

# We Don't Do It Their Way

I'M assuming that it's because I'm one of the first Americans to visit New Zealand under the Fulbright scheme that I've been asked to talk to you this evening. I may have set a pattern that will influence the reception you give other Fulbright visitors. I hope you may be as cordial to them as you have been to me; and that, on the whole, the impressions visiting New Zealanders get of America may be as favourable as mine have been of your country.

I don't presume to represent America in any official capacity, as a publicity agent, I don't expect to write a book on New Zealand as a result of the few months I have spent here. Since I drink neither coffee nor whisky, am neither divorced nor rich, and do not own a high-priced car, I possibly may not be considered by some of you as being an American at all.

If I'm not what you consider a typical American, that may be reason enough for my speaking to you and meeting you. I have been compelled by circumstances to change some of the preconceived notions I had of New Zealand. I hope I may have behaved in such a manner that some of you may have modified your views on what America and Americans are like. I hope you will laugh as much at my pronunciation as I do at yours, get as much amusement from my likes and dislikes as I have got from yours, and like me as much as I like you. In short, I hope we will all be better friends.

Since we are to be friends, I think I may speak frankly of both the favourable and the unfavourable impressions I have of your country. I hope you'll accept my views for what they are worth; and I want you to know that I'm putting into this talk what I've been told by New Zealanders they think should be in it. If I comment on prices and on homely things that hit us all, instead of on some of the major issues of government and of education, it's because you people have told me that's what you want to know about.

I doubt if I can do much to counteract the wrong impressions some of you have of America, impressions which some of your syndicated newspaper writers have given of my country. A few days after I landed here, I was surprised to read that one of your women reporters could not buy a meal in New York City for less than a pound. Later I read a New York diary by a London journalist in which ridiculous statements were made about the economics of living in New York.

Certainly I do not expect to find it necessary to pay any more for a good meal in a good place in New York City than is the case in a place of corresponding standing in Dunedin, Wellington, Christchurch or Auckland. I know that I can buy shoes, suits, shirts and other wearing apparel of superior quality in any major American city cheaper than I can in your major cities.

The other day I rode in a new American car, which the owner told me cost the equivalent of four thousand dollars before the devaluation of the pound. I know I could buy a similar car in my home town for less than half that price,

THREE months ago "The Listener" interviewed Professor E. LAURENCE PALMER, of Cornell University's College of Agriculture, then recently arrived here as one of the first scholarship holders under the Fulbright Scheme of educational exchanges sponsored by the U.S. Government. The other day, just before his return to the United States the Talks department of the NZBS persuaded him to record his impressions of New Zealand, and these are reprinted below. The talk was broadcast on the National link last Sunday evening.

and it's not my understanding that the inflated price is wholly an American responsibility. I hope America won't be blamed for it.

## 800 Years of Haircuts

Possibly this will be helpful. To buy a car like mine, at present New Zealand prices, you would have to spend enough to buy a New Zealand haircut every fortnight for about 800 years. The same car in my home town would cost as many dollars as will buy fortnightly American haircuts for about 50 years. Possibly because of this, American barbers can afford better cars than New Zealand barbers.

In general I'm certain that New Zealanders have a distorted idea about American prosperity. One rather prominent educator had the idea that our university students did little but prepare themselves for lives of leisure, and nothing practically to help them earn a living. I rather think that's going to be one of the best jokes I can tell an American university audience, where so many young folk work their way through colleges without the help of bursaries such as are available to so many of your advanced students. For example, we do nothing in America comparable with the bursaries you give teachers in preparation, in spite of the fact that generally we require a longer and more expensive period of training.

Recently a British educator, Mr. J. Hemming, who was making a visit of about a month to your country, reported in the Press that the physical standards of your better schools were the equal of the best anywhere in the world. In spite of the fact that he admitted to me that he knew little of American schools from first-hand experience, but felt qualified to pass an opinion on them—and in spite of the fact that he gave a university talk on clear thinking—I rather think he stretched his territory a bit, to include the whole world in the area over which he had authority of judgment.

