

NZCPR Weekly

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NEW ZEALAND CENTRE FOR POLITICAL RESEARCH

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Dr Muriel Newman

Can an individual make a difference? Sheryl Savill would like to think so. Sheryl is the instigator of the Citizens Initiated Referendum petition on smacking. Launched in February last year, her petition asked the question, "Should a smack as part of good parental correction be a criminal offence in New Zealand?"

Sheryl, a young mother of two, whose husband is a police officer, is this week's NZCPR Guest Commentator. In her article she explains, "I am not normally one to get involved in politics or public demonstrations. But when I realised how the anti-smacking bill would directly affect the way I was raising my children, I just knew that I had to do something. And I discovered very early on that I wasn't the only one who felt this way - many of the parents I talked to thought the bill was ludicrous. So ludicrous, they felt that there wasn't even a need for a petition... surely our politicians weren't that blind".

Well, Sheryl, it appears that they were (and are)!

The Crimes (Abolition of Force as a Justification for Child Discipline) Amendment Bill - which repealed Section 59 of the Crimes Act to remove the defence of "reasonable" force for parents who physically discipline their children - was passed by the vast majority of Parliament in May last year. Only 8 MPs voted against it: ACT's Rodney Hide and Heather Roy; New Zealand First's Winston Peters, Ron Mark and Pita Paraone; United Future's Judy Turner; and the Independents Gordon Copeland and Philip Field.

Both Labour and National changed their stance on the issue, originally intending to allow their MPs exercise a conscience vote, but ultimately requiring them to vote along party lines. This turnaround was particularly damaging for Labour as before the 2005 election, the Prime Minister went on record stating, "As you know I do not support a ban on smacking. I am opposed to that because I think it defies human nature. No-one wants to see a stressed and harassed parent who in exasperation lightly smacks a child dragged before the court". [1]

The resignation of Philip Field from the Labour Party in February 2007 had a major influence on the Prime Minister. Field's resignation cut Labour's majority and forced the Government to turn to the Green Party - but their support came at a high price which included government backing for Sue Bradford's anti-smacking bill.

For many New Zealanders the Prime Minister's u-turn became symptomatic of the inherent problems with MMP. It demonstrated that under MMP parties are quite prepared to abandon any principles they might have held in order to retain power. It showed that under MMP, the needs of

the electorate and the good of the country are all too often relegated to secondary considerations.

Under the new law, any parent who uses any sort of force verbal or physical - to discipline a child is breaking the law. And while the Police have the discretion not to prosecute a particular case, all cases must nonetheless be investigated by the Police and Child Youth and Family. That takes the state right into the heart of the family, judging parents and dictating how they should or should not raise their children.

Sheryl explains that this was one of the main reasons that she started the Referendum petition: "The government was intruding yet again into the lives of parents, and as a mum, I was really concerned about the impact that this type of bill would have on my family. To remove and undermine a parent's authority in their own home is a treacherous area for the State to wade into". To read Sheryl's article see www.nzcpr.com.

The law change proved to be very damaging for Labour, as the trend series for the Colmar Brunton political opinion polls shows. According to the poll taken in May 2007, just after the passing of the Bill, support for Labour had dropped from 39 percent in mid-April to 31 percent, their lowest poll rating since February 1997. In comparison, National rose in the poll from 49 percent to 56 percent, their highest poll rating since September 1990. With July's Colmar Brunton poll showing Labour on 35 percent and National on 52 percent support, history may well show that for Labour, the anti-smacking bill was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Sheryl Savill's petition for a Citizens' Initiated Referendum is New Zealand's forty-second petition since the CIR Act was introduced in 1993. While referenda have been proposed on matters as diverse as outlawing battery hens, saving forests, and changing the flag, only three have been successful so far. They were the 1995 firefighters referendum, supported by 87.8 percent of voters, and the 1999 proposals by Margaret Robertson to reduce the number of MPs and by Norm Withers to introduce tougher sentences for violent crime. They gained 81.5 and 91.8 percent support respectively.

Parliament's Clerk's Office, which is checking whether the petition has been signed by 10 percent of registered voters, is expected to deliver the news on its success or otherwise by August 23rd. If successful, the government must announce the referendum date within a month, and the ballot must then be held within a year.

