

SPEECH FOR 2009 ROGER AWARD EVENT, 11/3/10

- 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 Christine 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 (but definitely not to give you any hint as to the winner, that is Christine's job). To give you a little bit of the history of the Award and everything that has flowed from it. On behalf of the Roger Award organisers, I'd like to thank Drinking Liberally for hosting this event. It's a joint production – so not only are we drinking liberally, we're rogering enthusiastically!

Essentially this is an updated version of the same speech delivered annually (those of you who attended in 2007, the last time the Roger Award event was held in Wellington, might experience a vague sensation of familiarity with what I'm about to say). When I spoke at this event in Auckland a year ago I highlighted the fact that we were living through most unusual times, namely the global economic crisis, the recession. Politicians and the transnational corporate media would have us believe that "we" have now weathered the worst of it and "we" can now get back to business as usual. Tell that to the record number of unemployed. Tell that to the banks and financial institutions which are still on economic life support courtesy of the tax payer. Mind you, Wall Street bankers, having been bailed out by the biggest act of corporate welfare in global history, have jumped straight back into the diamond studded trough. I recommend that you see Michael Moore's movie "Capitalism: A Love Story" for a very succinct summary of what I'm talking about. Suffice to say that the fun ain't over yet and that some extremely ugly chickens have come home to roost.

The Roger Award is for the worst transnational corporation operating in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the year in question. So it is awarded for behaviour that is truly, outstandingly bad, the worst of excesses of transnational corporate capitalism, economic imperialism. I need to clarify one aspect – I don't want to give the impression that if "a few bad apples" cleaned up their act (or went out of business, which is what has happened, with breathtaking speed, in plenty of cases in this crisis), then all would be well. No, what we have been experiencing is a fundamental systemic crisis of capitalism, a system which is both inherently unstable and criminal, a system which carries within it the seeds of its own destruction. I don't subscribe to the view that capitalism will collapse of its own accord. I happen to agree with my old mate Chairman Mao who said "if you don't hit it, then it won't fall", but that's a whole different subject.

So, if the whole economic and political system under which we live is currently being demonstrated to be fatally flawed and bad for the health of the planet and all its inhabitants, is there any point in continuing to have something like the Roger Award? The answer is yes, because the Roger is about evidence and examples. Every year since 1997 it has skewered the lies and bullshit that are sold to us on a daily basis (if it's done by other people, it's called propaganda; but if it's done by "our side", it's just the way things are). The Roger Award is

basically a New Zealand people's court which hears evidence presented to it by ordinary New Zealanders about the specific corporate crimes committed by specific transnational corporations in a given year. It's not about rhetoric and slogans, but facts and figures. The Roger fulfils an invaluable role in proving, time and time again, just why it is such a bad thing to have allowed our country to have been colonised by transnational corporations. And it will continue to be needed in the future. Unstable capitalism goes through endless booms and busts. So, inevitably, the global economy will come out of this slump and once again we will be told that capitalism is the best possible system. Once again the answer will be "bullshit" and the Roger Award will keep on doing its invaluable national job of demonstrating why that claim is bullshit.

It is not coincidental that this event is taking place in Wellington this week. As you know, the trial is being held in the Wellington District Court this week of the three Christian peace activists who, in 2008, so spectacularly deflated one of the giant domes at the Waihopai spybase in Marlborough. I also work for the Anti-Bases Campaign and am in Wellington all this week wearing that hat, taking part in a whole raft of solidarity activities which we have helped to organise. These two things – the Roger Award and the spybase – are not unrelated. Waihopai is a small but vital cog in a global system of exploitation, intimidation, war and mass destruction that exists to make the world safe and profitable for the transnational corporations, many of whom are an integral part of that global war machine. By their symbolic action, a perfect example of non-violent direct action, the Waihopai Domebusters poked a finger into one of the eyes of the spying and enforcement mechanism of the system that we are talking about tonight. We all owe those guys a vote of thanks.

The Roger Award 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 (and many of the same Tory hacks, halfwits and hasbeens who held office in that last National government are back in office now. Not to mention the Act dinosaurs who are throwbacks to the good old days of the 80s. Their philosophy is that if they can just keep on doing what they were doing then, only more so, it might just work. They come from the school of "the operation was a success, but the patient died". You don't need me to spell out the details of what they're doing now, it's all around us). The prevailing philosophy of the 90s was "what's good for Big Business is good for New Zealand". It gave us the Employment Contracts Act and similar atrocities.

