

A TIMELY COMPARISON

In a bid to avoid at least part of the Winter I spent month in the UK and Europe. As far as the winter was concerned I may as well have stayed in NZ. However, I took the opportunity to observe the relatively new Conservative Government finding its feet and to compare the challenges facing both our government and the UK government. Both governments have very different priorities from their predecessors on government spending and the cuts in the various areas of health, education, social welfare etc. are not always welcomed in either country.

Both countries face remarkably similar issues and the following is a brief outline of just some of the UK's problems.

One of the major concerns is the "drinking culture" in the UK particularly amongst the young. A review of the licensing laws has been called for to see what can be done whether the shortening of drinking hours and other restrictions to get, particularly young people, to drink responsibly.

Many of today's youth are aimless and without any motivation. To that end the Conservative Government is bringing in National Citizens Service, which is a non-military voluntary service in the hope that it will give some young people a sense of discipline, purpose and stimulation to make something of their lives.

The Birmingham branch of the Department for the Care of Children has been identified as having the worst record in the UK for the care of children. The case workers are overloaded to the extent that many children are not being seen and some have lost their lives in domestic incidents. It is the usual story, far too many children needing assistance with far too few people to provide that assistance. That Department is to be reviewed.

VAT is to increase from January 2011 to 20%. While it is not as pervasive as our GST it is still a hefty consumer tax and will effectively increase the cost of living.

There are also calls in the UK for sentenced prisoners to serve the whole of their sentence rather than be released early from prison. There is also the question as to whether life should mean the whole of someone's life. In particular the case of John Venables who was one of the lads who murdered James Bulger in the early 1990's is taking centre stage. Under a new name Venables was released from detention in the hopes that he would develop into a responsible citizen. The experts' reports said they thought he was a low risk for re-offending. The opposite happened and Venables life spiralled out of control and he was relieved to be returned to prison after a depraved and sickening crime spree.

The UK government is also making cuts in areas of education, health and social welfare spending. They are also intent on closing loopholes which give rise to rip-offs in the tax credits regime administered by their departments. It all sounds very familiar.

All in all both countries appear to be facing very similar challenges and many of the solutions are also similar. It is probably fair to say that the grass is not really greener over the fence.

This article has been prepared by Bessie Paterson, a Partner with Ronald Angland & Son Solicitors, who may be contacted on Tel: 03 349-4708 or e-mail bessie@anglands.co.nz.