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One Man's Campaign in the Inner City News: Bruce Hucker (1979 to 1990)

David Haigh

Abstract

Bruce Hucker wrote a weekly article for the Inner City News between 1979 and 1990. Hucker took issue with Auckland City Council on many issues and accused the Citizens and Ratepayers group that ran council of being nothing other than a local branch of the National Party. He wrote on housing, unemployment and the need to democratise council. These issues are as pertinent today as they were then.

In addition to local issues, he spoke out against the Springbok tour, racism and discrimination at Government level, and the destruction of Auckland's CBD heritage. When Hucker became deputy mayor of Auckland City Council in the 1990s, he gave greater emphasis to community development, heritage protection, urban design and long term planning.

“To hold a pen is to be at war.” Voltaire

The *Inner City News* operated from 1979 to 1990. Although it was set up as a private company, it operated as a cooperative with all those involved being initially unpaid volunteers (Nicola Legat, Katy Reid, Elizabeth Raea & Bruce Hucker). Its main office and printing room was the basement of a member's home who also served as editor. Door to door deliveries were carried out by family members and supporters and copy written on a weekly basis by members. It started with some seeding funds from the Freemans Bay Community Committee, a community organisation that often did not see eye to eye with Auckland City Council. While being a cooperative, it still had to deal with day-to-day business matters like the purchase of printing equipment and finding advertising revenues. It is notable that, over the years, the quality of the newspaper print improved and the circulation grew. The idea to establish an independent press arose out of the dissatisfaction with the newsletter produced by the Freemans Bay Community Committee. This dissatisfaction was the limited size of the newsletter and control over content by the Auckland City Council. Reflecting on

this period, Hucker said, “If you empower people you disempower politicians and their bureaucracies” (Personal communication).

The first edition (October 1979) and the two that followed, contained a number of social issues including a story about Jack Watson who had had his home compulsorily purchased by council. He was seeking a price based on the principle of a home for a home at least up to local body standard. Housing was also the story behind a report by outgoing housing social worker for council, Pat Hanley, on the cost and shortage of housing. There was a short biography of the old campaigner, Johnny Mitchell, who, amongst many civic activities, campaigned against the Freemans Bay urban renewal project. These were followed by articles about a women’s refuge, a community garden in Ireland Street, the Auckland Women’s Health Centre, and the Tongan King’s opening a new church and an article on how to set up a vegie cooperative. It was a promising beginning.

While the *Inner City News* was practical in its purpose, in ideological terms it was linked to the mutualist and distributist concepts of Chesterton and Belloc who opposed a press owned by the wealthy. Belloc, in the opening statement to his book ‘The Free Press’ said:

I propose to discuss in what follows the evil of the great modern capitalist press putting power into ignoble hands; its correction by the formation of small independent organs, and the probably increasing effect of these last. (p.2)

Belloc went on to say, ‘It (the press) also began to arise contemporaneously with capitalism and finance: it has grown with them and served them.’ Belloc, H. p.2). Belloc and Chesterton were strong advocates of community owned businesses and cooperatives in the tradition of catholic social theory, a theory that lost its impetus, particularly in Britain following the death of GK Chesterton, but is now being promoted by Pope Francis.

Eventually the four founders sold the *Inner City News* to an ex-Herald journalist who in turn after a number of years sold it to the Harbour News. The latter was part of a large chain which included local newspapers. However, it never had the cutting edge of the old *Inner City News*.

Context

The *Inner City News* was established during a period of social and political change in New Zealand. There was rapid migration of Māori into Auckland from rural New Zealand and people from the Pacific Islands. Many moved into the

inner city of Auckland and set up their own facilities such as the Māori Community Centre in inner city Fanshawe Street and Pacific Island churches. Migration also led to housing pressures, and eventually the creation of new housing areas in the outer suburbs of Auckland. (Haigh, 2015) Carlton & Morrow commented on an earlier period in the 1960s and 70s, one that influenced the situation that Hucker discovered. Carlton & Morrow (2013) said, “In inner-city neighbourhoods such as Freemans Bay, they (Pacific people) crowded into cheap run-down villas, and added some vibrancy to the monochromatic community.” (p.31). Inward migration also led to housing pressures, and eventually the creation of new housing areas in the outer suburbs of Auckland. (Haigh, 2015).

