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COMMENT

Anne Salmond: Kapohia te ra – seize the day

Continuing to plant pine forests in response to climate change treats rural Kiwis as collateral and ignores past mistakes. Restoring native forests, however,

offers hope to those who have suffered the most, writes Dame Anne Salmond.

Avatar photo

by

Dame Anne Salmond

9 hours ago

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Forestry companies have paid no reparations at all for the damage they have caused to lives, livelihoods, properties and infrastructure, especially in

Tairāwhiti. Photo: Tim Murphy

article

University of Auckland

Expert opinion from University of Auckland - Waipapa Taumata Rau

Comment: I walked down Broadway in Newmarket, Auckland this week, and it was sobering. I’ve never seen so many empty shops. So many businesses seem to

be failing, with people losing their jobs and leaving the country. A Government that prides itself on its ability to run ‘the economy’ seems to be running

it into the ground.

How can any New Zealand administration still think that tax cuts, austerity and ‘small government’ are a recipe for economic success? Inspired by such

neo-liberal ideologies, Liz Truss almost crashed the UK economy. That kind of economics is more like a cargo cult than the sound management of a country’s

financial affairs.

The Government’s current approach to climate change is a case in point. While adopting a series of policies that are increasing the country’s climate debt,

the coalition Government wants to ask ‘the private sector’ to help out, while putting their access to global markets at risk.

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As the CE of Rabobank, a major international bank, warned recently, “Over 80 percent of New Zealand’s exports are headed to countries with mandatory climate-related

disclosures that are either in force or on the way.”

If New Zealand fails to meet its global commitments to tackle climate change and biodiversity losses, farmers and related industries in other countries

can use this to lobby their governments to shut down access for New Zealand goods and services.

In addition, many global companies that buy New Zealand products have their own sustainability requirements, along with international rating agencies,

insurance companies and banks.

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If that isn’t challenging enough, there’s also the question of maintaining relationships with China, by far the country’s largest market. Its no longer

unthinkable that our access to markets across China, the US and Europe might falter and fail.

Governments are supposed to look after the interests of their citizens, not those of lobbyists, and companies in other countries. That also applies to

the particular strategies adopted to tackle biodiversity losses and climate change.

In response to the carbon debt, the Minister for Climate Change, Simon Watts, plans to promote “a tree-planting frenzy”. The last time that happened, it

was an unmitigated disaster.

After Cyclone Bola hit Tairāwhiti in the late 1980s, the government decided pine plantations were the answer to widespread erosion. Farmland was sold to

international investors and converted to pine trees, hollowing out rural communities.

While the profits flowed offshore, the costs stayed with ratepayers and taxpayers, in the provision of port infrastructure, the losses associated with

workers killed and injured in the forests, and damage to the regional roading network.

When the trees began to be harvested, some of the most erodible landscapes in the world were left bare, with predictable outcomes.

In a series of severe weather events, culminating in Cyclone Gabrielle last year, sediment and forestry waste (including trees that toppled in the storms)

swept down local rivers, destroying bridges, roads, fences, powerlines, farm buildings, paddocks, orchards, vineyards, crops and family homes.

Riverbeds rose, increasing the flood risk to rural communities and Gisborne city. A little boy was killed by a pine log on Waikanae beach.

Agriculture, horticulture, viticulture, tourism, education, health and service industries in Tairāwhiti all suffered severe damage, and even the forestry

companies themselves, many of which have been successfully prosecuted in the courts.

Indeed, some forestry companies have been deregistered by the Forestry Stewardship Council in Bonn for their breaches of environmental standards, losing

access to key markets, with others likely to follow.

As it turns out, fighting against regulations to ensure sustainability is economically as well as socially and environmentally self-defeating, a cautionary

tale for other primary producers, as well as the coalition Government.

And while these catastrophes cost workers, business owners, ratepayers and taxpayers many billions of dollars, the forestry companies have paid no reparations

at all for the damage they have caused to lives, livelihoods, properties and infrastructure.

This is the kind of ‘economic management’ that rips off rural New Zealanders, while offering them up as ‘collateral damage.’

Under these circumstances, for the Government to propose a “tree-planting frenzy” that encourages international investors to expand their plantings of

highly flammable, shallow-rooting, exotic monocultures in the regions in response to collapsing ecosystems and climate change is an insult. This is short-term,

siloed thinking that learns nothing from past mistakes.

Projects that aim to regenerate and restore native forests around rivers and on steep, erodible hill country across the country, however, are a very different

proposition.

New Zealand’s temperate rain forests are richly biodiverse and resilient, with complex underground networks of roots and fungi that reduce erosion, cleanse

waterways and sequester large amounts of carbon, and canopies that absorb rainfall, cooling streams and the land.

Restoring native forests, on steep, erodible hill country and around waterways enhances resilience and makes primary production more sustainable, providing

a reliable income for farmers, iwi corporations and other landowners, fostering tourism and New Zealand’s ‘clean green’ reputation, while helping to secure

our ongoing access to international markets.

At present, the Government plans to spend billions of dollars – $3 billion to $24 billion on current estimates – buying international carbon credits to

meet the shortfall in New Zealand’s carbon debt. That’s another strategy that doesn’t make sense.

Why spend those hard-earned taxpayer dollars in other countries, when they can be invested at home to achieve the same goals – and much more, supporting

New Zealand farmers while enriching the New Zealand economy and local landscapes, and enhancing our access to global markets?

A project like

‘Recloaking Papatuanuku

,’ which aims to regenerate and restore native forest in erodible hill country and around waterways, with its affordable techniques, robust business plan

and widespread support, would be a great place to start.

If the Government isn’t willing to support such a project in its entirety, it could invest in a pilot in Tairāwhiti, where the need is urgent, even desperate.

In the wake of Cyclone Gabrielle, the Ministerial Inquiry into forestry slash, chaired by a former National cabinet minister, Hekia Parata, recommended

just such a strategy.

Such a long-term investment would be a godsend to the devastated landscapes and communities of the region. Since the damage it has suffered is largely

due to policies imposed by central government, that would only be just and fair.

Why not let Tairāwhiti, with its motto of ‘Kapohia te ra – seize the day,’ be the first to see the light on the horizon of climate change?

Avatar photo

DAME ANNE SALMOND

Anne Salmond is a Distinguished Professor at the University of Auckland, and was the 2013 New Zealander of the Year. She became a Dame in 1995 under National,

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