

Reforms dressed in abstractions & soiled phrases

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Oh, my God, I thought the other day, here they go again blathering on about 'economic reforms' and how we can't rest on our oars, and so on and so on.

It was all inspired by the OECD report on our economy and how the 'reforms' of 15 years have not delivered what they promised. About all we've done is debase the word 'reforms.'

Now, all of us are for national economic change and development, wealth-creation and general prosperity in this shrinking world, just as we're for motherhood, puppy dogs and little children lisping fairy tales. But what we want is not just flag-waving, sloganeering and therapy language but explicit, coherent, medium to long-term policy around which we can shape some national consensus.

Take Maurice Williamson's road management reforms. Where do they fit into economic strategy? Have we any reason to believe they will be less of a de-

backle than the power reforms that were hurried through as though our national survival were at stake?

Let's look at the recent reforms in their fragments: the confusion and failure of the power supply changes; the suppurating sore of the Fire Service; the Health Funding Authority and its \$7.5 million chairs in the high-rent part of Wellington.

What do any of these moves – accompanied as they are by highly paid admen, PR persons and, now, psychologists – mean to our economic future and our children's? Interesting that one of the fastest-selling New Zealand books over recent weeks has been Bruce Jesson's *Only Their*

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Purpose is Mad. The critical praise has homed in on its clarity and intellectual underpinning. Even some who think 'their purpose' sane have commended it.

The book's popularity emphasises that a lot of people want intelligent, reasoned appraisal of our social and economic condition and a route to the future. So why can't the people who keep urging us on to 'economic reforms' tell us precisely and coherently what those reforms are, and produce policy strategies with the same clarity and with the same sense that they are genuinely interested in truths and not just indulging, reflexively, a deep, subjective self-interest. The new right (for want of a better phrase) has never produced a credible prophet.

What we get are abstractions dressed in soiled phrases. So far, for 15 years, all we've had is the rhetoric.....

Jenny Shipley buried in a media scramble – cornering the market for economic platitudes•