even lower level of servitude when they succumb to the charms of the aspiring despot, who persuades them to delegate more and more of their own sovereignty to him and to his increasingly distant and decreasingly accountable central bureaucracy. He encourages them to mind their own business and leave civic affairs to him, thereby further isolating citizens from each other and from any engagement with the public interest. The despot seizes power in a democracy not through violence or overthrow, but by preying on the people's insecurities, promising easy solutions to complex problems, and presenting himself as just "one of us". Tocqueville called this arrangement "mild despotism" due to the complete lack of resistance that the despot meets on his way up the ladder of power.

Figure 1   Mapping Tocqueville: How Democracy Deteriorates Into Servitude
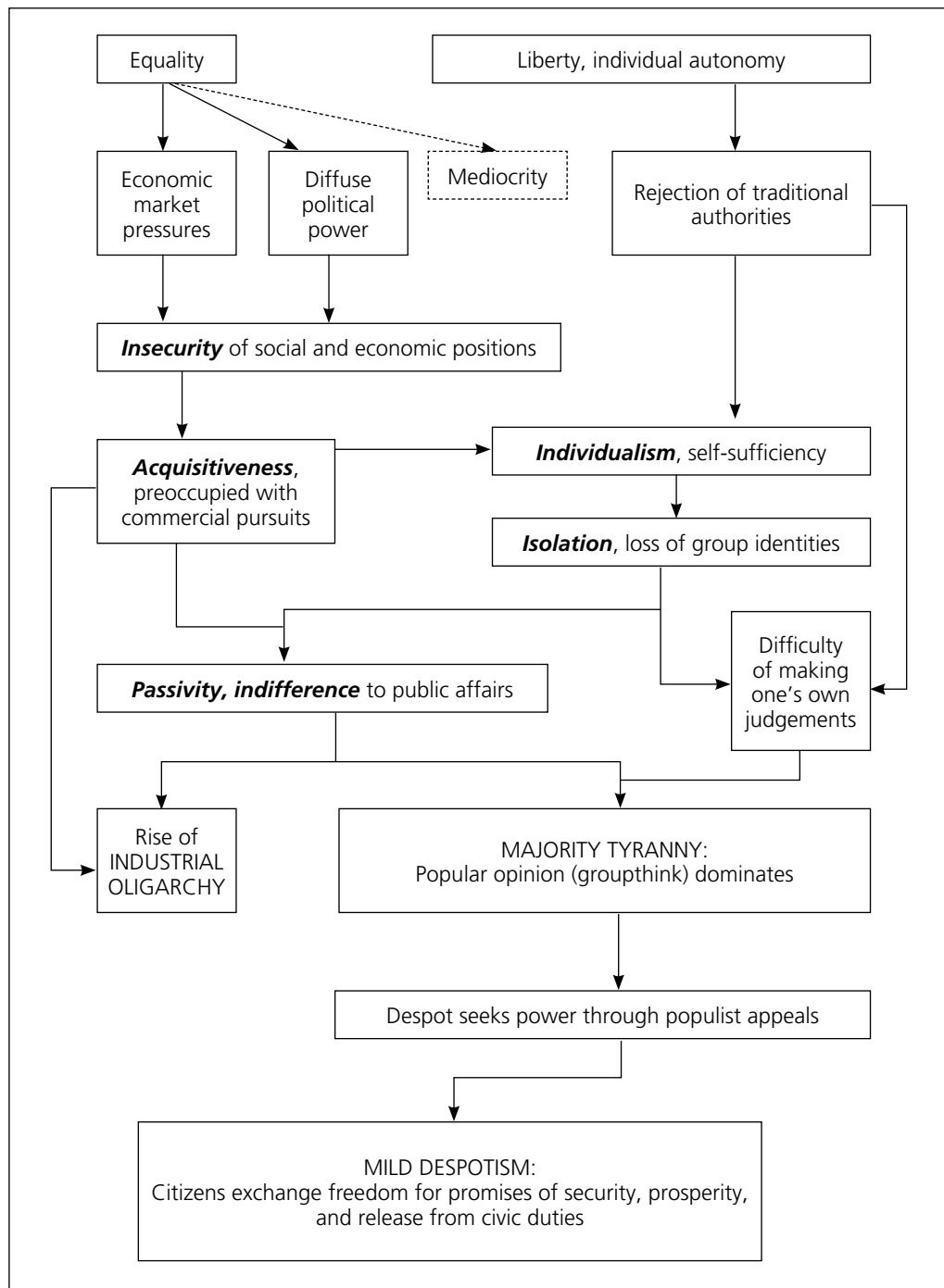
Tocqueville's third form of servitude emerges from the rapid growth of commercial opportunities which accompanies democratisation and liberalisation. Because modern fortunes can be gained and lost in the blink of an eye as markets expand and contract, people feel they must continually chase new business opportunities in order to stay ahead of the wave. They thrill to the apparently infinite opportunities for accumulating wealth, but they also become agitated by the intense competition from their peers and the seeming impossibility of keeping up. They lose their capacity to feel satisfied. If unchecked, the perpetual race for material wealth soon leads to establishment of a business aristocracy composed of society's more commercially talented and successful members. Economic power inevitably transforms into political power in this scenario, and thus democratic equality gives way to industrial aristocracy, i.e. rule by a capitalist elite. Citizens allow this to happen because their attention is diverted from public affairs by the pursuit of material wealth.

