

SPEECH FOR 2007 ROGER AWARD EVENT, 16/3/08

- Murray Horton

I have two functions for this event. I am responsible for the plaque engraved with the name of tonight's winner (joining all the other distinguished Roger Award winners). That will be duly reattached to the uniquely hideous trophy itself when Laila does the honours. At that point you will also be given a copy of the *Judges' Report* detailing why they selected the winner.

My other function, the here and now of it, is to be the opening act, the warm up act, and speak on behalf of the Roger Award's organisers. To give you a little bit of the history of the Award and everything that has flowed from it.

The Roger Award has now been in existence for a decade (the first one was awarded for 1997). It grew out of a 1996 brainstorm meeting in Christchurch, a meeting called to discuss some new ideas and strategies on how to counter the relentless tide of corporate crap which was in danger of drowning us all in that benighted decade. The prevailing philosophy was "what's good for Big Business is good for New Zealand". It gave us the Employment Contracts Act and similar atrocities. It is worth remembering that in the 1990s David Kirk, the man who now heads the Australian transnational which owns this city's distinguished newspaper, was then a senior adviser to National PM, Jim Bolger, and one of his big ideas (fortunately never pursued) was that NZ should look into setting up export processing zones of the kind which exist in Third World countries such as the Philippines. They are the logical conclusion of what I call corporate feudalism, as they are not bound by any of the laws of the host country and quite often physically separated from them. They are the ultimate gated communities, with the difference being that they lock the poor people in.

So, it was in that atmosphere of full on class warfare against the working class, unions and beneficiaries that the Roger Award was conceived (the credit belongs to David Small; I take credit for the name). The idea was simply to fight back in the propaganda war, to point out the obvious fact that these transnational corporations are the most important players in the NZ economy, that what they do affects every one of us in all aspects of our daily lives, and to hold them publicly accountable for the enormous negative impact they have on our country. When we came up with the idea at that brainstorm meeting 12 years ago, we had no idea that it would last this long, become a national institution, and generally be a raging success.

Since the inception, the Roger Award has been organised by two Christchurch-based groups, namely the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa (CAFCA) and GATT Watchdog. I am the one person who is on both committees. And if the name GATT leaves you scratching your head, it was the name of the organisation now known as the World Trade Organisation – we've never been able to get around to updating our name. And the Christchurch-based Christian World Service has been an active supporter from the outset.

The procedures involved in finding the Roger Award winner every year have remained consistent throughout. We circulate nomination forms to our own members and enlist

other groups (which have ranged from the Green Party to trade unions to special interest groups) to circulate them to their members. The form asks people to send in a nomination for the worst TNC of the previous calendar year based on broad criteria, which we review every year. We restrict the eligible companies to those which meet the legal definition of a foreign company, that is, more than 25% foreign owned. Every year we have to reject several nominations as ineligible for this reason – the likes of Air New Zealand, Fonterra, Solid Energy and Meridian (because they're all New Zealand owned companies). The Roger Award is not for the worst corporation of the year, but for the worst transnational corporation. In the past we have received (and ruled ineligible) perfectly serious nominations for the likes of Victoria University. Every year we receive at least one nomination for the Government or the Prime Minister.

There are two other major conditions attached to nominations – the corporations are only to be judged on their activities in NZ during the calendar year in question. We routinely receive screeds of accompanying material about the overseas activities of McDonalds or GE companies, for example, some of it going back years. Whilst interesting, we only view that as background or context. To keep it strictly relevant to New Zealanders, we confine the Award to what these companies have done here, and very recently. There are all manner of TNCs who behave appallingly throughout the Third World (think oil companies or drug companies, for instance) or much closer to home (think the James Hardie asbestos scandal in Australia) who never get nominated for the Roger, because they are just not on the radar in this country or don't even exist here. So, the Roger Award is not for the worst TNC, but for the worst TNC operating in NZ during the previous year. This policy of keeping it strictly focused on NZ here and now is another major reason for the Award's success.

The secret of the Roger Award's success is that everyone involved takes it very seriously. Despite the utterly phantasmagorical appearance of the trophy itself (it looks like an airport security man's worst nightmare), the endless media references to rogering, and the highly enjoyable events themselves, the Roger Award is not a joke or a spoof. We play it straight, we play it seriously, and we mean what we say. Serious, of course, does not have to be deadly serious and it sure as hell isn't boring. The best way to sum it up is that the Roger Award is serious fun. Although I must say that I have day dreams of a celebrity TV show called Rogering With The Bastards. I reckon it would be a runaway success.