However, during the 1970s and 1980s there was also another major demographic shift in the inner-city as Pacific people and Māori were squeezed out of the inner-city and they moved to other parts of the Auckland Region. Gentrification of areas like Ponsonby, Grey Lynn and Freemans Bay took place. Carlton and Morrow (2008) commented:

Speculators started buying very rundown rental properties, doing a minimal tidy-up and then selling them again. Not only did the cost of housing start to rise but also rental properties became increasingly expensive. By the mid-1980s only a quarter of properties in the area were rented, down from more than half two decades earlier (p.242).

It was also a time of a multitude of social movements such as the anti-Vietnam war protests, the anti-nuclear campaign, the Māori land hikoi led by Whina Cooper, the anti-Springbok tour and, after much argument, the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Bill. It was also a time when politics was dominated by two individuals: Prime Minister Rob Muldoon and his command economy, to be followed by the David Lange government and the free market reforms led by Finance Minister Roger Douglas.

At the local authority level, the conservative Citizens & Ratepayers Association (C&R) ruled Auckland City. They opposed setting up a ward system for elections, preferring an at-large system that ensured their continued control of council. For example, in the 1970s, only two out of 21 councillors lived in that part of the city west of Queen Street. In order to provide some community input to policy and services, community committees were established in 1972. Hucker (personal communication) stated that the election of these committees was an attempt to improve communication with Auckland City’s western suburbs.

Eventually with the election of a Labour government in 1984 amendments to the Local Government Act introduced mandatory ward systems for larger urban councils. These came into existence for the 1986 municipal elections. The major amalgamation of councils occurred under the 1989 Local Government Act. This also provided for wards and for the local election of community boards.

Hucker (initially under the *nom de plume* of Peeping Tom until he was elected to council in 1986 when he reverted to his own name) wrote a weekly column for the Inner City News and dealt with many local and national issues. This research only covers the local issues. It should be noted that Hucker was a left-leaning Labour Party supporter. In particular he strongly supported community development and issues of social justice, and opposed prejudice and the born-to-rule arrogance of the powerful. During this period he was a Presbyterian minister in the Inner-City Ministry and later in the Presbyterian Māori Synod. He had links with The Pacific Islanders Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh Street in Newton. He also taught part-time in the Sociology Department at the University of Auckland. His working class background in Otahuhu, Auckland enabled him to empathise with those least well off.

Unemployment.

Unemployment rates rose from 4% in 1980 to 10% in 1990 with young, Māori and Pacific Islanders most deeply affected. During this period, the Māori rate rose to 25% of the workforce. Unemployment as a social issue was important to Hucker. In 1980, he observed a march up Queen Street organised by unemployed men sacked from a council employment scheme at Motat. He commented, “Bystanders looked a little perturbed. In part it must have been the sight of so many brown faces in Queen Street.” (1.8.80)

Later, he wrote on the closure of the Southdown Freezing Works with the loss of 900 workers. He had spent six seasons at the neighbouring Hellabys, putting himself through university. He commented, “The Free-Marketeers strike again.” (26.9.80). Hucker was concerned about government withholding a 1981 report that showed unemployment had reached 8% of the workforce. He also commented on interventions by Auckland City Council (ACC) in setting up an employment department. He considered the administrative costs excessive and the initiative to assist the unemployed contradicted council’s plans to cut its own budget, which impacted on both workers and unemployed. He wrote, “They (the councillors) talked out of both sides of their mouth at once ... it is evident that their faces have become permanently lopsided and distorted.” (12.3.81)

Taking a different tack, Hucker suggested the setting up of local enterprise boards to promote job creation rather than merely running government temporary work schemes for the unemployed. This idea was picked up by Manukau City Council (MCC). The Auckland Regional Authority (ARA) also stressed the need to stimulate the economy and to this end it organised an employment seminar to discuss options. By 1983, 10% of the workforce was unemployed (113,000) and the Māori jobless was 14% and 33% among Māori youth.

Hucker reported that the ARA had approved free bus passes for the unemployed to search for work. Within two months that decision was rescinded as a narrow-minded far right conservative group (the New Deal) won control of the ARA.

Auckland City Council and Auckland Regional Authority Elections

In the early 1980s, Hucker noted that the C&R ticket had moved further to the right with now only two liberal C&R candidates. He had this to say about the three mayoral candidates of Sir Dove Myer Robinson, Cath Tizard and Colin Kay: “Robbie (opportunism), Cath (presidential), Colin (lacks imagination)”. (12.9.80). He accused C&R of being the local body equivalent of the National Party as they try to present a caring side to their policies. Summing this up he said, “It appears that this is a case of the rich man in his castle and the poor man at his gate.” (26.9.80)

Eventually the unimaginative Colin Kay won the election and 19 out of the 21 councillors came from the affluent eastern suburbs. C&R continued to be dominated by business and professional people like John Strevens and Jolyon Firth. In defence of his position, Hucker said, “God forbid if more working class people thought that they should have a right to political representation.” (12.12.80). The new council and mayor pressed for cuts in expenditure, although Hucker exposed council’s position as contradictory: cutting expenditure and at the same time supporting the unemployed.

