I am a voracious opinion reader and discovered recently that two writers Phil O'Reilly and Max Rashbrooke, from opposite ends of the political spectrum, are saying exactly the same thing about our democratic landscape, which makes me think..

Both are saying, in different contexts, that it is time to bring the public into decision making much more. Says O'Reilly, a Business advocate (Sunday Star Times 21/10/24) "We need to bring the public more into the game,…. then we might all hold our politicians into account more effectively." In similar vein, Rashbrooke, a University researcher, (The Post , 16/11/24) declares that "Top down , one-way politics is a 20th Century hangover. We need more opportunities for ordinary people to come together … and play a meaningful part in decision making".

An example where there is no chance that either will be satisfied in their hopes, is the process of coalition making following MMP elections in NZ in 2023. The agreement reached there between National, ACT and NZ First states that the Parties will "*protect freedom of speech by ruling out the introduction of hate speech legislation and stop the Law Commission's work on hate speech legislation.*

Image credit: internetnz.nz

A photo of Farzani Yakubi on left

Some embarrassment was created by this statement, for the Minister of Justice, when he bowed to public outrage about the stalking of vulnerable young women by sexual predators on social media and elsewhere (The Post, March 20th 2024). This followed the death of 21 year old Auckland law student Farzani Yakubi after being stalked for months by her killer despite her pleas to Police to intervene.

Paul Goldsmith's initiative is the very least our Government could do, at a time when their Australian counterparts has already initiated legislation aimed at limiting cellphone access by young

people, and is also proposing a mandatory code to discourage platforms like Google, Meta and Tik Tok, from allowing violent or degrading content, by subjecting them to 100M dollar fines .

Authoritative voices are growing here in NZ, for much more to be done to discourage these Global Media entities from continuing to flood the Internet with images of Illicit and harmful content. Internet NZ Chief Executive Vivien Maidaborn has pointed out (The Post 29/11/24) that “young people accessing harmful on-line content” is the top concern in her organization’s recent Insights survey. The survey recorded 73% of the total in the survey, a powerful indicator of serious concern, backed by Netsafe in their briefing of the Government in April.

It doesn’t appear that anyone is listening. Perhaps because mature adults are not the target here but the young, vulnerable, and voiceless. It appears there is some belief in the minds of some commentators that these pleas, if heard, might threaten Freedom of Speech.

Recent research shows 75% of practicing journalists in NZ have lost their jobs. It may be that the loss of trust in media and other institutions so often talked about, and the subsequent migration of many to Social Media for their news and information, has been caused at least in part because ordinary people in the street no longer feel they are being heard?. It may be time we considered introducing Citizens Assemblies to articulate the opinions of those like young people, and those many others who are not politicians or consultants or pressure groups, but who have a right to be heard as well.

(JOHN TERRIS is the President of Media Matters in NZ, a 30 year old media consumer advocacy group. As an MP, he introduced a Private Members Bill in 1989 to enable a referendum on Proportional Representation, which issued, in the early 90’s, in the introduction of MMP)

MEDIA MATTERS IN NEW ZEALAND
(Incorporating Children’s Media Watch)

Campaigning for a better media