I even wonder how he would justify the adult toilets provided for children just beginning school, which I saw in a new school that was opened officially this month. The principal of that school was powerless to correct the situation; he was told that was standard equipment, and that was all there was to it. This new school had an elaborate dental clinic equipped to the last detail. It had practically no library or library facilities.

I wonder whether you prefer to hear someone tell you that your best schools are the equal of any in the world, or if you prefer me to suggest specific weaknesses I have recognised. I could talk to you a whole evening on them. I think I know which you prefer, because more

than once I have been asked by small groups to tell them frankly about things I had seen in New Zealand that I thought might well be improved—only to have it made perfectly obvious that that was not what was wanted. In this you are like we are.

## Integrity and Mediocrity

I have been tremendously impressed by the integrity of your people . . . and by their satisfaction with mediocrity. I admire your obvious love of beauty in flowers or music, but not your contentment with cold buildings. I found it very difficult to understand the readiness with which one of your brilliant scientists is willing to let the Government take care of him when he becomes sick or old, and does not feel any necessity for exerting himself to maximum capacity to provide for his own future.

I was distressed to learn from the headmistress of one of your girls' high schools that her most brilliant students are not continuing their period of training to a point of maximum usefulness . . . because there is no necessity for their doing so. In view of these things, it sort of seems to me that instead of American colleges preparing our students for lives of leisure, it is your high schools that may be doing just that for young New Zealanders.

It may be that this is the way towards a happy future. It may be that there is no longer any need of individual initiative and sustained drive by individuals. If so, I am personally glad that it is you, and not America, that is making the experiment. I'm glad that we are not the guinea pigs you seem to have elected yourselves to be. If you are on the right track, we will imitate you!

My experience in New Zealand for the last few months has made it even harder for me to believe that, if public enterprise is so superior to private enterprise, it should have to spend such a long time gaining its independence, during which it seems to have to rely rather heavily on the profits of private enterprise for its support.

A few weeks after I came to New Zealand, I read of a man in one of your larger cities who thought he had solved the problem of life. To avoid paying taxes he had just "gone wild." He lived in a hideout, let his beard grow in spite of the cheapness of shaves in your country, got his meals from garbage tins at night, and generally pulled himself free from his fellow men.

Before I left America I heard of a certain man who had made a modest competence and elected to spend much of his time walking on the seashore throwing stones in the water. I personally cannot understand either of these men, but am equally sure that neither



PROFESSOR LAURENCE PALMER  
"If you are on the right track, we will imitate you"

could understand me. I am sure that one of them gave to society many years of good hard labour, and will not be calling upon society to care for him in his later years. Possibly your philosophy of life lies midway between those held by these two men. I don't know, but I wish I did. There are many other things that I don't understand; but I hope I may.

## Problems of Definition

It's quite possible that some of our misunderstandings are matters of definition. I was accused by Mr. L. J. Wild of seeking to glamourise rural life, in spite of the fact that my dictionary says glamour is "alluring beauty." I stand by my guns on the desirability of showing that rural life is not wholly sunk in a pig sty.

My interpretation of soil erosion as being a serious problem in New Zealand has been questioned by some of your officials; but I shall have a difficult time explaining some of the pictures I have taken as being representative of anything but what we in America call soil erosion.

Really, we should not quibble about definition or pronunciation, nor about anything other than whether we are doing our best to make the future happy for ourselves and for others. If you who have to live in New Zealand are satisfied that you have no soil erosion of a damaging nature, and are willing to bank your future on what you are doing, you are just as entitled to that way of living as is the man who wanted to spend his time throwing stones in the water, or the man who was content to live by prowling around at night.

I've read recently, in one of your weekly newspapers, an article which seems to indicate that at least one New Zealander thinks Americans are not short of money, and that "any method of taking some of that money from them deserves careful investigation."

I can assure you New Zealanders that there are at least some Americans who do not like statements like that. They are the Americans who are responsible for paying off our rising national debt. They are the Americans who want genuinely to help. They are the Americans who want to know you better, and want you to know them better. In short, they are Americans like me; those who work

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