In 1982, Hucker argued that it is time for a change and pushed for a ward system of representation. In February 1983 Council rejected this proposal. He continued his attack on C&R and its informal links to the National Party. Ex-councillor, Selwyn Dawson supported Hucker. He said that the C&R ideas were user pays, self-help and minimum intervention. This statement by Dawson proved to be correct when, shortly after, council asked government to reduce wages paid to temporary workers to 80% of the award rate. Hucker countered that this would only lead to greater levels of poverty. In order to clarify its

position, C&R set out its philosophy: efficiency, property rights, enterprise, user pays and order. Hucker commented:

It is interesting that social justice and social conscience are not considered appropriate questions for inclusion in a set of principles. We can no longer afford the luxury of a politics of indifference at local government level (21-6-83).

In the 1983 mayoral elections, Hucker supported Cath Tizard. “She represents a strong voice for women and I suspect her time has come.” (27-9-83). Cath was duly elected. At the same time a new Labour government was also elected and government required local authorities to introduce a ward system for the next elections. ACC spent \$100,000 fighting this requirement but to no avail. But in a final throw of the dice, ACC withdrew funds for community committees. Hucker said, “The C&R councillors have calculated that it would be damaging to their interests to have them (the community committees) in existence in the lead up to next year’s election.” (18.6.85)

Hucker was also deeply concerned about the possibility of the election of the New Deal (another far right brand of C&R) at the ARA level. He worried that they planned to undo all the good work carried out at the regional level. He also believed it was wrong for this political grouping to expropriate the name of FDR’s social democratic government elected during the Great Depression. Eventually 20 New Deal candidates out of 21 regional councillors were elected. He suggested “... we New Zealanders are an underdeveloped nation when it comes to political culture. Philosophical traditions and ... discussion of political ideas are foreign to us.” (25-10-83)

Within six months the New Deal was planning to shed various ARA committees. The chair, Fred Thomas, issued an instruction to the General Manager to notify him of any instances of dishonesty, negligence or breaches of confidentiality by any employee. After another six months, the New Deal had sacked 100 staff, and the CEO and Planning Director had both resigned. Hucker commented, “I was critical of the old ARA. But they were bastions of sanity compared with the new broom.” (2.10.84). By mid-1985, the New Deal had destroyed itself due to political infighting. The Labour Government appointed a commission to investigate, which reported that the New Deal had destroyed staff relations and called for ongoing monitoring of the ARA.

In September 1986, Hucker announced that he was standing as a Labour candidate at the forthcoming council elections. He stated, “The Auckland City Council has been an elite body that has given sterling service to the business

community and the wealthier Eastern Suburbs.” (15.10.86). In 1989, there was a major amalgamation of local authorities in Auckland. In this process, Hucker argued, “Its approach to delegation should be based on the objective of encouraging more neighbourhood government, so that local people have more say over what happens to their communities.” (1.4.89). In the 1989 elections, he noted that C&R candidates from the Eastern Suburbs were now standing in western wards. He said, “Perhaps C&R should change its name. Voter identification could be maintained by keeping the same initials. ‘Citizens’ could become ‘Carpetbaggers’.” (9.9.89). But once again, in spite of the ward system, C&R was re-elected gaining 18 out of the 25 seats. Hucker was re-elected to ACC and represented the western bays ward.

The Springbok Tour

In late 1980, concern was growing about the proposed rugby union tour of New Zealand by the South African (white only) Springbok team. This issue was to divide the country. Hucker noted that government had donated \$2.7 million towards ‘law and order’ for the tour. Later the cost escalated to \$7 million. He commented, “The Rugby Union should be ashamed of itself” (19.12.80). Minister of Police, Ben Couch, a politician who supported bringing back the birch, advised the police to step aside when rugby supporters attack demonstrators. Later, Couch also stated that he supported apartheid. Hucker explained that the majority of people opposed the tour including Pacific Island people and the Labour Party. Jokingly, Hucker said that rugby is a dangerous game that can lead to dermatitis. He said, “Dermatites are quite insensitive to public disapproval and to the needs or suffering of other people.” (9.4.81)