Thus, the fatal formula for democratic deterioration leads from the liberating and empowering concept of equality through the intermediate vices of individualism, isolation, insecurity, unrestrained acquisitiveness, and civic indifference, and finally to one or more of Tocqueville's three unhappy endings: majority tyranny, mild despotism, and industrial aristocracy. This complex web of cause and effect is one of the most striking and illuminating elements of Tocqueville's analysis, and constructing the arguments behind such webs is the defining method of his political sociology. Within the democracy web, cultural traits weave in and out of social attitudes and behaviours, which together determine laws, institutional structures, and political habits, which then weave back into culture and society. All of these elements taken together represent the necessary background conditions for healthy democracy and a sustainable society. Based on Tocqueville's analysis, we might venture to define social and political (or "nationhood") sustainability as the ability of a society to resist internal forces of decay while also maintaining and reproducing the background social, cultural, and institutional conditions necessary for healthy democratic social relations to flourish.

TOWARD A NEW ZEALAND MODEL OF SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY: PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

Figure 1's ultra-gloomy scenarios of civic decay are more than enough to shake the faith of even the most devout believer in democracy's golden future. They did not put Tocqueville off, however, for he argued that societies could devise effective protections against them:[2] "I see great perils that it is possible to ward off; great evils that one can avoid or restrain, and I become more and more firm in the belief that to be honest and

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2   It should be noted, however, that evidence from later letters and writings suggests that Tocqueville may have lost much of his hopefulness about the future of American democracy toward the end of his life. He died in 1859.

prosperous, it is still enough for democratic nations to wish it" (p.675). If he is correct, then the perversities of democratic equality may be controlled and directed, given sufficient will to do so, but how?

Rather than rehearsing Tocqueville's preferred list of American answers to this question, let's consider how New Zealand has managed to "ward off" democracy's self-destructive tendencies and remain "honest and prosperous" in the face of "great evils". It is a huge topic, of course, and much has been written about New Zealand democracy and society. Only a few preliminary observations are possible here.

Sustaining Equality

As noted above, Tocqueville credits equality with giving birth to democracy at the same time that he blames equality for instigating nearly all of the troubles that undermine democracy. It should therefore come as no surprise that Tocqueville (p.186) argues, with characteristic nuance and complexity, that the first remedy for the ills associated with a degraded form of equality may be, quite simply, more equality: "Thus it sometimes happens in the immense complication of human laws that extreme freedom corrects the abuses of freedom and that extreme democracy prevents the dangers of democracy". If egalitarian democracy therefore needs reinforcement, perhaps it is less like a birthright for people, such as the Americans, whose history and culture ("point of departure") is soaked through with egalitarian ideals, and more like a fire that needs continually to be stoked once it has been lit, or like a plant that needs tending even after it has sprouted.

