

Waiheke Community Radio Trust - Oral Submission to the Government Select Committee on Auckland Governance

21 July 2009

Waiheke, as you may or may not know, is a vocal place. I think it may be fair to characterize the island as a hyper-community. We take democracy seriously and we act on our democratic rights in many forms, from making submissions (in the case of the Royal Commission on Auckland governance we made a third of the total submissions yet we constitute only 0.6% of the current Auckland city population), to collecting over a thousand signatures on a petition requesting the government take steps to require some transparency and accountability of the transport monopoly that impacts significantly on the social and economic fabric of our island; and more recently we marched up Queen Street to attend city council meetings to witness and protest the abominable treatment our world class, community based, waste and recycling organisation has just suffered at the hands of the current Auckland City bureaucrats.

In many ways Waihekians represent, better than almost anywhere I have ever lived, what citizenship should be about. We are inquisitive, we are informed, and when necessary we act and we speak out. Why are we like this? Why so much passion in this community, more-so than in the Glenfields, or the Mt. Roskills? I believe its because communities are mostly defined by their boundaries; and Waiheke has very distinct geographic, environmental, and legislative boundaries, and these boundaries create unique and particular issues such as isolation, a dependency on public transportation, reticulation, waste management and recycling, etc., that most other city communities or suburbs don't face or don't have to think about to the extent that we do. Communities are defined by such shared characteristics that bond people into a seemingly unified experience, which is also an experience that differs from those that exist outside it. In this sense Waihekians have a very strong sense of community.

Our community characteristics are also why, in part, we have our own non-profit, independent radio station: Waiheke Radio, on who's behalf I am making this submission. This Low Power FM radio station is not like you might imagine a radio station to be. It's broadcast from a small council owned building in our local arts centre, it was mostly built by hand with thousands of collective volunteer hours, and it's about as "No. 8 wire" as you can get in most of its' material aspects. But in its' social, participatory, and communicative functions, this station helps Waihekians become better citizens of New Zealand. The act of an individual given access to the ability to participate in media production is a political act – it requires and necessitates consideration by the individual and the group of the power inherent in broadcasting to communicate messages, tastes, preferences, and viewpoints to a community of listeners. Our local radio station (like much of our community based medi) helps keep us informed of what's going on locally and across the gulf, and it creates a platform for members of this community to have a voice, to speak to their community, to cultivate our arts, to celebrate our residents, and it is a space for us to learn how to participate in broadcasting and in new media. A community based radio station is a good thing - it is a good thing for our democracy. As we stated in our written submission, support from our community board and the city councillor for the Hauraki Gulf were instrumental in enabling us in getting this station off the ground. When we went to them for support they understood the need for our station and the services we would provide because they recognize and understand the nature of our community. They understood *themselves* that what we were proposing to do could not come from commercial radio, and could not be provided by the national broadcasting service, it could only come from locals creating local content.

Auckland regional politics are under significant threat of being further captured by a small technocratic cabal. The discourse of local government is already dominated by highly complex financial regulations and arcane details of governmental reform. Waihekians know all too well the politics of cost-benefit analysis and intimidating committees staffed by men-in-black speaking in an

almost foreign language; participatory governance is an alien landscape to a vast majority of the electorate.

Community boards and highly localized decision makers on the other hand address the well-being and concerns of individuals on a face-to-face level and in a language that citizens and residents understand. With full understanding of the context of issues and requests and with a wealth of localized knowledge on the histories, likely impacts, and repercussions of decisions taken on such a micro-levels Community boards are at the coal-face of democracy. The members of Waiheke Radio are concerned with the suggestion that the powers of community boards be left in the hands of a centralized city structure headed by a mayor with significantly increased powers. For such centralized power to have such control over the peripheral and communal aspects of our society seems to fly in the face of common sense offered up by the myriad warnings that are so prevalent in this period of our global history, where many of the powerful few have significantly impacted so much on the lives of the rest of us. Individuality unchecked is the antithesis of community - which partly defines itself on shared symbolism, on inclusion, and on parity.

I'd like to read a quote from a member of our community from her submission to the Royal Commission earlier this year that sums this up quite nicely:

"I am not a member of Waiheke politics. But I always vote for the local community board. That is my chance to have a say. Because we are a community with three local newspapers as well as being small enough to trade news on the grapevine, I feel very capable of choosing the leaders for my community. I know such leaders are held to accountability both because they see their constituents on a daily basis, whether it be on the ferries, the local supermarket, the local weekly well-attended outdoor market, and any other number of places, and because their actions are reported via community media." (Carol Handin, submission to Royal Commission on Auckland Governance, 2009)

In a period of almost global discrediting of professionalised, careerist politics - perhaps our best chance of political renewal is by supporting the myriad of community based efforts that are happening all around this city, the ones that are creating opportunities, innovating in the provision of social services, and just getting on with all sorts of important jobs and functions in all regions, rural and urban, and within the inner and outer reaches of our expanding cities. The potential of the grassroots is after all one of the core defining myths of the New Zealand spirit. The real test we are facing is whether these organisations can gather the strength and develop the organisational capacity to eventually feed back into a reformed politics at the centre. It is for this reason, that the Waiheke Community Radio Trust is strongly recommending that under a revised governance model for Auckland city, that local community boards be provided far greater powers than have currently been suggested by both the current government and one hopeful mayoral candidate. We also strongly believe that in the geographic configuration of community boards there must be cognisance of the unique needs of communities like Waiheke and Great Barrier. Waiheke needs it's own board; we will most likely no longer have council representation, and our issues cannot be adequately understood or represented by a city based board. The establishment of Waiheke Radio serves as an example of the kind of initiative that can go ahead if representation, decision making and financial control are held locally. It is essential that these reforms leave our community with the ability to determine local needs and priorities.

Thank you.