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 14 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. GATT was the acronym of the organisation now

known as the World Trade Organisation. 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 transnational corporation 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. In 2009 we received a lot of nominations for Fonterra). 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 and even Greenpeace. We usually receive at least one nomination for the Government or the Prime Minister. My favourite 2009 nomination was one that simply said: "All of them!".

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.

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 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 (this year's judges are scattered from Bay of Plenty to Banks Peninsula and it's the first time in years that we haven't had a Wellington judge. We tried to get one or two but were unsuccessful). So, let's hear it for the judges.

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 three men and two women, three North Islanders and two South Islanders. We've had some high profile people as judges – Anton Oliver, who was a 2007 judge, was 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. The 2009 judges are a former Waikato University Vice-Chancellor (who was also a former British Labour MP and author), a writer and researcher, a union official and a couple of academics. All of them have also had years in the progressive movement.

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.

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 – most of the judges have come from outside Christchurch; and the event has been held outside Christchurch more often than in it.

This is the third time it's been held in Wellington and the two previous events were highly memorable and enjoyable. The most recent time was in 2007, when it was won by Progressive Enterprises after a bitter lockout of its distribution centre workers the previous year, which led to a very high profile example of good old fashioned class struggle. Our Chief Judge that year was Laila Harre, then the Secretary of the National Distribution Union, the main union involved in the struggle. She made it clear that she played no part in the voting on the winner. The audience included a boisterous bunch of Progressive workers who had come down from Palmerston North and boy did they let rip when their employer won. That evening featured music, comedy, film, and for some reason that completely eluded me (and everyone else, I suspect) the winner's certificate was presented to George Bush (well, actually, a union official wearing a George Bush mask).

It's been held in Auckland four 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. What an appropriate setting for judging the worst transnational corporate offenders. Last year it was held in the much more prim and proper Trade Union Centre, but we still had comedy – we watched an episode of “Yes Prime Minister”, which was uncannily appropriate for the winner (British American Tobacco). As well as Wellington, it has been held once in Dunedin, and that was notable for the speech by our Chief Judge, Mayor Sukhi Turner. I gave her a speaking time of 15 minutes and she spoke for 50, stopping to direct ad lib remarks and challenges to the reporters present, saying “I bet you won’t print that”. They did, actually.

As befits our more modest nature (some would say less talented), the Christchurch events have been more prosaic than poetic and the last time it was held there, in 2008, was no exception, although we did have a highly entertaining singer (who demonstrated the artistic temperament by not singing any of the agreed songs but he also did add a personal, very funny, anecdote about one of the finalists).

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. 2009 was no exception, as Christine 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. The 2008 Roger winners were in the major papers and on radio when announced last year. When Mayor Sukhi Turner was a judge that was a big story in itself. A couple of years ago the *Herald on Sunday* in Auckland asked if they could have an exclusive notification of the winner a full 12 hours before the event, which was held on a Sunday night – 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.

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. 2009 was no exception. When the finalists were announced, the heads of two of them approached either me or one of the judges to demand that they be removed from the list. Not because they denied any of the serious accusations against them, they didn’t even bother to address that subject, but because they said they are ineligible because they claimed to be New Zealand-owned companies. For the record, those two companies are Infratil and Rymans Healthcare and, also for the record, they qualify as foreign-owned companies. This is just the latest example.

When the former 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 have sent 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 former Ministerial capacity demanding that the Roger Award organisers apologise to Ernslaw One, a forestry company which was a runner up that year. We caught Jim out using exactly the same wording as the company's CEO when the latter complained about it winning the Roger. His name was Mr Song, so we went public, telling Jim he needed to get a new songwriter. And the only time a Japanese company has won (Juken Nissho, the only ever Asian Roger winner), 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 five years of the 2005 Overseas Investment Act and the new “oversight” regime that was introduced with it by Labour. CAFCA said at the time that the new law had only one goal – to make the transnational corporate takeover of New Zealand even easier. Last year National announced that it plans to liberalise the Act yet again (it is in danger of being liberalised to death), although no details have yet been announced. And in a related move, negotiations start this month in Australia on expanding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (originally better known as the P4) to include the US, and several other countries. This is intended to bring into effect a free trade agreement with the US, one which will benefit only that country's transnational corporations and which will have severe negative impacts on New Zealand. All around us is the evidence of the moves that National is taking to “make the New Zealand economy attractive to foreign investment”. Both major parties are equally guilty of blindly promoting this obsessive compulsive belief in foreign investment and “free” trade as their major policy. The only difference is one of degree.

When you read the *Judges' Report* tonight on the nine transnational corporations who are the finalists for the 2009 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 (even if the crisis of capitalism means that their looting and pillaging has had to be scaled back a bit).

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.