

Simon Court speech to Aggregate and Quarry Conference

Thursday 14 August 2022

Thank you Wayne Scott, the Aggregate and Quarry Association and the IOQ for this opportunity to speak to the delegates today.

Fascinating present from IOQ Australia, so many parallels with NZ, and plenty to learn by sharing these experiences with each other

The best thing about holding the Energy and Resources portfolio is that I get to spend time with people who I used to rely on to deliver SPR, Gap 65 and TNZ 40 on time and to the quality spec when I worked as a civil engineer in the waste and roading sectors.

Then you were suppliers to my projects, now I am here as your representative in Parliament and that comes with some significant obligations given the challenges facing this industry and the entire productive sector right now.

It is great to be in Taranaki today. Last week I was here to look at Methanex Motonui operations, one of the most efficient producers of methanol in the world - around 3.5% of the worlds supply made right here.

What the engineers at Methanex told me, and what everyone in this room knows – that NZ energy and resources sector has among the highest environmental standards in the world.

That's because the people who work in these industries also fish, hunt and live in the communities where these businesses operate.

They respect their environment because it sustains their way of life, not just in Taranaki.

That simple fact is lost on policy and law makers in Wellington. They devise regulations without understanding the impact on business and communities

Classic examples – the so called “Essential Freshwater rules” that prohibited activities in wetlands, and defined wetlands as a patch of bulrushes 3m³ in a paddock.

Rules designed by people who don't realise that, as part of resource developments, you can build new wetlands that are actually better than those found on existing landscapes.

Here is the evidence from the Taranaki Regional Council website.

[Soil conservation works](#) over the last 25 years have resulted in a 29% net reduction in mean annual sediment load, with a further 15% reduction expected as existing works mature.

Then we come to the National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity which requires Councils to identify SNAs and create a system to protect indigenous biodiversity.

SNAs are a stupid idea - they work against private conservation efforts.

That policy will have unintended but predictable consequences – landowners are already promising to clear regenerating native bush to avoid having their land captured under new planning rules.

When I worked at Auckland Council remediating closed landfills, the SNAs on council land were a massive barrier to fixing the sites.

By the way Council had voluntarily applied SNAs to their own land, but not to private land in Auckland, fearing the fight that would kick off.

Problem we were trying to solve – we needed CCTV inspection of the old leachate and SW systems as part of investigation and preliminary design.

But there were native planting areas on slopes of the old landfill – now deemed SNA's
And, we needed to cut a track 50m x 3m wide to get to one manhole of many, and clear 10m² around each MH to allow for the CCTV rig.

We were required to get resource consents for clearing any vegetation in an SNA over 5m².

We spent \$50k on technical reports and assessments before we could apply for consents,

Outrageous imposition on the organisation by well-meaning but foolish regulators.

So, I'm going to focus on a topic which affects everybody in the room – the RMA and what to do about it.

When I come to places like Taranaki and say "I'm from Auckland" you get a range of reactions.

Typical ones are -

"I couldn't live in Auckland because of the traffic – it takes so long to get anywhere.

Or – "I couldn't afford to live there; the houses are so expensive!

Yesterday on my first flight, from Napier to Auckland, a machinery parts supplier told me they were going to move their main distribution centre from Auckland to Christchurch, because it's much easier to consent land in Christchurch as well as the land being much cheaper.

It's not just Auckland.

Every region has a story about a road, a port, or a dam held up by the RMA.

The East West Link in Auckland, a roading project intended to get freight truck off local roads, is still working through RMA appeals 5 years after the project was meant to start.

The Ports of Tauranga have recently been kicked out of the fast-track consenting process because the Minister for the Environment wanted to give more people the opportunity to object.

According to a report commissioned by the Infrastructure Commission, infrastructure providers spend almost \$1.3 billion every year on consenting.

That's just for the consents, without building anything. For the average smaller project — like fixing a dangerous road — consenting costs account for almost 16% of the total budget.

And the problem is getting worse. The cost of consenting infrastructure has increased by 70% since 2014, while authorities now take 50% longer to make a decision than in 2014/15.

The length of the RMA itself has increased by 31% since 2015. And from 400 pages to over 900 since it was passed.

Last year in 2021 I sat on the Environment Committee through hearings on the Government replacement, the NBA.

That's the first of three new laws to replace the RMA prop by David Parker.

The feedback from industry was – its too complicated, too many new terms and definitions that will take years to litigate, conflicting objectives.

And doesn't solve the underlying problems with Resource Management laws.

The Government's reforms to the RMA repeat many of the mistakes of the past.

They lack specificity about who has the right to do what on their land and who has the right to object.

That means projects will still be held up by years of hearings, appeals, consultants' reports, and iwi consultations.

It would be fair to say that most Aucklanders have no idea where the stuff used to make roads, buildings and houses comes from.

They do know that building materials are way more expensive than they used to be, and you have to wait longer to get them.

The government will tell you it's because of Covid or a war in Ukraine.

People who run truck fleets and suppliers who need to move bulk materials around big cities and across regions will tell you this is not a new issue.

Pricing jobs in Auckland in 2000s, we would plan to get 4 sometime five loads a day from the CBD to Redvale Landfill.

Now it is 3 but sometimes only 2.

If the roads or ports are congested, that means more delays and more costs for everything New Zealanders purchase.

These bottlenecks make commercial sense to fix. The only reason they haven't been is because of red tape in the way.

ACT's replacement for the RMA would make it much easier to get building.

Current RMA and 30 years of tinkering, politicians making political trade-offs instead of allowing local people and communities work out where to build stuff and how to manage effects.

Regulators and policy makers fail to recognise we build infrastructure to deliver social benefits, roads to connect people with jobs and services, and to get goods to markets.

Need raw materials like hard rock, limestone and to build homes roads and everything that needs a foundation or concrete to hold it up.

We need to build our way out of the cost-of-living crisis. That's simply not possible under current and proposed RMA changes.

ACT would set New Zealanders free to do so by scrapping the RMA and replacing it with a fit-for-purpose set of environmental and urban development laws.

We would restrict the right to object to projects to those who are directly affected by the project.

Further, we would reduce the hurdles like the gateway tests where developers and infra owners have to prove why their proposal should be allowed in a particular place.

We would codify enviro practices, and eliminate consent requirements for things like erosion and sediment control, the basic stuff that's cut and paste into consent conditions at great cost and time to the applicant.

Finally, our changes to environmental law would ensure that policymakers were aware of the economic costs of their actions when restricting development.

We need real change in public policy if we want a healthy economy and thriving communities.

Which if we can solve, give young people a reason to stay in NZ, to save for a home and bring up the next generation to love this country like I do.

That is why we will be asking NZ to consider supporting ACT in 2023 if they want a real change, as opposed to simply changing a red captain for a blue captain in the Beehive.

So, if you want to contribute to our thinking on policy and regulation contact me through our website at ACT.org.nz.

Or if you want to see more of David Seymour's political stand-up and meet the other ACT MPs we are on a 15 towns in 14 days tour around NZ - the Real Change tour. Jump online to find an event near you.

Thank you