

that they are the custodians of their children. Even if they are good parents, feeding, clothing and loving their children, and not mistreating them in any way, they are merely held by the state to be the guardians of those children. For now. Because the notion of "custody" is politically incorrect, and the fact of natural birth parenthood is, like land ownership, an unfair advantage of the greedy and selfish, which ought not to be lauded over non-natural parents.

You might then have a Muldoonesque turn around the question of lesbian fathers, gay marriages and the prospect of hookers plying their trade on suburban streets and getting job-search grants when between pimps. But there's no need to resort to using the Moral Conservative Outrage module for the Do-It-Yourself Opposition Leader Kit. There's plenty of mainstream stuff to be going on with.

Like, the Jobs Jolt for the ageing unemployed; the further hounding of smokers and drinkers; the taxing of farmers for methane, with no countervailing compensation for the pro-environmental things every farmer does every day.

Then your inner Muldoon would get started on Maori claims: how long they're taking, how much money is being bilked in phoney research schemes. You would traverse the lack of public-sector accountability, which lets all that

Maori-only spending go unmeasured and unmonitored.

While harping on the public service, you would decry the number of Labour crony, fellow traveller, sickly white liberal appointees -- for there is a handy Winston Rhetoric-Booster Module in your kit. You would remark that the fine parliamentary convention whereby certain jobs such as race relations and human rights honchos are appointed with multilateral party support has been trashed, with the government consulting no other parties, most recently in its appointment of the Children's Commissioner. So once-cherished offices of public accountability and moral guardianship are non-politicised and therefore less publicly respected. To that, the government wishes to add a Supreme Court of right-on judicial activists to replace the impartial Privy Council.

You will by now need to hit the whisky bottle in the time-honoured Opposition fashion. So much outrage has to be regularly refuelled. There will be time later to apply your kit to the perennial questions of health, education, taxation and superannuation. But you'll have got the hang of serious opposition. It's to ask, how would Muldoon have handled this? This might seem cheap and obvious, but believe me, on the other side of the House, they often

ask themselves, "What would Lange or Big Norm have done now?" (Actually, at this point it would be fruitful for the Opposition even to ask, how would Bolger have handled this?)

Among the great talents of these men was the ability to see the big picture, and articulate it compellingly. In Opposition, they knew what they stood for and what they stood against. They kept their powder dry on the stuff that didn't matter. You wouldn't have caught Muldoon or Kirk going off-message to rail against the doings of some obscure millionaire on D'Urville Island, or campaigning for a convicted paedophile. They would have put the scatter-gun likes of Winston and Rodney in strait-jackets, and only let them loose for specific, targeted purposes.

Of course, Lange, Kirk, Muldoon and even Bolger knew that policy issues were a hell of a lot more complicated and nuanced than their Opposition rhetoric ever let on. But they also knew that you didn't have the luxury of worrying about the nuances till you got to be the government. And you didn't get to be the government by boring people with nuances. They knew that you kept the Qualifications, Complications and Niggling Anomalies module in your Prime Minister Kit under the sofa, and resisted the urge even to take them out of the plastic till you really were PM. ■

SLANE



Ask, well, anyone. Such as Ron Bennett from Kumeu. He will pay the Auckland Regional Council (ARC) three times more in rates this year than last. "They're not doing the job right," he complains. "I've got a son in Takapuna. You want to hear him jump around."

Graham Bennett is the son and he is indeed jumping around. The ARC rates on his million-dollar property have trebled. "This is a wealth tax," he groans. The older Bennett gritted his teeth and paid the bill. "I'm not a scrounger," he says.

The younger one wants to argue the toss with the council in court.

Or, you could ask Jill from Stanmore Bay on the Whangaparaoa Peninsula, whose circumstances are so dire that she doesn't want her surname published. Jill has actually lost her home altogether. On an invalid's benefit, Jill has a budget so tight that she is often down to her last 10c. Her ARC rates bill pushed her over the top. "It was the straw that broke the camel's back," she reports. Jill sold her house and hasn't found another. "I'm going to finish up in the boondocks."