Arguably, the centrepiece of New Zealand's social tradition has been a willingness to do precisely this – to review and adjust basic economic and social arrangements continually in order to keep the fires of equality and social harmony burning brightly. In addition, it could be argued that the New Zealand tradition has built a complex and integrated understanding of equality that cannot easily be reduced to a single slogan such as "fair go" or "closing the gaps". These slogans hint at important components of New Zealand equality, but the fuller conception includes economic, social, moral and political values and an indivisible compound of equal outcomes, equal opportunities, equal standing and equal dignity. Even such an expansive concept as human rights cannot encompass this compound notion, for equality extends beyond rights to privileges, advantages, and contributions.

Faced with Nobel Laureate economist Amartya Sen's (1980) provocative question about social justice – "equality of what?" – many New Zealanders would be hard pressed to give a single answer. The much-vaunted efforts of the early settlers aimed at an egalitarian ideal, which included a relatively compressed income distribution, non-deferential social attitudes, social and economic mobility, class distinctions that tended to be loose and casual, high levels of political participation and government

responsiveness to voters, high rates of social inclusion, low poverty, a strong inclination to resolve internal conflicts peacefully and consensually, and a spirit of mutual respect and teamwork. The extent to which these aspirations were realised is a matter of some dispute among historians and others, of course, but there does seem to be a rough consensus among many that New Zealand's British settlers largely succeeded in creating *for themselves* a more egalitarian society than the one they had known in Britain. Nonetheless, settler society clearly would fail to satisfy contemporary standards of equality because it excluded large proportions of the population from full social membership, particularly women and Māori, but also Asian settlers and members of certain occupational groups. It also perpetuated various forms of hierarchy and paternalistic relations in the midst of the egalitarian mythmaking. Therefore, values such as universal extension of equal rights and respect, and appreciation for (or, at a minimum, tolerance of) human diversity need to be added to the list of ideals that comprise New Zealand's integrated core conception of equality.

New Zealanders expect and accept that certain variations in income, accomplishment, opportunity, status, wealth and power are unavoidable. Nevertheless, there is a widespread sense that all of these variations need to be kept within tolerable allowances in order to sustain equality of human dignity. From this viewpoint, of course, the idea of trading one form of equality off against another, or settling for equality in one sphere (such as civil rights) and not another (such as the economy), simply does not make sense. How do you summarise all of this in a slogan? Prime Minister Helen Clark refers to nationhood and national identity, while John Key has referred to "the Kiwi way", but these terms are largely emotive and do not tell us enough about the content of the core ideas.

The Social State

An irreducibly compound ideal of equality naturally requires a complex array of customs, attitudes, laws, institutions and policies to support it. Taken together, these add up to something like Tocqueville's "democratic social state", a concept meant to capture the totality of egalitarian democracy's socio-political-cultural world. In the case of New Zealand, the state itself occupies an especially large and important niche within that world due to New Zealanders' historical preference for using government to pursue collective interests. This preference for state-led activity, shared with Australia, probably reflects the close-knit nature of New Zealand society, a feature which makes it easier for people to communicate with and control their elected representatives, and therefore easier to see government as a genuine extension of the people. Where policies to support compound equality are concerned, New Zealand's distinctive version of the democratic social state traditionally has produced bundles of economic and social policies that were meant to work together to achieve equality.

Most striking among these bundles are policies such as government efforts to enable and accelerate the subdivision of large farm estates, related efforts to experiment with various types of land tenure, centralised mechanisms for arbitrating industrial wages, and the Waitangi Tribunal, all of which demonstrate what Gary Hawke (1979:390) has referred to as "the subordination of property rights to the needs of a community" – a principle which, he argues, has characterised New Zealand public policy for much of the country's history. Beginning with land reform, banking, labour, and industrial policies in the late 19th century, extending through the establishment of a central bank and currency devaluation measures in the depression era, and finally to fiscal and economic policies in support of full employment in the post-war period, the New Zealand government repeatedly has revised its approach to economic instruments and private property in order to meet social demands for economic growth while also achieving "the maximum possible harmony of interests" among New Zealanders (Hawke 1979:387). In many cases, harmonisation required explicit equalisation of advantages.