The nominators are the vital first step in this process and they take it very seriously indeed, some of them absolutely swamping us in accompanying material (the person who nominates British American Tobacco every year has sent us booklets, whole conference papers, DVDs, and tapes of radio interviews, as well as the usual screeds of copied clippings and online articles). The organisers select the finalists and send them to the judges. The calibre and dedication of these completely unpaid people, who give up part of their summer holiday to cruise through this corporate sewer in a glass bottomed boat makes all the difference to the success of the Award. The organisers and the judges are, very deliberately, quite independent of each other, so I'm not privy to their judging processes – I've only had fascinating glimpse of them when several of one year's judges happened to be at a protest at the Waihopai spybase and decided to take advantage of a very rare physical meeting to reach a consensus (this year's judges are scattered from Auckland to Dunedin and as far away as France, the first time we've had a judge living overseas). I saw enough to realise just how thoroughly and seriously the

judges take their job, year in and year out. So, let's hear it for the judges, two of whom have announced that they are retiring from the Roger judiciary as of now.

I want to express our particular thanks to Laila, who is one of those retiring. She has done it for three consecutive years, two of those as chief judge, which means that she has to coordinate their work, resolve any deadlocks (the 06 Roger Award was originally a tie and the judges sweated blood to agree to a single winner) and actually write the *Judges' Statement*. She also had to exhibit diplomatic skills last year when the 2006 winner was the company with whom her union had been locked in bitter (and ultimately victorious) dispute. So she couldn't play any role in actually picking that winner. Laila deserves an extra big round of applause, as she has made an invaluable contribution for several years.

It's always a total lottery inviting people to be Roger Award judges. There is absolutely nothing in it for them. This year we have four men and two women, two North Islanders and four South Islanders (although one of the latter is the one who now lives and works in France). We've had some high profile people as judges – Anton Oliver of course, is just the latest example, and our first All Black. I'll let you into a secret. For the very first Roger, we invited Ian Wishart to be a judge. Thank Christ he turned us down, because we then approached our first "reserve", Dunedin's then Mayor, Sukhi Turner. To our surprise she said "yes", she did it for several years and she became the face of the Roger Award, giving as good as she got when subjected to enormous political and media criticism for her association with it. Stroppy sheilas have always been a feature of the Roger Judges. One year Sukhi's husband, the world famous cricketer and current NZ selector, Glenn Turner, joined her as a judge. This was too much for the *Otago Daily Times*, which rang me up to ask: "We expect this sort of thing from Sukhi but what is Glenn doing getting involved with people like you?" It just wasn't cricket, apparently. In addition to the All Black this year's judges included union officials (one of whom had been a recent Cabinet Minister), the national President of the Methodist Church and a Victoria University economist.

The people who write the *Judges' Reports* every year do an excellent job, under a very tight deadline. They have included some wellknown figures who have always preferred, for a variety of reasons, to keep their names out of the limelight. And Sue Newberry, originally from the University of Canterbury and now Associate Professor of Accounting at the University of Sydney does a superb job of translating the winner's arcane financial accounts into plain English, often to devastating effect. She has added a whole new dimension to the annual *Judges' Report* since she volunteered her services to write a proper *Financial Analysis* in the past several years. Do you remember that famous Monty Python book entitled "Why Accountancy Is Not Boring"? Read Sue's section of the *Report* tonight and you'll see why. We are delighted that Sue can be with us tonight, so let's hear it for Sue. She slogs her guts out doing this; I know, as I've read all three versions that she wrote.

Equally dedicated are the people around the country who every year organise the keenly awaited Roger Award event, the highlight of many people's social calendar (we actually had a national paper's gossip columnist threaten to attend one year in Auckland – she didn't). They are the secret as to why the Roger may be serious but not deadly serious, they are the people who really make it fun. The Roger Award is organised out of Christchurch but it belongs to all of New Zealand – very few of the judges have come

from Christchurch; and the event has been held outside Christchurch more often than in it.

