



Tunnel vision

The gloves are off in the battle for the Mt Albert electorate.

It's a well-known sour-grapes technique of the vanquished to leave dead fish and rotting meat secreted under the floorboards to welcome the victors. Now that most ministerial houses are just rentals rather than state-owned, this petty revenge (which I dearly hope is not apocryphal) is not so easy for outgoing government MPs to practice.

But it turns out Helen Clark left something much more pungent under the boards than rotting flesh – the plans for the tunnel under Mt Albert.

To non-Aucklanders, the plan sounds as benign as a knitting pattern. Either you go over, or you go under, or you go over AND under a few times. Whichever, you've knitted yourself a quicker route to and from the airport. The dropped stitch of a greater or smaller number of demolished houses was always going to be a problem. But under Clark's iron-fisted protection, no roading official was ever under any misapprehension that anything was going anywhere other than *under* all the way.

(Let's pause for a minute to marvel at the audacity of the title alone: the Water-view tunnel. Ordinarily, the idea of a tunnel having a water view would scare the bejesus out of anyone contemplating travelling through it. A tunnel should have a tunnel view only – surely?)

Anyway, the tunnel project plans chugged along, with the National Party idly sniping that it was blatant power-abuse and favouritism on the part of the PM, to protect her vote at such extra cost to the taxpayer. Little did National dream the tunnel project would begin to pong at the optimally embarrassing time for it – during a by-election in that very seat.

Clark could not possibly have planned the timing of this. (Could she?) But just when it seemed National had a modest shot at winning, or at least rattling the red vote in the Labour crown-jewel seat of Mt Albert, thus prolonging Labour's post-loss demoralisation – bingo. The time arrived when the

Government absolutely had to make the final decision on the western-ring route.

It was damned either way. If it had okayed the tunnel plan, it would have added another gazillion to the bill, which would all have to be borrowed. It would also – having criticised the tunnel plan while in Opposition – have looked as though it was trying to buy the by-election.

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Alas, the truth about the costings of the project is that there IS no truth about the costings of the project. Transport Minister Steven Joyce talked of being loath to “buy the by-election for \$1.5 billion”, as though that would be the extra cost of a full tunnel. But there's endless conjecture about whether that's

a fair estimate. Locals say it's more like only \$500 million extra.

They say officials are deliberately downplaying the steep extra cost of having to buy and demolish so many more houses, which if factored in, would make the differential even smaller.

The Government can say that a few hundred house-

holders' convenience must occasionally come second to the interests of the whole country, but you get a queasy feeling that the eventual cost of the project will muddy the waters nastily.

We've got the Treasury right now publicly going through a sackcloth-and-ashes exercise about why it always gets its forecasting of the economy wrong. Have officials' accuracy in calculating road-building costs ever been much better?

While so far it's easy to see the Mt Albertians' complaints as special pleading, it wouldn't do to underestimate the chord this could strike with other voters, who are sick of politicians – typically local-body politicians – trampling over their rights and sneering “Nimby!” Because most New Zealanders would probably regard the right NOT to have the amenity of their properties and neighbourhoods overridden for others' convenience, as being pretty important. Yet councils' district plans allow this to happen all the time. Nimbies have the vote, too – and are probably the majority.

One thing is sure about this by-election, then. It WILL be about local issues. Or at least, about this one local issue. Normally, when by-election candidates piously talk about it being all about local issues, voters are entitled to an eyeroll. By-elections are always mini-national elections – snapshot referendums on how the Government is doing.

This would have put National in pretty good shape, specially with Labour in the doghouse over a rather cute sequence of events in the candidate selection process. The favourite, Phil Twyford – anointed by Clark herself – suddenly found himself conveniently unwilling to stand. Fancy that – considering his decision a) cleared the way for Phil Goff's showier candidate, David Shearer, to step up, and b) obviated the risk of



Judith Tizard getting back into Parliament as a result of Twyford's list vacancy.

Voters must do Labour the courtesy of assuming that none of this was accidental.

The Greens, with their refreshing stance of no-damned-ring route, over or under, are well placed to make a strong showing.

Still, it wouldn't do to underestimate independent candidate Jackson Wood, a Wellington student who, though he has never been to Mt Albert and has no immediate plans to visit, points out he does live in Mt Victoria. “Close enough!” he says. He proposes a Zeppelin ferry system to transport dangling cars over Waterview – using straps going around the cars' tummies – to be named the Peter Davis Skyway.

And as Wood is campaigning for Mt Albert in Wellington, where sillier ideas than this get rubber-stamped every day, it would be foolish to write him off.

Who, for instance, would have thought that the Government – or any government – would have acceded to the idea of Christine Rankin being appointed to the Families Commission?

Presumably a) the Government doesn't approve of the commission; b) Rankin doesn't approve of the commission; c) the Government is highly likely to axe the commission; d) its coalition

prop Peter Dunne – who alone approves of the commission, as he got to set it up as coalition-support payback from the previous Government (which didn't support the commission) – doesn't approve of Christine Rankin; or finally, e) the whole business has brought the ever self-promoting Rankin publicity even she would hardly have dreamt of.

She has some winningly robust things to say about political correctness, and she is dead right, that the commission's achievements thus far elude the general populace. But her value on such a body is a mystery. It has no power. Its work duplicates or is duplicated by numerous other arms of state. But now Rankin has a contract. You can bet the commission's most salient function from now on will be as a backdrop for this sometime celebrity. Already there's a general public misapprehension that Rankin is the Families Commissioner. She is one of several, and not the chief commissioner nor even the deputy.

Fairly or otherwise, Rankin is widely seen as a product/exponent of the cult-of-personality management style which flared and eventually fizzled during the 80s and 90s. She may have refined her ideas since spending hundreds of thousands on luxurious staff-bonding exercises while her department routinely bilked beneficiaries of

their full entitlements – but in politics and in the bureaucracy, getting the right symbolism is extremely important. This isn't it.

And as she – while campaigning against the anti-smacking law (which the commission supported) – slagged government MPs for being childless, she has unfortunately opened the way for critics to highlight her much-married status.

You have to exclaim at her Winston-esque genius for portraying herself as an underdog and gaining popularity along the way as a dashing battler. There is a big audience that finds her views on families and the law refreshing. But because she's such an attention-junkie – and let's admit this now, we in the media simply can't resist writing about her, her legs, her earrings and her husbands, so we're equally to blame – she may have a similar effect on the Government's sense of purpose to the odour of rotting fish wafting from somewhere under the floor.

What's next but to bring on the Zeppelins? ■

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Helen Clark