But, with its overall rates rise of 34 percent and individual rises up to four and even six times last year's rates, the ARC merely tops the list of villains. Banks Peninsula and Franklin people are looking down the barrel of 16.6 percent.

Waterfront property kept its owners smiling until the rates bills came in. Now they're grizzling from Foxton Beach to Hahei.

Nelson, where newspapers goggle over the latest real-estate excesses, is usually so placid that last week locals were complaining about the noise of ships. But a proposed rate rise of 18 percent sent them into such a fury that the local council knocked it back to eight.

David Swire is sore with the Whangarei District Council, whose rates demands have whacked his Falls Estate retirement village at Tikipunga. Residents, average age around 78, will pay an extra \$305 a year. Totting it up at \$6 a week, Swire makes his own demand: "The village is paying all this extra money and what do we get for it?"

In Napier, Doug Black sits in the fashionable suburb of Westshore and wonders how long he and his partner can go on paying their rates. "I've got the best view in

Napier," he says, "but at 82 what the hell."

The owners of a clutch of fishing huts at Lake Alexandrina in the mountains near Tekapo are as far from Auckland as they can get, except for their rates. Worse, there is no discount for the snow and ice that prevent owners from getting to their huts for four to six months of the year. Jim Underdown reckons that the good news is that this winter has been mild. The bad news is the Mackenzie District Council has trebled their rates to \$240 a year. "We lost badly," says Underdown.

Near Maitara, in Southland, Doug Dodds comes in from milking his cows

annually, and rising. No, it wasn't just you: rates rises, said Bollard, had raced past inflation for a decade.

So hardly anyone likes their local council. They are talking revolt. In the quiet streets of suburban and country New Zealand, the mood is explosive.

WEEKENDS ARE good times for selling cars. Taking a bath in the flood of imports, owners become weekend auto hustlers.

But if you park your car in a Christchurch street with a "for sale" sign in the window, someone will put a letter under your windscreen wiper, insisting that you've broken the law. Stop it or else.

A council employee is paid to do this.

Everyone can tell you how their council wastes money.

Too many councillors - 24 in Christchurch, more than anywhere. Making too good a living, Auckland Mayor John Banks, already rich, is on \$143,000 a year.

Too many junkets: the sister city business is a scam. Here's Nelson City Council spending \$6000 taking its guests to the Wearable Art Show.

All true, arguably. Perhaps it is significant that in Dunedin, where people will actually pay less in rates this year, councillors have decided that they and city officials will generally travel economy class rather than business.

But profligacy or privilege is hardly pushing up the rates.

What do these councils have in common that makes them spend so much? Nothing obvious to the naked eye, says Auckland political scientist and local-body specialist Graham

Bush, who pays just over \$2000 in rates on his \$800,000 Auckland home. Except, politicians choose the middle of their three-year terms - that is, this year - to hike up rates: "Next year [local body election year], ensuring rates don't go too high will be further up their scale of priorities."

Have they grown fat and lazy? Or been forced to pick up the leavings of socially negligent governments? "Both are correct," says Bush sagely. Dove-Meyer Robinson, probably Auckland's last admired mayor, had a single secretary; by Bush's count, John Banks has a personal staff of seven (only five, retorts Banks's office). "And some councils have gone over the top with five or six sister cities," says Bush.

BUSINESS GOES FOR the bloated theory. Roundtable's Roger Kerr says spending

COUNCILS ALL OVER NEW ZEALAND ARE RAISING THE RATES - AND THE BLOOD PRESSURE OF RATEPAYERS. WHO'S REALLY TO BLAME, AND DO WE GET VALUE FOR MONEY FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT?

BY BRUCE ANSLEY

to consider his fortunes. His local council planned to charge him \$2730 for his local swimming pool and library this year. Dodds is sore. "I've never seen the pool," he says. "I'm not quite certain where it is. It must be a big gold-plated one. We use the library, but for what we're spending we could buy all the books we read."