Social Consensus and Majority Tyranny

Hawke (1979) notes that New Zealanders' traditional willingness to let government modify property arrangements to serve social purposes has depended heavily on there being a solid consensus concerning the content of those purposes. In New Zealand, the list of agreed social purposes has been short and reasonably consistent throughout the nation's history. Hawke (1979) listed them as social harmony and economic growth. James Belich (2001:22–23) described similar components to the 19th-century "populist compact": keep class distinctions relatively loose and locally variable to prevent sharper social boundaries and conflicts from developing (i.e. social harmony), and deliver continuous and rapid increases in standards of living, especially for working people relative to the gentry and capitalists, via "a constant fresh supply of opportunity" (i.e. economic growth). The two purposes appear over and over in contemporary settings as well. In her recent statement to Parliament, Prime Minister Helen Clark (2007) summarised the successes of her government by referring to both economic and social gains – more people in work and higher incomes, higher educational achievement and less crime. She reported that "These results have been achieved across the society, lifting Māori and Pākehā, along with Pasifika, Asian, and other New Zealanders", an accomplishment that presumably reduces social cleavages, at least those that run along ethnic lines (Clark 2007:1). Her government promised to "sustain family and community living standards in our open, competitive economy", which has generated "solid economic and tax growth over seven years" (Clark 2007:1–4). This goal is to be accomplished by developing a high-value economy that presumably will deliver high wages evenly among the population. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Michael Cullen (2007:4) recently argued that the benefits of economic growth need to

be shared across the board both for reasons of intrinsic fairness and for the sake of building "a societal consensus for the direction of economic growth". "In short", he concluded, "a fair society underpins a strong economy."

The goals of economic growth and social harmony are shared across parties, although interpretations differ. The National Party may be known best for its pro-economic growth policies, but the party leader John Key used his first major speech as leader to talk about social harmony and what he sees as the main threats to it. Key employed the provocative term "underclass" to describe groups within New Zealand who suffer from learned helplessness, lack of hope, and "a dangerous drift toward social and economic exclusion" (Key 2007:2). This approach to social harmony differs from the centre-left's focus on celebrating diversity and universalising basic services. Key's reference to an underclass looks like a risky political strategy, because it cuts against the grain of traditional myths about New Zealand's classless, egalitarian society. However, evidence suggests that New Zealanders today bring a realistic perspective to equality, embracing it as a worthy aspiration but recognising that it is not yet an accomplished fact.[3]

How did New Zealand develop such broad and deep agreement about the goals of economic development and social harmony? Hawke and many others attribute New Zealand's high level of internal agreement to its size, relative homogeneity, and the close-knit quality of Kiwi society. These qualities make strong, effective government possible and can help reduce tensions between socially distant groups. New Zealand's experience suggests that they also may help prevent two of Tocqueville's unhappy endings – social mediocrity and the decline from egalitarian democracy into majority tyranny.

New Zealanders understand these threats well, and nowadays, the mere mention of social consensus provokes a wide range of reactions. For many New Zealanders, the famed social consensus of the 1950s and 1960s reeked of social and psychological manipulation. They argue that it was less a consensus and more an imposed morality which centred on the superiority of one very narrow model of family and economy, namely the heterosexual, male, breadwinning rugby fan supporting his family through work in a heavily protected and regulated industry or through the earnings from a farm or small business. Some New Zealanders feel that the post-war social consensus suffocated originality of expression and actively harmed many individuals and population groups who could not fit the ideal Kiwi type or did not want to fit it.

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3   A large majority of respondents to a recent *Listener* poll (70%) expressed the belief that a class system operates in New Zealand, based largely on income and wealth. Many fewer National voters (24%) agreed with this assessment than members of other parties (Black 2005).

