

Where to from here for NZNO?



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In the October 2019 issue of *Kai Tiaki Nursing New Zealand*, we wrote an editorial calling for unity, after the bruising events of the previous few months culminated in a board attempt to remove president Grant Brookes. In the editorial we said: *“Never before have we witnessed the division now so sadly evident.”*

Well, we have now witnessed even greater division. This is a very sad time for NZNO – for its members, its remaining board members and those who have resigned, and the staff. All are coping, to greater or lesser degrees, with two crises – the externally-generated COVID-19 pandemic and the internally-generated one. The latter detracts from nurses’ critical and courageous work in the former.

In the midst of this worldwide pandemic, nurses have been an integral part of the global response; the work of frontline nurses has been exposed and appreciated as never before. And, as nurses relate in this issue, they are proud to be part of that global response. That timing makes the implosion of NZNO’s board even more regrettable.

That implosion began with the resignation of vice-president Cheryl Hanham in early March for “personal reasons”. Twice-elected president Grant Brookes resigned last month for reasons that have been well documented in his public blog and in this issue (p8). His resignation was followed closely by three board members elected last year. They stated the board was not a safe place to be.

This sequence of events has triggered a range of responses – anger, bewilder-

ment, disbelief, frustration, deep concern, embarrassment and apathy. Facebook – at times like this a rancorous echo chamber – has been where many have vented their spleen. Personal insults, wild accusations and misinformation have swirled around in a deeply unifying (not to mention unprofessional) way.

One of the key reasons advanced by Brookes for his resignation was the deteriorating bicultural partnership within NZNO. There is an inherent tension between a “democratic organisation” – a western world view – and an organisation which genuinely reflects te Tiriti o Waitangi – a te ao Māori worldview and one supported by many Pākehā. “Pure” democracy – one member one vote – will always mean the views of tāngata whenua are outvoted, and that is iniquitous. Finding a structure that genuinely reflects both world views is the first challenge. Finding a way that ensures both partners are able to resolve the difficulties that inevitably arise is a greater challenge. What seems to be apparent is an inability to address the current challenges partly because of the strictures imposed by the constitution. That constitution, adopted in 2012, fundamentally changed the structures and processes of NZNO and was supported by 6.2 per cent of members.

Every protagonist – and every bystander – in this situation will have their own truth. Whether you believe this to be a battle between two opposing ideologies, a contest between starkly differing philosophies, a power play between two forceful personalities, a fight for the soul of a professional association and trade union – all these are immaterial in the face of what is at stake here: the future of NZNO.

Brookes said he could no longer see a way to forge a path forward. Kaiwhaka-haere Kerri Nuku sees his resignation as a personal attack. All organisations operating in the wider political arena are prey to these age-old ingredients – anger, personal agendas, long-held

resentments, power plays, broken trust, confidentiality agreements, cultural (in the widest possible sense) clashes. Whichever of these might be fuelling the wider ongoing dysfunction in NZNO must be put aside, if the organisation is to move forward. Collaborative leadership based on an agreed common goal would be a powerful first step. A re-look at the constitution could also be helpful.

One of the silver linings of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has provided a chance to reflect on what is truly important in our personal lives and in wider professional and political contexts. How can the respect the profession has earned during this crisis be maintained and properly valued?

Despite the current rancour, NZNO is bigger than this. It can and must survive and continue to be the voice of all nurses in Aotearoa.

Would that this time of reflection be used to ensure NZNO can take the painful lessons of the last two years and again be an organisation that is respected professionally, truly representative, open to change and renewal, and that is robust enough to deal with deep divisions with respect. That outcome is in the members’ hands, should they choose to become more fully involved in the workings of NZNO.

At this time of reflection, our overwhelming sense is one of deep sadness. Sadness that the governance structure of an organisation with a legacy of 111 years, a membership of more than 51,000, a staff of close to 150 and a unique and empowering blend of professional and industrial aspirations, should be in this situation. NZNO is bigger and more enduring than one president, one kaiwhakahaere, one chief executive, one seriously depleted board of directors and one crisis. Despite the current rancour, NZNO is bigger than this. It can and must survive and continue to be the voice of all nurses in Aotearoa. •