It's been held in Auckland three times and they've always been great fun. Those bloody big city skites held the first one entirely outdoors and in the central city – just to rub into our faces that if we tried that in Wellington, we'd get blown away or frozen, in the case of Christchurch. They tried the same the second year but I struggled to keep a straight face as it pissed down with rain, so we retreated into a building where it continued to rain because it was an authentic Auckland leaky building. It was leaking all over their sound system control panel, which made for an interesting evening. The third time it was held, appropriately enough, in a Queen Street comedy club. I wondered why it came complete with a very large cinema screen – I later learned that it used to be a porno cinema. The pornography of corporate imperialism, eh? It's been held twice in Wellington and once in Dunedin and all of the those events have been wonderful evenings of music, theatre, poetry, comedy, film and drama – so much so in the case of one Auckland event that they could only get through a fraction of those who wanted to perform. As befits our more modest nature (some would say less talented), the Christchurch events have been more prosaic than poetic and this one is no exception, although we do have a nationally known musician to perform for you.

And finally, the really big secret of the Roger Award's success is the truly breathtaking standard of bastardry of the contenders who year after year thrust themselves forward to be picked as the worst in the country. We've always been spoilt for choice. 2007 was no exception, as Laila will tell you in detail. Which brings us to the central question about the Roger Award – does anyone care about it, does it matter? Take my word for it, the media certainly care about it, they play it straight, and it gets covered somewhere in the mainstream media every year (last year, in Wellington, to give two recent examples, I did a crack of dawn live studio interview for TVNZ's *Business* and a live Radio NZ phone interview that afternoon). It's usually reported in the *Business* section, along with all the bullshit PR and greenwash awards that Big Business dreams up to swap among themselves. When Mayor Sukhi Turner was a judge, that was a big story in itself. This time around the *Sunday Herald* in Auckland asked if they could have an exclusive notification of the winner a full 12 hours before this event – we turned them down. We'll cooperate with the media but not to the point where they get to publish the results before they've even been announced.

And the transnationals themselves take it very seriously. There's no mystery why they do – like all big bullies, not only do they want to be feared, they also want to be loved. And the Roger Award tells them in very detailed terms that they aren't and why they aren't – it is an anti-bullshit, demystification exercise. Just read the *Financial Analysis* in the 2007 *Judges' Report* to give one example.

Either they themselves or their hired guns in PR usually try to beg, threaten or cajole as a result of their appearance in the Roger. When Tranz Rail had an absolute lock on the Roger (we eventually shunted it into the Hall of Shame, where it remains the sole occupant, to let somebody else have a go) senior management actually contacted all the judges individually and then me as organiser offering to meet us in person to advise on how it had improved its behaviour and urging that it no longer feature in the Roger. Some companies send us corporate handouts to justify their existence – we've had glossy booklets from British American Tobacco (with tobacco leaf shaped cutouts in the pages) and a video from the former owners of Waste Management about how their

Auckland rubbish dump is good enough to eat. Phone calls or e-mails from company managers or PR hacks wanting to argue the toss are quite common. Sometimes the transnationals go to the top to have a go at us – one year Jim Anderton wrote to me in his Ministerial capacity demanding that the Roger Award organisers apologise to Ernslaw One, a forestry company which was a runner up that year. And the only time a Japanese company has won (Juken Nissho, the only ever Asian Roger winner, which tends to belie the claim that “the Asians own NZ”) I was rung by the Japanese Embassy with a string of questions about how we selected our judges, why was the Mayor of Dunedin involved, and the killer question, did I think that this would adversely affect Japanese investment in NZ? I said that I hoped so, but that I doubted it. So let’s hear it for the transnationals, without whom none of this would be possible. Let’s give them a resounding boo.

To conclude – the Roger Award is more necessary than ever. We’re now coming up to three years of the 2005 Overseas Investment Act and the new “oversight” regime that was introduced with it. CAFCA said at the time that the new law had only one goal – to make the transnational corporate takeover of New Zealand even easier. Even the Government responsible for that Act seems to be coming to that realisation, changing the law within the past fortnight to effectively stop the sale of Auckland Airport to a Canadian pension fund. We congratulate them but ask, what took them so long? And tell them that’s there’s plenty more to be done, plenty more messes to be cleaned up. When you read the *Judges’ Report* tonight on the eight transnational corporations who are the finalists for the 2007 Award that will remind you of the huge crime perpetrated on the people of New Zealand by a system that permits our country to be run as one big garage sale for the benefit of the giants which dominate and plunder the global economy.

So, is it all hopeless? No bloody way. Are we up shit creek? Yes. But not without quite a few paddles and there’s one of them on display here tonight, good old Roger. Look at him, he’s a sharp and prickly beast, all the better for jabbing and poking the bastards that are trying to squeeze the life out of us. So let’s get on with it.