Others feel that social consensus was necessary for building social cohesion, which contributed positively to New Zealand's high quality of life and high levels of democratic participation in the post-war period.

With respect to Tocqueville's prediction of creeping mediocrity and narrowed horizons, signs of creative suffocation are difficult to detect in what has long been one of the world's cultural "over-producers" (Belich 2003), and New Zealanders have always maintained a characteristic curiousity about, and trade with, the rest of the world even during their most self-satisfied phases. Still, most would agree that the cultural revolution of the 1970s and 1980s was necessary to sweep out prejudices and stale ideas that had accumulated in earlier periods. Current flourishing of New Zealand art, music, and culture, including the Māori renaissance, surely owes something to "decolonisation" (Belich 2001), the dismantling of consensus, and the embrace of diversity. Thus, mediocrity need not follow from equality, and even when provincialism appears entrenched, people may find ways to shake things up and let new ideas in.

With respect to majority tyranny and mild despotism, something like it may have been evident in the days of first-past-the-post elections, which, combined with a unicameral parliament, produced governments so powerful that they earned the label, "elected dictatorship" (Mulgan). On the other hand, even governments with large majorities have tended to follow long-standing norms of keeping in touch with the people and being responsive to voters.[4] Perhaps the pre-MMP governments did not follow Tocqueville's predicted path because of the density of connections mentioned earlier, which makes it harder for elected representatives to distance themselves from those whom they represent. New Zealand's high (though falling) rates of political participation and its well-known village style of politics offer powerful antidotes to civic indifference and mild despotism. Thus, it appears that a tight social consensus need not produce either majority tyranny or mild despotism in the political realm.

Envy and Isolation

Close-knit societies may be good at producing consensus and social cohesion, but it is also true that familiarity sometimes breeds contempt. As Tocqueville observed, noble democratic citizens can quickly become petty, mean-spirited carpers at the first whiff of unequal advantage. Although "men will never found an equality that is enough for them", they continually chase ever flatter conditions and, in the process, become less and less tolerant of the slightest deviation from strict targets: "When inequality

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4   Some may argue that certain New Zealand prime ministers or cabinets have been exceptions to this rule. Robert Muldoon comes to mind, of course, and those who accuse David Lange, Roger Douglas, and others of riding roughshod over voters' wishes and dispensing with norms of parliamentary debate and policy consultation might wish to include the fourth Labour Government as an exception as well. I will leave it to others to decide these cases.

is the common law of a society, the strongest inequalities do not strike the eye; when everything is nearly on a level, the least of them wound it. That is why the desire for equality always becomes more insatiable as equality is greater" (p.513).

As New Zealanders know too well, the obsessive pursuit of equal outcomes can produce envy and mutual suspicion rather than cohesion and mutual respect. James Belich (2003) calls this "the Kiwi curse" of "negative egalitarianism". According to his formulation, this requires that everyone not only enjoys equal benefits but also suffers equally – as when city mayors are issued extra parking tickets to keep them humble. Alan Webster's analysis of the New Zealand Values Survey identifies groups within his sample who demonstrate negative egalitarianism; in his words, they "are great on equality when equality means that no one gets a better deal than I do" (New Zealand Herald 2001). Envy-driven egalitarianism may have its roots in settlers' pre-migration experiences at the less privileged end of Britain's rigid class hierarchies. Or it may stem from the logic of strict equality, which holds that any differences in outcomes for citizens who are otherwise meant to be equal must signal some sort of hidden advantage and unfair privilege. Either way, these phenomena provide a useful reality check for anyone who is in danger of waxing too nostalgic about the progressive attitudes of New Zealanders past or present.

Politicians often find it useful to nod in the direction of envy-based egalitarianism rather than the more constructive, mutual-respect variation, particularly when seeking the votes of those groups identified by Webster above. For example, National Party Leader John Key (2007:1) recently described "the Kiwi way" as including a belief that "no one is born superior to anyone else". The meaning of this phrase is nearly the same as if he had said, "everyone is born equal", but it leaves a subtly different impression on the hearer by planting the idea that someone somewhere harbours delusions of superiority which must be quashed. The mild suspicions being stoked by this kind of rhetoric may qualify as natural human emotions, but if Tocqueville is right, societies need to guard against them nonetheless.