An opinion poll showed that the public was against the tour. Hucker raised the rhetoric and stated, “The Rugby Union’s actions are an expression of a narrow and unmitigated selfishness.” (18.6.81). When the match in Hamilton was stopped as the protestors invaded the pitch and the feelings of rugby supporters grew ugly, Hucker commented, “On Saturday in Hamilton, New Zealand paid the price for the insular selfishness of the Rugby Union and the political acquiescence of the tour by our government.” (23.7.81)

Hucker did note some of the tour’s humorous moments when Rev Walpole dressed as a referee, stole the ball and booted it into the stand. Police batons were known as Minto Bars and protest placards read: It’s moments like these you need Minto. (John Minto was one of the key figures in the protest organisation). However, as police brutality increased, humour quickly turned to anger and

sadness when the clowns were clubbed, he said, “We laugh with the clowns, but in an instant our laughter turns to tears.” (8.10.81)

The impact of the tour was felt for many years to come. For example, Hucker suggested that the deteriorated relations between the police and young people, as a result of the Springbok tour, was a factor that triggered off the Queen Street riot in December 1984. An open-air concert featuring Herbs and Dave Dobbin attracted large numbers of young people. Alcohol was also a factor in the antagonism against the police. There was much damage to property, shop windows broken, looting and cars damaged. A total of 120 were arrested. Government set up a Commission of Inquiry but the underlying causes were never addressed. A year later, the NZ Rugby Union started to organise a tour of South Africa by the All Blacks. This was strongly opposed by the Lange government. Hucker suggested that government impose sanctions against the rugby union and against rugby as a sport. Three months later a group of lawyers obtained an injunction to stop the proposed tour.

Housing

Picking up the issue of housing, Hucker noted the comments by the CEO of the Housing Corporation in chastising tenants who fall behind in paying their rent. Tongue in cheek, he said, “It’s good to see such compassion and understanding being displayed in the public service.” (3.3.81). Also in 1981, the Minister of Housing denied there was a housing problem in Auckland. Hucker suggested the Minister must get his information from Neil Housing, and recommended that he should broaden his range of contacts. For example, two institutions that dealt with homelessness reported that in one week they had handled 164 cases of homeless people. Auckland’s Housing NZ waiting list had increased from 2880 to 3068 in one year and 2000 were in the urgent category. To make matters worse, ACC proposed increasing its residential rents, to which Hucker responded, “It’s good of (the tenants) to subsidise the rates.” (16.7.81)

A year later, at a housing seminar, there was agreement that Auckland was indeed experiencing a housing crisis. At the seminar, Barbara Ward was quoted, “...if a wealthy nation does leave any of its citizens in poor unhealthy substandard housing the issue is one of choice not of necessity.” (8.7.82). However, council was intent on increasing rents. It was stopped when it was discovered that this was in breach of the government’s price freeze.

In 1985, ACC received a confidential report from the City Valuer seeking rent increases for council houses varying from 408% to more than 100%. This

was too much for the council committee to stomach and it sought further information. Later ACC proposed increases ranging from 4.5% to 255%. Pressure was brought to bear by Hucker, as chair of the Freemans Bay Community Committee. He argued that such increases would severely affect tenants. As a result of the submissions, rent increases were substantially reduced. Also in 1985, ACC started selling off its inner city houses with the result that there were fewer rental houses available.

However, the issue of rent increases returned in 1987. Council imposed rent rises of 34% on its 554 tenancies. Hucker continued to argue against such rises and that they would impose hardship on tenants. Again in 1988, council proposed rent rises of 27%. This resulted in a major fight back by tenants (supported by Hucker). Under pressure, council moderated the increases. Hucker commented, "What the whole exercise showed was the importance of the contribution of the community in the council's decision-making process. What is needed is even more of that." (20.2.88)

Around the same time, Hucker lobbied for improvements to the poor state of facilities (stoves, washing machines and dryers) in council's pensioner housing. In a report to council, the property manager argued that such improvements were unnecessary. Hucker countered, "I am both angry and ashamed. Older people deserve a better deal." (20.5.88). Eventually, Hucker won the argument and new amenities were installed.

Inevitably, local authorities became unhappy with the Hucker column. Vern Warren, Director of Planning for ACC requested the Inner City News scale back the criticism of the council and say some good things about it. Hucker retorted, "Mr. Warren has not been in his job long enough to know the long history of conflict between the council and local communities, and the serious damage done to people as a result of council's policies." (23.7.81). Council's reaction was to stop the Inner City News being distributed throughout public newspaper boxes in the CBD. Hucker was suspicious that this was a result of criticisms of council by the Inner City News.