Routine whining?

Not when the Governor of the Reserve Bank joins the chorus. Alan Bollard gloomed over average household rates rises of 4.5 percent this year, warned that they could fire inflation, cause the Reserve Bank to tighten monetary policy, depress the entire economy. And it wasn't as if councils were strapped for cash: by his count, their operating incomes over the last four years had gone up four percent



Ron and Fay Bennett of Kumeu and son Graham of Takapuna: "The ARC's not doing the job right."

problems have little to do with the government shucking its responsibilities onto councils and everything to do with the councils themselves. Local government claims to be the victim of new laws and argues that it has to look after everything from liquor licensing to brothels.

It is hard to pin down the local council. But ratepayers know what they *don't* like: paying for whatever mess their politicians have got themselves into.

Auckland's situation is messy but straightforward.

Decades of neglect are catching up with the city. Roads are so choked that

ARC has drawn a circle around places like Kumeu or Huapai or Hobsonville and said they can be serviced by buses; so we have to pay the transport rate. People just outside the circle don't pay." The Colsons' ARC rates have gone from \$84 to \$275.

The ratepayers are restless. Colson went to a meeting in Orewa. "If Gwen Bull had been there," he says, "they'd have lynched her."

A protest petition is getting a lot of support from people such as Ron Bennett. "This is my gripe," says Bennett. "I paid them \$61 last year. This year they want \$194. But I haven't gone in a bus for 30

They are threatening to stop paying.

It may not be rioting in the streets, but, says Drury. "You'd be talking up to 100,000 people not paying. Are they going to sue them all?"

Of course, it is entirely reasonable for people to ask whether they should be paying for roads, trains, buses and amenities they may not use, or use very much. Drury: "We don't consider we should be paying for what's going wrong in Auckland. Neither should Christchurch or Invercargill." Graham Bennett in Takapuna says his land value is around \$600,000 and his neighbour, whose land is worth over \$1m, will pay even more in rates and both of them will pay peanuts compared with

"We have too many social engineers in local government, more than central government by a long chalk. They take the view that if you live in a wealthy area, you can afford it. But some are literally being rated from their properties." – JOHN HARRISON, NAPIER CITY COUNCILLOR

gridlock looms.

The ARC could hardly have handled its predicament worse. It packed drastic action into a single year. It was forced to break cover with its rates demands and send them separately. It spread the burden in a way that was widely seen as unfair. Prime Minister Helen Clark has accused the ARC of shifting the load away from business onto low- and middle-income homeowners, a result of its rating system.

The universal complaint from ratepayers outside Auckland is that they are confronted with big rises for services they do not believe they will receive. They object to what they see as injustice and all of ARC chair Gwen Bull's protests have failed to change that perception.

"We were presented with a fait accompli," complains Vic Colson of the Kumeu and District Ratepayers Association. "The

years. I don't go into Auckland. I used to work there – what do I want to go there for? We had trains here 30 years ago. Then they cut them out. They're not putting buses where people need them. They're not doing the job right."

IN OREWA, AUCKLAND'S premier retirement community, local ratepayers' leader John Drury claims ARC intransigence to be so aggravating that his group is holding the people back.

"They won't budge," he says of the ARC. "It's worrying. People are calling for civil disobedience. We've said no. We're law-abiding citizens, not deviants. But unless the ARC wakes up and does something drastic there will be civil disobedience."

Will there be blood on the ground?

Not exactly, says Drury. Many locals are paying in 10 instalments, by cheque.

tycoon Craig Heatley's flash house down the road at the beach. "Yet we all get the same service. Large families use far more facilities than a widow in the family home. It's a wealth tax," he says again.

SO THE REAL ARGUMENT is over the way we are rated rather than how much we have to pay.

This argument is as virulent south of the Bombay Hills.