This is where the prime minister's second category of less-familiar sustainability comes into play: sustainable "nationhood". Envy can be overcome, at least in theory, by a strong dose of team spirit, which convinces society's members that the accomplishments of one are the accomplishments of all, and that individual contributions of many different kinds are needed to advance the nation's collective interests. The spirit of teamwork and good sportsmanship is easiest to cultivate when people have a sense of their "team" identity, of course.

The current government's focus on nationhood as a public policy priority presumably seeks to build this sense of shared identity, belonging, and teamwork. It has many historical and cultural resources to work with, including the ethos of mutual respect

and "mateship" that developed through the early settlers' partnerships for survival. For example, historian Rollo Arnold (1994) tells of a communal approach to settlement in the 1880s, promoted by the Stout–Vogel government, in which groups of settlers from established communities formed "small farm associations" for the purposes of jointly settling new backblocks. This approach to pioneering runs counter to the ruggedly individualistic model that is so often caricatured, and it surely helped shape social relations in both old and new settlements:

> In banding together, finding their block of land, and planning for their joint occupation of it, the group got to know and trust each other. Individuals who would never have "gone it alone" as pure, self-seeking capitalists were prepared to attempt backblocks pioneering as members of "a band of brothers" undergirded by a sense of community, and by an awareness that there would be a pooling of talents and a group commitment to the common good. (Arnold 1994:128)

Successful teamwork in these sorts of settings required mutual respect among team members, which itself implied a belief in equal strength and capability rather than equal weakness. It also elicited hard work from every team member and strong disapproval of free riders. The communal approach to settlement would have been expected to help ward off the excessive individualism that Tocqueville warned about and protect against isolation and its socially damaging effects.

Acquisitiveness

A different strategy for combating envy, individualism, and isolation seeks to shift people's preoccupations away from the kinds of activities that breed envy – such as accumulation of material goods or social status – and toward more collective, other-regarding, and perhaps other-worldly concerns. This strategy brings the added benefit of combating excessive acquisitiveness, another of the vices implicated in Figure 1.

Tocqueville strongly endorsed religion as the key to this strategy, based on his observations of how Americans' religious beliefs tended to restrain their otherwise "feverish ardour" for material gain and their socially competitive appetites (p.511). For Tocqueville, the ability to resist such impulses was important because it protected citizens from becoming wholly preoccupied with the pursuit of wealth and status and distracted from public affairs. It carved a space in which citizens could focus on non-income-producing activities such as participating in associations, public debates, and politics, where they would form stronger horizontal bonds with their fellow citizens. Religion's effects on civic engagement in America appear to have persisted to the present day, with membership in Protestant churches still a strong predictor of political participation (Verba et al. 1995).

The New Zealand story is rather different. Christian influences on culture have always tended to be less overt here than in the United States, while secular norms against selfishness and material excess have been stronger. As a result, recent evidence shows very different patterns of civic engagement compared to the United States, with non-religious New Zealanders more politically active than those who report membership in a church (Donovan et al. 2004, cited in Vowles 2004). The roots of this phenomenon are long and deep. Ged Martin (1989:467) has noted that the first major period of European settlement, from the 1840s to 1880s, "coincided with the post-Darwinian intellectual retreat of the British churches". Even those settlers who claimed a religious (overwhelmingly Protestant) affiliation brought this more secular worldview with them, and according to Martin, their attachment to the church weakened so in the new country that by 1881, less than a third of settlers reported regular church attendance.[5] Although the British settlers brought with them many of the traditional values that we associate with Christian ethics, such as loyalty, probity and kindness, these were more a cultural residue of Christian belief than the fruit of faith itself, in Martin's view. They were also reinforced no doubt by the humanitarian ideas of the time, for New Zealand was settled at the peak of the humanitarian movement's strength.