The editor of the newspaper received a complaint from the Deputy Chair of the ARA about Hucker's columns. The editor offered the Deputy Chair space in the paper for a rebuttal story but copy never arrived. Hucker continued to attack the New Deal policies within the ARA. He also defined the policy areas he saw as wrong: funding for Mt Smart stadium when, before the election, the New Deal said that this would not happen, attempts to remove Māori representation from

the Planning Committee, reducing the effectiveness of the Regional Planning Scheme, staff reductions and the way that power was exercised. For example the New Deal refused to debate issues at meetings, solely relying on their superior numbers to push through what they wanted.

Racism and Discrimination

In 1981, racism was often openly expressed. A Social Credit candidate for parliament wanted a policy forcing Pacific Islanders to learn English. Hucker damned him by quoting back the candidate's own words: "It is no good allowing people to come here who can only say 'I no speaka da English'. You show them a TAB betting slip and they understand perfectly." (19.11.81)

The police were also party to fomenting racism. It reported that 75% of rape cases involved Māori or Pacific Island people. Hucker analysed the figures and found that they were for convictions (22), not offences reported (104). Hucker also noted that most rapes were not reported, thus damning the police conclusions. In his column he asked, "Why did the police release the statistics in this particular form?" (17.3.82). He left it for readers to make up their own minds.

In 1984, parliament passed the Immigration Bill that required teachers and employers to check the immigration status of students and employees. Hucker heard one Samoan say, "We are moving towards a police state." (7.2.84). The antipathy between the Pacific Island community and police increased to such an extent that Pacific Island Ministers laid a complaint with the race relations commissioner against cabinet minister Aussie Malcolm, who was quoted as saying that Pacific Island overstayers "... were staying illegally to rape and bash." (13.3.84)

In 1985, the Homosexual Law Reform Bill was before parliament and there was strong opposition by conservatives and some churches. In support of the law reform that would decriminalise homosexual behavior, Hucker said, "The key ethical issue in the homosexual law reform debate is not whether homosexual behaviour is wrong or unnatural, nor whether it should be condoned, but whether it should be subject to criminal sanctions. In my view it should not be." (7.5.85)

Conclusions

For ten years, in a voluntary capacity, Hucker wrote a weekly column for the Inner City News. He had a readable style and tended to start with a story, debate the issues around it and then round it all off by returning to the story and adding a telling conclusion. In today's debate on freedom of expression and the ethics of journalism, Hucker always stuck to the issue, not the individual. His style was

sometime joking, mocking or challenging but never offensive. In spite of opposition, he continued to be a one-man battler for democracy, transparency and justice. He was a thorn in the side of the C&R dominated council and was nothing if not persistent in his criticism. Finally, through his persistence he moved from the pen to the political hustings. It was the City Vision team (a group of Labour, Green and community people) that broke the stranglehold that C&R had held over council for decades. The Labour Government brought in the ward system of elections and the requirement for greater transparency. However, it was Hucker and the City Vision team that organised themselves to become an effective political force in the city.

After a number of years as a councillor, Hucker became deputy mayor of council from 1998-2001 and from 2004-2007. As deputy mayor and leader of City Vision he was able to influence the direction of policy, programmes and funding. He took great interest in such issues as urban design and helped establish the urban design panel and the appointment of skilled staff. He continued to promote community development by allocating funds for community facilities and championing recognition of ethnic diversity of the city including Māori, Pacific, Chinese and Indian communities. In allocating councillor positions he was careful to be as inclusive as possible and allocated positions to all political groupings, including C&R. He also created a more inclusive relationship with staff and broke down the barriers between councillors and staff. However, he was also appointed to several strategic positions including chairing the group establishing the Britomart Station, chairing the Auckland Regional Growth Strategy in Auckland City, chairing the shareholders representative group with oversight of Watercare Services Ltd on behalf of its six territorial authority owners, and was chair of a similar shareholders representative group for the Auckland Regional Transport Network Ltd.

Many of the issues that Hucker wrote on in the 1980s are back again as contemporary ones: high migration, housing, unemployment and inequality. Hucker always supported the most vulnerable, e.g. renters, unemployed and the poorly housed. His columns are as relevant as they were 30 years ago. It is now over to journalists, academics, civil society and political groups to continue to challenge powerful elites that run roughshod over democracy, transparency and justice. Belloc and Chesterton would be proud of those who take up this challenge.

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