Many councils have tried to even out the load on ratepayers by introducing uniform charges – a single sum paid by every property. The uniform charge's essential problem is that poorer properties pay proportionately more; so it is not surprising that businesspeople and wealthier landowners such as farmers are anxious to lever it up to the maximum allowable.

In Napier, businessman and the city



PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY LAWRENCE

council's finance committee chair John Harrison wanted the charge to go up to the maximum over two years. The city council effectively halved his proposal, to Harrison's great annoyance.

"It f---s me off to the max," he says. "It is totally gutless. We have too many social engineers in local government, more than central government by a long chalk. They take the view that if you live in a wealthy area, you can afford it. But some are literally being rated from their properties."

Doug Black worries that he may be one of them. He and his partner Bernice Kerr bought their house in Westshore when it was a backwater. Now it is expensive in a city whose property boom has ranked with Nelson's. "If rates go up any more, we may have to sell up," says Black glumly.

The complaint echoes in Gore, where rural ratepayers objected to paying through the nose, as they saw it, for their swimming pool and library. Down there, the council admits its rates simply have not been high enough to cope. "The council put in place magnificent facilities," says its chief executive Steve Parry. "Some would say it overspent rather than under-rated. Debt rose tenfold over 10 years and at the same time rates rose less than inflation did."

Now ratepayers face a 9.8 percent rise, and the council has imposed a relatively low uniform charge.

In this part of Southland, properties range from expensive, such as rich dairy farms, to small town sections worth \$100. So country people allege that they are paying far too much. "We're happy to pay a fair share," says their spokesperson Mark Copland, "but a blowout is unacceptable."

So in the far south they begin to sound remarkably like the far north and people such as Takapuna's Bennett.

Above, disgruntled Auckland ratepayers at a rates protest meeting. Below, ARC chair Gwen Bull.

"The concept of funding local government by rates based on real-estate value is long past its use-by date," says dairy farmer Dodds. "Everyone who has a vote should pay."

But that is a poll tax.

"What's wrong with that?" Dodds retorts. "It's unpopular because people who should be paying are getting a free ride. But with this left-wing government we've got now it's not going to go anywhere."

Although Dodds's view is not unusual - I heard comments implying a poll tax all over the country - it is unlikely to go anywhere with a right-wing government, either.

A poll tax is regressive. It is levied equally on everyone, but hits the poor far harder than the wealthy. It was popular in the 19th century, but largely discredited until Margaret Thatcher, as British Prime Minister and champion of Victorian values and remedies, revived it in 1990, thus ensuring her demise as PM later that year.

Although the argument among ratepayers is over the way they should be rated, the debate within councils is about who is responsible for their rising costs.

They accuse central government of muscling into their act, an argument championed at the recent local government conference in Queenstown by the Clutha District Council. "It's a creeping rot," says its chief executive Ciaran Keogh. "We've become super-regulated."

New standards imposed by everyone, from the Fire Service to the Ministry of Health are costing, says Keogh. In Clinton, where the owner of a property valued at \$11,000 all up pays \$1145 in rates, complying with the ministry's new drinking

water standard would cost so much that Keogh calculates it would be cheaper to buy them bottled water.

But the new requirements to consult with the people irk councils most. The new Local Government Act was described by Local Government Minister Chris Carter as essentially the voice of the people, allowing individuals and the community to have their say.

