

Opinion

Okay, on reflection maybe I've been a bit harsh about the traffic cops ...

I've two daughters of whom I'm really proud. In their formative years, when they were looking for guidance my preferred advice was to follow their dreams except when they concerned either traffic cops or politicians. "Darken our door with either and you'll be disinherited" I told them.

It is to their credit they haven't. I can further remember a friend telling my youngest daughter at age about 10 that "there must be some good politicians or traffic officers" to be told "wash your mouth out". Young daughter, predictably you might say, is now a highly successful solicitor in London.

I was reminded of my opinion of politicians by the recent headline in the Dominion Post "MPs in secret perk talks". Written by Vernon Small we were told that "MPs are secretly negotiating to award themselves more generous perks". It went on to detail how MP Phil Heatley had been reinstated to Cabinet after his unlawful spending of \$1400 and the subsequent explanation by the Prime Minister John Key that the amounts involved were trifling and the rules confusing anyway. You would have to be joking.

In our part of the country life is tough on the farm. We can only dream about the luxuries politicians award themselves as a matter of right. We continue to be amazed at their outright arrogance over their feet being in the trough. We find it difficult to believe that \$1400 is "trifling" or that the rules are "confusing".

For a start I've been reporting in a court of law when the theft of a dollar has brought a conviction. It wasn't the amount of the theft; it was the intention of the person involved. To then suggest the law is confusing takes arrogance to a new level.

If I do a wheel skid in Masterton telling the police that the law was confusing won't stop my car from



Alternative View

Alan Emerson

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being impounded.

If I'm caught talking on my cellphone while driving, telling the officer involved that the law was confusing or that I didn't know of it won't stop a fine.

Telling the regional council their statutes are confusing won't stop me getting fined for pollution. I'd go further and say there are many confusing laws on our books of which ignorance or a lack of understanding provides no defence whatsoever to the rest of us, so why politicians?

To ask a simple question why should any employer pay for either

kids' travel or wine at a party? If that employer is the taxpayer I would suggest the laws need to be tougher, not more lax as they seem bound to become.

Further we have a government preaching financial austerity and restraint on, it would seem, everyone in the country bar them. Look at the shambles last year over housing allowances, family trusts and travel. The message coming out of Parliament seemed to me to be "we're better than you, now bugger off".

To claim stress, long hours and being away from home as the reason for the plethora of perks and allowances politicians allocate themselves is, again, arrogant in the extreme. Come and work on the farm for a while and you'll learn about stress and long hours.

The "away from home" rort won't go down well in the country either with many local farmers' wives living in town and having a job there just to make ends meet.

Further they can't claim housing allowances and the like, they just pay their taxes to support, among other things, the level of politicians' perks.

A further article by Vernon Small in the Dom-Post detailed how a review in 1999 by former Cabinet Minister Stan Rodger, recommended opening Parliament to the Official Information Act. MPs have refused, happy it would seem making laws for others with exemptions for themselves.

In his book, *With Respect*, former top civil servant Mark Prebble wants

parliament opened to more public scrutiny. I agree.

He recommends that parliamentary allowances should be put with an independent authority. Again, I agree, but it won't happen. Politicians will still want to wallow in the trough of tax dollars that you and I provide.

So John Key's statement in support of Heatley that the amounts were trifling and the rules are confusing doesn't wash. If the rules are confusing fix them and, down on the farm \$1400 isn't trifling.

What irritates me most, however, is the fact that government ministers have the

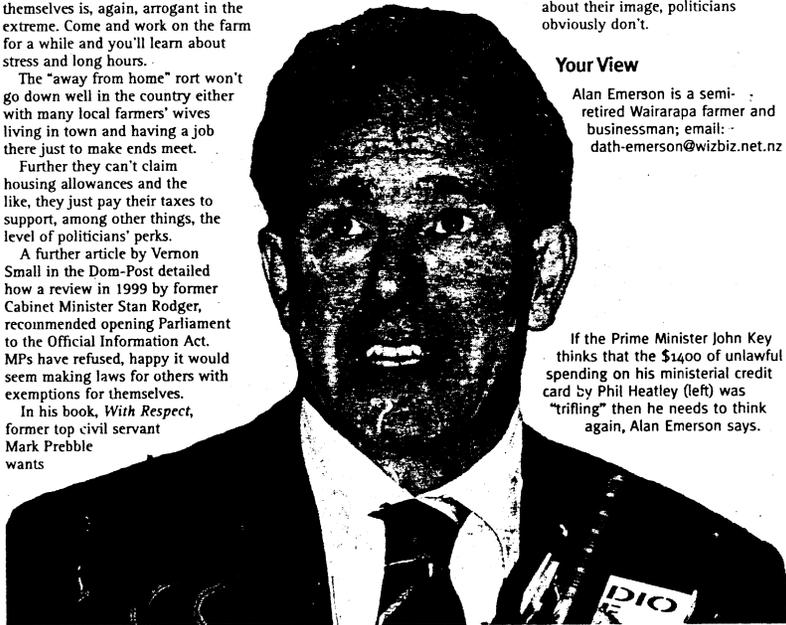
arrogance to throw a credit card round at will, get found out, pardoned then reinstated when if you and I did it we could face either dismissal or a conviction. And what are those same politicians doing now? In secret, we are told, negotiating for bigger perks.

Mind you I can't be the only person thinking that way about politicians as a Readers Digest public acceptability survey puts politicians as 40th out of the 40 most trusted professions behind psychics and astrologers, sex workers, car salesmen and telemarketers.

The issue though is that car salesmen and sex workers worry about their image, politicians obviously don't.

Your View

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If the Prime Minister John Key thinks that the \$1400 of unlawful spending on his ministerial credit card by Phil Heatley (left) was "trifling" then he needs to think again, Alan Emerson says.