

*Alan Johnson:*

## Reaping the rewards of wholesale indifference

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By Alan Johnson

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Randwick Park is a suburb in the east of Manurewa with a population of 5600 people, similar to Kaitaia, Stratford or Ashburton.

Randwick Park and indeed Manurewa have only come to prominence recently because of a spate of violent crimes including the murder of a liquor store owner.

The media's representation of this and other recent murders has been ill-informed and unfair in the way that it has presented the people of Manurewa and their struggles.

Much of this recent media comment has focused on the personal stories of anger and despair and failed to acknowledge the wider community stories of anger and despair that provide both the context and some of the explanations for what has happened.

The background story to Randwick Park, and indeed to many parts of South Auckland, is one of indifference. Personal indifference, official indifference and political indifference.

The callous indifference that Navtej Singh's killer showed to him has chilled New Zealanders. The indifference of locals to Mr Singh's suffering as they apparently pilfered booze while he lay dying is disheartening.

At the indifference of police who followed operating procedure and delayed responding is appalling, but frankly not unusual in South Auckland.

Even the apparent indifference of Mr Singh and his business partner to the harm they were doing selling liquor in Randwick Park. A report in the Sunday Star-Times indicated that Mr Singh and his partner had extended their operating hours in an effort to increase turnover.

There were already problems in the area, with family violence and youth drinking in the streets, but this was just a business decision, after all.

This indifference extends deeply into officialdom as well with quite dismal performances by central and local government agencies. For example, the indifference of the Ministry of Education in its failure to plan for early childhood education in Manurewa is quite staggering.

Recent figures indicate that there are only places in early childhood education centres in Manurewa for 36 per cent of local pre-schoolers compared with a national average of 64 per cent. In Randwick Park there are early childhood education places for one in five of the 700 or so pre-schoolers living there.

The lack of early childhood education opportunities translates into numeracy and literacy problems in primary schools and to underachievement in formal qualifications in secondary schools. Just 41 per cent of the 929 Year 11 students attending Manurewa's three local high schools passed NCEA Level 1 in 2007 compared with 73 per cent of students in decile-9 schools and 81 per cent in decile-10 schools within the Auckland region. Over 40 per cent of Manurewa's youth leave school without any NCEA qualifications.

In 2007, the Ministry of Social Development provided funding for three youth workers for Manurewa. At the same time it provided six youth workers for Otara and six for Mangere in an effort to address problems relating to youth gangs and youth crime.

Manurewa has nearly 10,000 teenagers, hundreds of whom are engaged in crime, mainly petty. Three youth workers to address this challenge is a token effort at best.

But Manukau City Council surely takes the cake for its indifference.

The council has within its district planning powers the ability to zone out liquor stores in neighbourhood shopping areas. It has repeatedly been asked by community boards and residents to do this.

The answer is always the same - that a change to the district plan is expensive and lengthy. There were, however, resources available to undertake a plan change for a proposed canal and marina development on the Wairoa River in Clevedon, which is now being opposed by ARC and local residents on environmental grounds.

It seems that changing the rules for developers of expensive residential property is an appropriate use of ratepayers' money but protecting poor neighbourhoods from the impacts of liquor retailing is not.

The rich irony in all of this is that it is easier to establish a liquor store in a suburban neighbourhood than it is to start an early childhood education facility or build a classroom in a local school.

Manukau City Council's indifference extends to the way in which it fails to support citizens who are struggling to build community infrastructure. Our sports clubs in Manurewa are literally collapsing with decaying club buildings and falling participation by children and teenagers. One local rugby club has just three senior teams and no junior football.

Yet for all its rhetoric of social conscience, the council declined to assist the local rugby league club with a new building, despite the fact that it is the biggest league club in the country, engages the most at-risk young people and has outgrown its tired old building.

Much of what has happened in Manurewa over the past few months is unsurprising for local people. Mr Singh's murder was, frankly, an accident waiting to happen, as indeed much of our local misfortune is.

The key to reversing this misfortune is to overcome our indifference to one another as neighbours and to build stronger community relationships. The key to doing this is to empower local people to have more control over what happens in their neighbourhoods.

This empowerment will require resources and not just the rhetoric of apparently concerned politicians. These resources should be directed towards our children through their kindergartens, their kohanga reo and language nests, their schools, their music classes and their sports teams.

If Manurewa's kids had the same opportunities as their counterparts in wealthier suburbs, the crimes of indifference that we are now witnessing would be far less common.

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