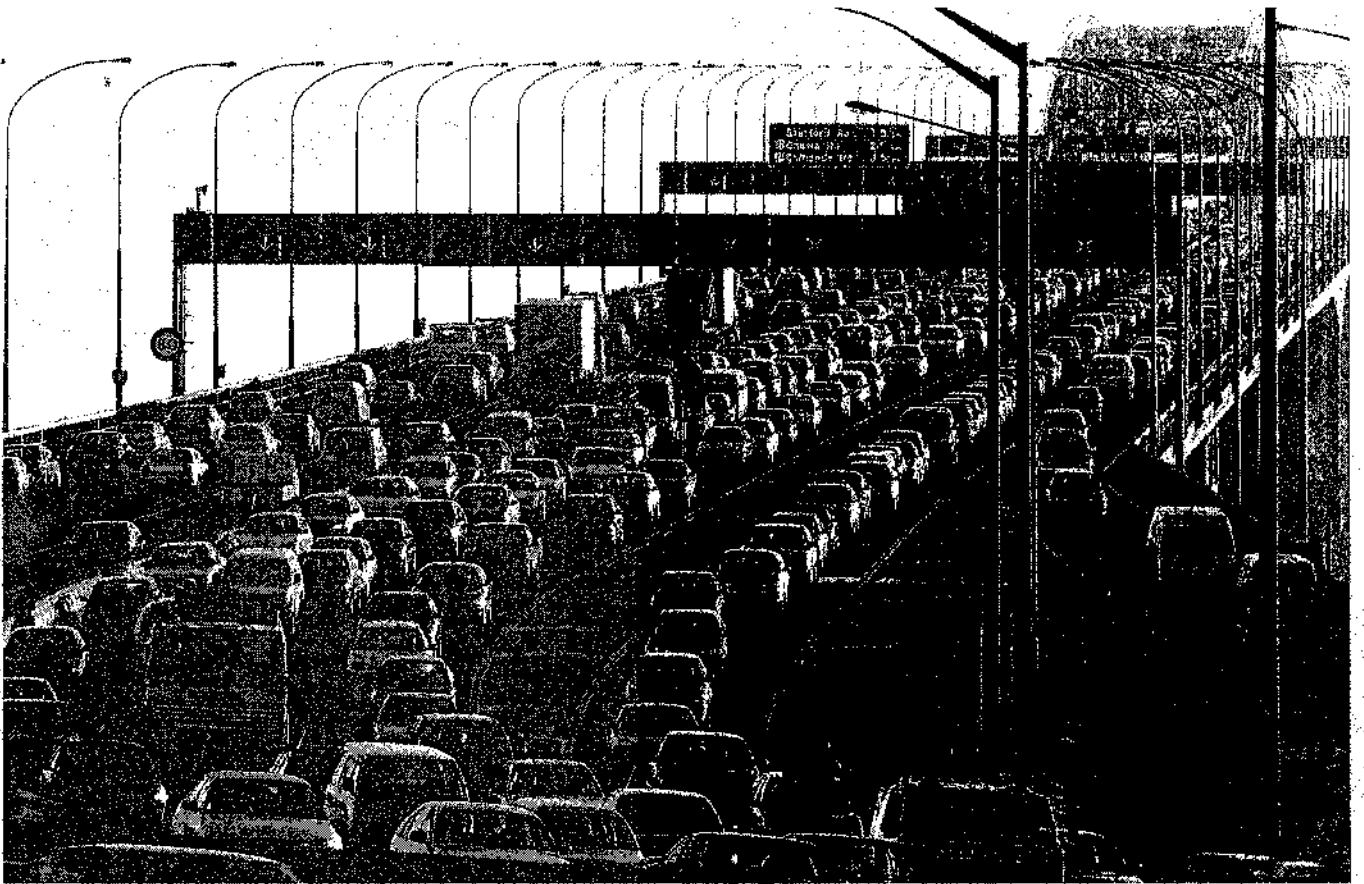
The question that many councils are asking is, does the community want it say? "We need it like a drowning man needs an anchor," says Keogh, whose mayor, Juno Hayes, and the district council are now busy rallying the south against the Act. They estimate that its requirements will plump rates by two percent.

When half of the public won't vote in local body elections and no one turns up for annual plan meetings, Keogh wonders



PHOTOGRAPH BY GUY LAWRENCE

M65



Above, log-jam on Auckland Harbour Bridge. Below, Auckland Mayor John Banks: staff of seven?

who will ever go along to the government's new compulsory long-term council community plan meetings. No one would go to an annual plan meeting in, say, Owaka, he notes. Talk about chlorinating their water supply and upping their rates by \$500, though, "and it would be standing room only and they'd all be holding pick handles and flaming torches".

