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Saying 'no' to gangs

THE INABILITY to say "no" in this country is at the root of a great many of its social problems, not the least of them being the continual presence in our towns and cities of organised criminal gangs of the Mongrel Mob/Black Power ilk. We may speculate that more than 60 years of state welfarism is at the heart of our universal desire to let someone else — preferably "the government" — solve our community and individual problems. Too many successive administrations have decided that a policy of indulgent humanitarianism could safely be assumed to carry the load of the unending vigilance every community requires lest it be destroyed — and at the least cost and responsibility. Even the Prime Minister, responding to the latest gang outrage, has been moved to offer a few more useless pearls on the subject: everyone has had a gutsful of gangs, she says, and the Government will consider any effective measures to control them.

People are quite entitled to indulge in a touch of scepticism about this. Was the 'gang problem' new in 1990 when the Clark Government assumed office? It was not, of course. Helen Clark claims her administration and its agencies have been working on the organised crime problem for more than seven years; that she has not been idle at a legislative, policy and funding level either. People may assume from this self-justification, then, that none of these measures has been effective. Yes, the gang problem is a very difficult one to eradicate. But at what level of lawlessness does the community finally decide it has had enough: that indulgence cannot be tolerated for this specific group? Is the death of a child not quite enough?

The Prime Minister needs to instruct the police commissioner to turn his forces en masse on to the gangs and harry them with a nationally-backed solidarity of unbending determination and the universal enforcement of tough, basic rules. Not once, but all the time. Ms Clark does not need new laws to do any of this. The Government already has an arsenal of legislative weapons at its disposal, from local body bylaws to the strongest sanctions in our communally-agreed justice system. The gang problem will not be rolled back unless and until it uses them — all of them — all the time, until the task is done. There is nothing new about human criminality that has not already been learned over the course of history; it remains to be seen whether the Clark Government has yet learned that giving in to the soft option school of thought on curbing anti-social behaviour does not work. This Government, like its predecessors, is failing to combat violent gangs, it is failing to adequately manage law and order in serious criminal offending, and it is failing to make our prisons places to be avoided. No place in this country now seems safe: in 30 years the virus of violent crime has infected every corner of the land. Whole communities are experiencing levels of gang-sponsored criminality unknown for perhaps three or four generations.

We have all, by our inaction, permitted the virus to spread, allowed the politicians to strike a tough pose on law and order before elections, and to do very little once in office. Civic and political leadership, and practical help at the earliest possible stage, are required in every community for lasting beneficial effect on the gang problem. If we are to fight this war — for that is what it is — we must all accept the challenge: we must start saying "no" to gangs. And we need political leaders prepared to abandon hand-wringing as their principal response and to get actively involved in the fight against crime.

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