

Free the poor – another world is possible

By Jane Blaikie, Wellington

Sometime in the spring of 1937 my grandmother ran into a paddock in East Otago and called other people's ducks from the sky. She recognised the ducks as domesticated, my father recalled, tempted them into a fowl run with grain and shut the gate. With seven children to feed and her husband out on the road looking for work, my grandmother did not let a chance fly by.

My father talked about his childhood only in the year or two before he died in 2008 – and then in oddly romantic snippets, for a dour man, like the story of the flock of ducks. The valley where they lived was beautiful, with its meandering Waihemo River and the bush behind their place rising to a line of golden tussock. But the actuality of Depression-era poverty was to his mind, even 70 years later, shameful.

He claimed to be the clever one – the first of his siblings to go to secondary school. In reality, the year he climbed on his bike to ride nine miles along the Pigroot to college in Palmerston was the year the Michael Savage Labour Government made secondary education freely available.

Still, it was the sort of self-belief to take a boy a long way. A few years later, with his mother dead and siblings scattered to relatives, and no jobs in the district, his father – who had joined the Labour Party – put him on the boat-train for Wellington because he had heard there were jobs in the capital.

My father arrived with his bike and a cardboard suitcase. He headed straight for the State Services Commission – a stranger on the ferry had pointed out its building on the waterfront. At the SSC, he chose his new life from a list of public services that began with the letter 'a'. He skipped 'Agriculture' and settled on 'Audit Office' – for the next 42 years.

He began as mail boy and was encouraged to sign up for night classes, but he struggled with the study. He remembered in old age, with a sense of pride even, that while he had been at college in Palmerston no one ever passed School Certificate.

The war saved him. He forged his father's signature (being underage) and joined the Air Force, training in Canada, Ireland and southern England. Senior officers protected him from active service. When he returned to the Audit Office, he knuckled down to night school and passed the secondary and tertiary exams to become a chartered accountant. On a blind date, he met my mother, a '£10 Pom' living in a state services hostel on The Terrace.

He worked his way up the hierarchy, was based in London for a few years, auditing New Zealand embassies and trade bodies across Europe and North America, and retired in the mid 1980s as assistant auditor-general. By this time, however, he was in despair.

A younger man, who my father saw as morally corrupt (this man had a mistress), was making waves in the profession, and had leapfrogged my father in the Audit Office promotion stakes. My father couldn't quite put a finger on it. He was deeply anxious about the underside of Jeff Chapman's vision: the stripping away of the old values of public service and loyalty, a push to privatize off functions of the Audit Office to the big accounting firms, and the whittling away of the terms and conditions of the new recruits.

Jeff Chapman would eventually be jailed for stealing public money to pay his personal bills, but in 1984 my father simply appeared old-fashioned in the face of the drive for deregulation that gripped the establishment.

He reacted with incoherent outbursts that stymied his chances in this new, slicker world. He blazed at Mervyn Probine, then head of the SSC, when he blocked overtime payments to my father's staff. He came home and sat motionless for hours in a wing-back chair. In retrospect, he was smart but probably belonged on a spectrum of high-functioning autists.

He retreated in retirement to a large garden in Taranaki, where he had been happy as district auditor in the 1960s. He grew tropical rhododendrons and many rows of runner and dwarf beans in the dark volcanic soil.

I like to think that at some profound level he saw the changes of the 1980s for what they were – the turning of a tide that had lifted him from poverty to the middle classes, as an attack on working people, and more importantly as an attack on their children – whose chances were being ripped away.

Because if that's what he saw as he gazed at his new potatoes, he was right.

Late last year, the Children's Commissioner released a report on child poverty. A chart on page five puts the rate of child poverty in 1986 in New Zealand at 11 percent of all children. It rises for the rest of the decade (increasing unemployment), leaps skyward from 1991 (benefit cuts) and peaks at 30 percent in 2001. By 2007, the rate falls to 22 percent, rising again in 2009 (financial crisis) to a plateau of 25 percent.

I've no doubt that the situation of today's children in poverty is as difficult as what my father experienced. According to the Commissioner, some 194,000 New Zealand children today suffer 'enforced lacks' of essentials such as doctor's visits, fresh fruit and vegetables, and adequate clothing. They are 1.4 times more likely to die than other children.

Perhaps even, their situation is worse than my father's. From the age of eight he was scouring the district with a gun, shooting rabbits, heading into the bush for pigs. With his older brothers, he tickled trout and collected mushrooms, and at home they worked an acre-sized vegetable patch. They wore rags – a photo shows the boys lined up in too-small, many-patched jackets, looking like something from Dickens – and the older boys slept outside in a canvas tent with a wooden floor. But today's more urban poverty seems harder: communities gutted by high imprisonment rates, cheap alcohol and drugs, and unaffordable housing.

The will to meaningfully address child poverty in New Zealand today, outside of parts of the non-profit sector, is lacking. Michael Joseph Savage's landslide victory in 1935 led to the welfare state, after a long struggle by activists. Yet in 2013 it is still political suicide to propose grunty solutions to child poverty, even though we are now well into a second generation of children growing up without the necessities to participate in their society.

One of the Commissioner's expert advisors, Professor Jonathan Boston from Victoria University, posits that poor children nowadays are perceived as being mostly Maori or Pasifika (they are not, although Maori and Pasifika communities are disproportionately affected) and this creates a 'them and us' attitude that blames the victim and enables inaction. The current government shrugged off most of the Commissioner's 78 recommendations, particularly the ones that might have been effective, such as a universal child benefit.

But surely something must change, and perhaps ideas on the fringe hint at other possible worlds – just as the radical socialism of the early twentieth century suggested the later policies of social security.

And why not hold on to hope: the political will to strengthen unions and break-up big corporate power can be found; employee-owned workplaces will flourish; more public ‘free’ goods, especially related to technology and healthcare, will abound; sustainability linked to equality can limit consumerism (through costs on carbon use) and boost quality-of-life measures such as health, happiness and community.

On the global stage, governments will find ways to corral the trillions of dollars sitting in tax havens into national tax nets.

Another idea that’s gaining traction, across northern Europe, is that of an unconditional basic income. It accepts that jobs lost to the developing world will not come back to the West (and the workers of Asia needed them more than we did anyway). But the West, including New Zealand, is wealthy – despite the rhetoric of debt and austerity – and there is no need to throw people onto the scrapheap.

Maverick economist Gareth Morgan expounds a local scenario in his book *The Big Kahuna*: all adults are paid \$300 a week, with a decent allowance for children. Welfare is abolished and a 30 percent flat-tax from a wider tax base funds it. The poor are free: free to look after their children, to volunteer, to care for their elders, to create, to study, to invent and to work in useful jobs.

My grandmother died in 1940 from complications of a surgery that no one talked about – most likely related to child-bearing. Yet in writing this essay, for the first time I see her living image. From the road I look at her standing in a long, worn dress by a copper and a pile of washing. She holds the wooden paddle she also used to beat her half-wild sons into some sort of order. I say to her: another world did arrive – we had the chances you did not. But it is drifting away. We work for its return.