Residue of Christianity or not, values of frugality, anti-materialism, and anti-elitism have persisted in New Zealand society and culture largely through secular processes of socialisation. Everyone has a story that illustrates these values. Prime Minister David Lange (1986), for example, told tales of a previous prime minister who was known for taking public buses to official meetings in London and helping to wash up after state functions. We may debate the extent to which today's population is practicing what their forebears preached, particularly in light of rapidly increasing credit card debt and high rates of fuel consumption, etc., but the art of getting by with less is still revered by many and seen as evidence of cleverness, resourcefulness, and the down-to-earth Kiwi personality.

With respect to contemporary attitudes, recent surveys do seem to show that New Zealanders are less driven by the pursuit of wealth than other nationalities, and more interested in maintaining an active leisure. The government's Growth and Innovation Advisory Board (2004) scratched beneath the surface of these views using survey and focus group research, and found what they called "polite support" for the goal of economic growth but also strong reservations about its negative side effects. Over half of those surveyed felt that economic growth would generate greater opportunities and better, more interesting, and more secure jobs, but more than 60% anticipated that economic growth also would bring negative side effects, including more traffic and

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5   This does not mean that New Zealanders lack spirituality, which can express itself in many ways. For discussion, see Morris (2005).

congestion, a larger gap between rich and poor, personal stress, a more materialistic culture, pressure on limited resources, and environmental damage. When asked which values were "personally important" to them, only 10% ticked economic growth, compared to 46% for quality of life and 32% for quality of the natural environment.

Although economic development has ranked at the top of the country's list of goals historically, New Zealanders today clearly see something of a devil's bargain in accelerating the pursuit of national wealth. The Growth and Innovation Advisory Board attributes much of this to the experience of the 1980s and 1990s, which left many feeling that pro-growth policies inflict too much pain relative to the perceived gain. Both major parties seem to recognise the electorate's current ambivalence about economic growth. This is perhaps one of the reasons why John Key (2007) focused on the values of opportunity, hope, and fairness, rather than economic growth, in his first major speech as party leader. It also may help explain why Michael Cullen (2007:3) said recently that "the pursuit of happiness" does not "equate to the pursuit of wealth and success in owning a red Ferrari". "The things that actually matter to people", he continued, "are time with family and friends, a sense of contribution through work, being part of the community, the ability to trust each other, and having good health, just as much as financial situation."

Māori cultural values help support the anti-competitive, anti-materialist side of the New Zealand worldview in many ways, as does the environmental movement. A universal approach to social security also offers a partial antidote to negative egalitarianism, for if everyone enjoys the same access to basic goods and services such as health, education and housing, there will be fewer areas of life in which to nurse envy.

Insecurity

When envy and acquisitiveness have been brought under control, it so happens that insecurity, another of Figure 1's headline vices, also loses some of its sting. Insecurity threatens democracy by loading people with constant economic worries and thereby distracting them from public concerns. This leads to civic indifference and makes it harder for people to resist the empty promises of despots who offer material security in return for unlimited power.[6] To the extent that welfare state programmes reduce insecurity, they may therefore strengthen democracy, and this has certainly been one of New Zealand's predominant social policy strategies. However, it is worth repeating

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6   Insecurity need not refer always to living standards. It may take the form of concerns about physical safety and threats to safety from bullying, violent crime, war or terrorism. Post-9/11 American history clearly demonstrates how democratically elected executives can accumulate greater power by appealing to citizens' insecurities over terrorism.

that welfare state programmes represent only one piece of New Zealand's social policy heritage. The earlier tradition of setting economic and social policies that could work together to pursue economic growth and egalitarian harmony is worth remembering and perhaps resuscitating.