Undoubtedly, the best time to hold a citizens initiated

referendum is at an election. It ensures a far higher turnout at a much lower cost. However, it appears highly unlikely that the Prime Minister will want anti-smacking “nanny-state” accusations clouding the election campaign, even though putting her own political interests ahead of the wishes of the public will cost taxpayers an estimated \$10 million the cost of holding a stand-alone referendum.

I started this column by asking whether an individual can make a difference. Sheryl is definitely making a difference.

In my own way, I would like to think that I am also making a difference with the New Zealand Centre for Political Research. As many of you will know I established the NZCPR straight after the 2005 election, when I found that my nine-year Parliamentary term had suddenly come to an end. I believed that a public policy think tank could make a real contribution to changing the future direction of New Zealand by using research, publications and open public debate to promote the benefits of freedom, liberty and limited government - as well as the power of free markets.

While most people were very encouraging, many said I would not be able to find the funding. However, I decided to put my trust in the readers, believing that if they agreed with what I was doing they would support me.

In many respects the NZCPR has been an outstanding success. NZCPR Weekly is delivered to leading decision-makers and discerning readers through what is probably the country's largest electronic mailing list, and, thanks to the enthusiasm of recipients, NZCPR newsletters are regularly circulated around the Internet - even making it onto Fox News!

The NZCPR website (www.nzcpr.com) has grown in popularity now attracting around a million hits a month, evolving into a literal treasure trove of services designed to keep readers well informed with live local news feeds on the HOME page, international feeds on the MEDIA page, and political feeds on the PARLIAMENT page.

The NZCPR FORUM is an important part of the operation, for it is here that your opinion counts. The wealth of weekly comments by readers can be found in

HANSARD, the HOUSE is the window into Parliamentary business, and the GENERAL DEBATE features commentary and information that NZCPR subscribers would like to see promoted more widely see <http://www.nzcpr.com/forum/index.php>.

Christine Davey, mother of a P addict, is a Forum contributor who is making a real difference. Christine wanted to highlight how this dangerous drug destroys lives by starting a blog, “P” and the NZ Community. Her blog has become a comprehensive resource which has already attracted over 36,000 views see

<http://www.nzcpr.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=20>

Through the NZCPR Forum, Christine has gained the confidence to speak out, challenging Members of Parliament, volunteering for the “Fight Against P” support group, writing press releases, and now becoming the Spokesman on Drug Issues for the Sensible Sentencing Trust. As she recently explained to me, “All this has come about because you invited me to join your Forum 2 years ago - and look where I am now!”

With your assistance, the ideas communicated through the NZCPR are making a real difference and are helping to shape the future direction of New Zealand. But while our influence continues to grow, funding remains a real struggle. The New Zealand Centre for Political Research has become a full-time commitment, taking all of my time and effort to keep it going. If you value the work of the NZCPR, then please help me I can only continue on with your support... if you would like to help, please go to

<http://www.nzcpr.com/support.htm>

This week's poll asks: Should a smack as part of good parental correction be a criminal offence in New Zealand?

FOOTNOTES:

[1]. TVNZ News, PM's stance on smacking questioned: <http://tvnz.co.nz/view/page/411749/1024326>

Supporting the NZ Centre for Political Research

The New Zealand Centre for Political Research is an independent public policy think tank run by former Member of Parliament Dr Muriel Newman. The NZCPR's mission is to educate and inform the public about the benefits of freedom, liberty and limited government through research, publications and open public debate.

The NZCPR Weekly electronic newsletter is the biggest in the country and the www.NZCPR.com website is one of the busiest political sites. Material produced by the NZCPR helps to shape public opinion by being widely circulated through local and international media, websites, blogs and by individuals.

The NZCPR received no government funding. It is supported by individual readers who value a free and open society and want to assist in changing the direction of New Zealand. Subscribers receive a range of benefits including an exclusive copy of the NZCPR's electronic book “The Treaty of Waitangi” by Hon Sir Apirana Ngata. Further information can be found on the website at www.nzcpr.com/support.htm.

Thank you for your interest.