For the ratepaying public is always more interested in the detail than the broad sweep.

Delegates to the local bodies conference

in Queenstown early this month were given wine openers by the Queenstown Lakes District Council.

When they flew out, most delegates found their wine openers confiscated by airport security. The airport is owned by the Queenstown Lakes District Council.

Who paid for these people to go to New Zealand's premier tourist resort for their conference? Who paid for the wasted wine openers?

Guess.

CALLING FOR HELP is useless.

You could try the Auditor-General, as 290 people did last year. Despite a lot of generalities from the Auditor-General's office, the results are imperceptible to the naked eye.

The Auditor-General has declared ARC ratepayers to be on their own.

The Ombudsman is little help. They will investigate some matters, but, says the Ombudsman's office, "whether the dollars and cents are reasonable is the council's decision".

The Minister of Local Government is "assessing" a complaint, presumably Drury's, about ARC rates, but Carter will tell you that his office has taken serious action only once in 25 years, when it appointed a commissioner to run Rodney district.

Graham Bennett from Takapuna is trying to take the ARC to the Disputes Tribunal over his rates increase.

The issue will be re-opened by Act MP Rodney Hide's bill seeking to cap rates rises.

In the meantime, the best shot you're going to get is throwing out your local councillors at the next election.

Bennett has high hopes of a decent turnout for a change. "When they get a big squawk, they run down there in droves," he says of his fellow, usually lethargic, ratepayers. But history is against him. At local-body election time most voters sleep right through. ■



KEITH WALTON/MARTIN STUBBS/GETTY IMAGES

Should we be able to RATE THE RATERS?

BY BRUCE ANSLEY

How do you rate your local council over your council's rates? Compare Rodney with Gore, the Auckland Regional Council with Environment Canterbury? Who are the big spenders? The misers? Britain and Australia both have their local government league tables. Ratepayers in this country have no means of comparison. But Local Government Minister Chris Carter is interested in giving them a way of telling the good from the bad.

In Britain, ratepayers can look up the league table and discover, for example, that Wandsworth in London is an excellent council, but Coventry is bad. In fact, when the first assessments were published last year they showed councils to be unexpectedly popular with the public.

The league table is also an incentive for councils: top-rating councils get more freedom from government control, but poor performers come under close government scrutiny.

The tables have been controversial, but the British Government is extending and refining them.

Carter, though, is more interested in the Australians.

New South Wales publishes a similar league table, comparing councils according to key performance indicators. Botany Bay ratepayers can check the tables to see how much they're paying in rates compared with ratepayers in Woollahra. They can see how the number of staff their council employs



TAUPO: A BEST-PERFORMING COUNCIL.

matches up, how good their libraries are, whether they are paying as much as their neighbours across the city to have their rubbish collected and how efficient the garbages are, whether they are getting value for the money they pay for water supply and sewage disposal.

Carter will meet Tony Kelly, the NSW Local Government Minister, next month to discuss the scheme.

"I'm very interested," says Carter. "I'd be prepared to consider it, but it would have to be very carefully laid out so we're comparing apples with apples." The only recent comparison in this country was a survey of councils' performance by *Consumer* magazine in 1999. Its readers thought councils in the wider

Auckland area were doing a terrible job. At the other end of the scale, the best-performing councils were Christchurch, Napier, Taupo and Timaru.

The last four all posted comparatively modest rates rises this year.

In Christchurch – so finely tuned that the council decided its staff should get cheap possum socks to help save power during this last crisis but at no cost to the ratepayers – a home with a capital value of \$200,000 will pay \$1140 to the city council. An average home in Napier will pay \$1255, one on the swisher hill area with a capital value of \$240,000, will pay \$1682. The average Timaru property owner will pay \$1008 in city rates and Taupo averages \$1300.



NAPIER: MODEST RATES RISES



CHRISTCHURCH