Thus, a tour through Tocqueville's vices and their New Zealand remedies bring us back full circle to the idea with which this section began – that egalitarian democracy's self-destructive tendencies must be countered by more and better forms of equality planted and nurtured across all social and economic institutions. This requires constant (but preferably not obsessive) attention, for when patterns of inequality are allowed to build up, they can soon endanger social and political stability. In Tocqueville's words, "When conditions are very unequal and the inequalities are permanent, individuals little by little become so unalike that one would say there are as many distinct humanities as there are classes"; under such circumstances, people too easily lose sight of "the general bond that brings all together in the vast bosom of the human race", and this sense of shared humanity, once lost, is difficult to rebuild (p.412).

If keeping a lid on income and wealth gaps is crucial to social and political sustainability, as Tocqueville and the New Zealand social policy tradition suggest it is, then those who view economic equality as a threat to economic growth will tell us that social and political sustainability means economic decline. The idea of equality and growth as combatants rests on the assumption that the economy's key players – investors, entrepreneurs, managers and workers – are motivated mostly by money. This assumption further implies that efforts to reorganise private property rights to align with socially useful functions will dampen economic growth by removing some of the incentives that drive innovation and production. For this reason, New Zealanders' openness to adjusting property rights, combined with their generally lukewarm response to economic growth as a personal goal, greatly worries public servants in places like the Ministry of Economic Development who are trying hard to convince small and medium business owners that they really do want to grow up and become big exporters. At the same time, however, New Zealanders' relatively restrained enthusiasm for growth is good news for those who welcome a value system that measures wellbeing in units other than dollars and a policy system that coordinates economic and social policy to achieve social harmony alongside prosperity.

Globalising pressures present one of the biggest challenges to social and political equality, for they tend to favour a singular focus on wealth creation and they create competitive pressures that are hard to resist. Time will tell if New Zealand can resist the pull, and if so, how. However, to those who argue that resistance is either pointless or dangerous, we have a Tocqueville-inspired vision of social sustainability to show that the price of giving up on equality may be far too high to ponder.

CONCLUSION

Good practice in policy analysis and advice requires the analyst to specify the criteria by which various policy options will be assessed. These criteria generally take the form of outcome statements or descriptions of changes in the actual conditions experienced by individual citizens, families, communities, ethnic groups, the environment, economic players, or others – e.g. less crime victimisation, less disease, less poverty, more exports, more product innovations, higher educational achievement, higher savings rates, lower inflation, and on and on. The discussion of social and political sustainability presented above suggests that, alongside outcomes-based criteria, some policy analysis criteria should assess policy options according to their likely impacts on the economic, social, cultural and political background factors that determine the fate of egalitarian democracy. Social policies and programmes are part of society's web of social norms, customs and attitudes – its mores – and for this reason, they must be designed not only to produce the outcomes that public management authorities favour, but also to reinforce the virtues and weaken the vices that together determine social and political sustainability itself.

Conditions constantly change. Social attitudes also change. One important test of social and political sustainability is a society's ability to adjust to such changes and weather the inevitable shocks, without being overwhelmed by social conflict or succumbing to the anti-democratic forces that take advantage of instability. Amidst what seem like constant changes, the ingredients for sustainability appear to have remained remarkably consistent. In the case of New Zealand, these include the many factors – only some of which are covered in this paper – that have protected New Zealand from Figure 1's scenarios. They also include an understanding of equality's compound nature and the ongoing need to kindle its flame.

Far more work is needed to shape a vision of social and political sustainability that can guide policymaking across the whole government portfolio. A comprehensive vision needs to include important bits of culture and behaviour that government cannot easily influence, such as day-to-day civilities among people and social mixing across the ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic divides that so control our identities. The vision also needs to resist the temptation to separate economic from social policy and to trade away egalitarian ideals in return for the vague promise of long-run economic growth. How policies should be designed to support compound equality, and with it, social and political sustainability, remains an open question. The purpose of this paper is to help stimulate discussion of that question by offering both a classical vision of sustainability and a glimpse of some core elements in New Zealand's heritage of sustainable social relations. That heritage is worth revisiting on a regular basis, not only by New Zealanders but by any society interested in "securing the new [or old] goods that equality can offer" (p.675) and thereby avoiding the vices that "put society as a whole in peril" (p.670).

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