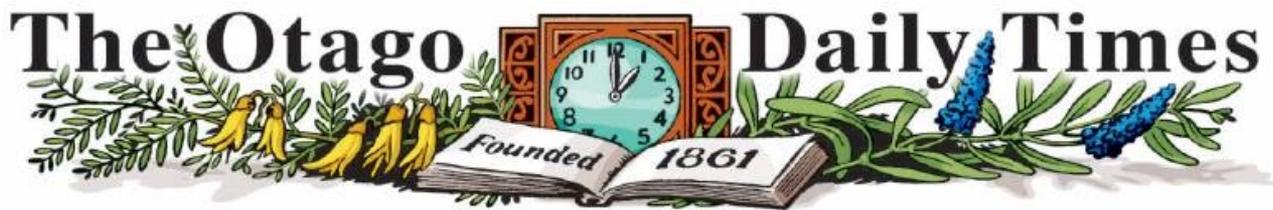


'Cancer' undermining democracy



Who would have thought that a group, and individuals associated with it, would try to infiltrate local councils and community boards in little New Zealand?

It is as if a virus has spread from the United States and infected thousands. The virus then seeks to devastate its host.

It has spread to the South. Several candidates are either directly affiliated with, or have shared their support online for, the group Voices for Freedom (VFF). They have been urged to keep those links quiet.

Group co-founder Claire Deeks, in an August 9 email, encouraged candidates not to disclose their affiliation with the group, which has also urged followers to make New Zealand "ungovernable".

University of Otago researcher and The Disinformation Project research lead Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa correctly said there was nothing wrong with people wanting to stand for elections and engaging with democracy.

But people were not being upfront with what they stood for and believed in, he said.

"You're introducing a cancer that is going to undermine democracy," he said.

Indeed. It can begin local, and shared understandings and processes — for all their faults — are affected. Just as in the United States, democratic debate based on any sort of roughly rational information is destroyed.

This is not to deny the presence of genuine concerns amid chronic misinformation and sometimes straight-out lies. It is possible, for example, to debate and disagree on the balance between individual rights and vaccine mandates.

Free speech, within limits, is vital for a healthy democracy — and there is an element of truth in criticism of parts of the mainstream media and the influential educated "elite" for enforcing certain outlooks and opinions. Woe betide those who stray from these.

There is often a righteous attitude towards the other — those who do not share the "correct" 2022 views on society. In the infamous words of former United States presidential candidate Hilary Clinton, it is as if they are "deplorables".

Nevertheless, while there were good people with potentially legitimate concerns among the awful Parliamentary protests and motorway marches, we should all be disturbed

by the rabbit holes into which large numbers have tumbled.

They share the same online echo chambers and are bolstered by mutual support and a sense of persecution. They have built their own righteous certainty and conviction.

Cauldrons of disinformation have stewed in a toxic brew. Extreme violent language and death threats, a la the United States, have spread and taken hold. They are frightening, going well beyond free expression into hate and criminal speech.

Although the likes of the VFF website on the surface might seem to expound an almost plausible point of view, poisonous disinformation is soon apparent. Although matters raised feed into real concerns and alienation, it also manifests into vile animosity and menace.

The excesses of the parliamentary protests were dreadful. The attempted penetration of local bodies is another alarming sign, even if some candidates are not on the extreme edge and might not subscribe to the worst outbursts.

Ironically, should any purveyors of VFF propaganda find themselves on southern rural community boards they might just find the boards lack the significance to be any vehicle for causing mayhem.

Candidates sympathising with VFF should have the

courage of their convictions and be open about past or present affiliations.

Democracy, in fact, provides them with the chance to promulgate their beliefs and test their popularity. Attempts to become elected surreptitiously, though, are appalling.

Fortunately, the odds are heavily against such candidates winning places on the main councils. Name recognition is important, and almost all are not well known among the public, even if two in Southland are high-profile VFF affiliates.

VFF has also caused consternation by encouraging its followers, who might be concerned about the electoral process, to apply to become electorate managers for next year's general election.

VFF tactics and goals are abhorrent in any democracy. Southern electors should show their disgust by eschewing any associated candidates via the ballot box.