



## Our Children Our Choice: Priorities for Policy Auckland Launch

### Speech by Efeso Collins

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Ou te fa'afeiloa'i atu ma le agaga fa'aaloalo i le pa'ia ma le mamalu ua aofia i lenei po. E ao ona momoli la'au i Foga'a ona ua tatou feiloa'i i luma o nu'u, ae le o tua o nu'u. Malo le soifua ma le lagi e mama.

Some of you were with us on Saturday as we marched up Queen St in unison, boldness, anger and a small glimmer of hope.

Feeling pretty pumped after the march, I took the opportunity of reading these papers that Janfrie had so dutifully emailed to me a few days earlier. I naughtily turned on a cartoon to distract bubba... and started out reading the papers.

About 2 pages in, I put the ipad down and started to watch Pocahontas with my little girl. I wasn't really watching the cartoon. I was just looking for a place to escape.

- 285000 children in poverty
- Unprecedented rules on how beneficiaries must enrol their kids in early childhood centres or risk losing their benefits
- The disproportionate impact of poverty on Maori and Pasifika communities
- High rates of rheumatic fever amongst kids due to cold and damp houses
- The bold correlation between poverty and domestic violence
- The so-called rights children have to quality education, warmth and protection

The readings were a stark re-confrontation of the data that's often thrown around in academic journals, economic and political debates, but makes reference to me – reference to the people who live in my home.

Reference to the people who sit in the same pew as me at church.

Reference to the same people who order at the unhealthy, cheap fried chicken take-aways as me.

Reference to the people who all sleep in the sitting room because it's the cheapest way to keep everyone warm over winter nights.

Reference to the people who are genuinely trying to make ends meet in a nation fraught with institutional racism and capitalistic judgement.

I needed time to escape the pain; the disempowerment and pent up anger that Susan St John et al were writing about – the words that gave language, politic and voice to my experience.

Once upon a time I could hide on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the university library and read this kind of material. I could do as my social science lecturers advised me to do at the time, and be “objective” about it all. Read it, but don't feel it.

I guess we've neo-liberalised the reading experience too.

I felt an overwhelming sense of disempowerment.

And I know the point of this book is to give voice and strength to those who have occupied the margins for far too long... but it just made me feel so sad.

There's a part in the movie Pocahontas where she meets a guy from the 'west' who's trying to colonise her land, her people and anything else they could find.

True to American form, the movie sees them fall in love. I'm rolling my eyes lol.

But in the movie she sings a song called 'Colours of the wind' that remind me that I too, have a right to naming, describing and attributing my world.

*You think you own whatever land you land on  
The Earth is just a dead thing you can claim  
But I know every rock and tree and creature  
Has a life, has a spirit, has a name*

*You think the only people who are people  
Are the people who look and think like you  
But if you walk the footsteps of a stranger  
You'll learn things you never knew you never knew*

The song in that movie reminded me that mainstream media and conservative economics, were and continue to try and determine my experience in a narrow, uncaring and post-colonial narrative.

But these readings... these readings offer a counter narrative which represents me a whole lot better.

Although extremely difficult, I finished the readings last night. I tried to read them without feeling, but that was just too hard.

I took hold of one of the recommendations and reflected on my work today, as a local government politician.

The call... or perhaps more aptly worded, the cry for a cross political party pact to make child poverty a central theme.

I know that in my own experience as a local government politician that people can work together. That there are opportunities to find common ground and achieve better outcomes for our communities.

And whilst I totally disparege at the fact that much of that work relies on stroking egos, and framing sentences in language schemes that are weak and vague...it's worth it.

I represent one of the most highly deprived local board areas in the city. I don't mind stroking some nutter politicians ego, to realize the higher ideal of equity and fairer outcomes for all.

CPAG – Thank you for the paper. Thank you for giving voice and language to my reality.

Thank you for the reminder that if one thing abides...it is hope.

Faafetai lava.