

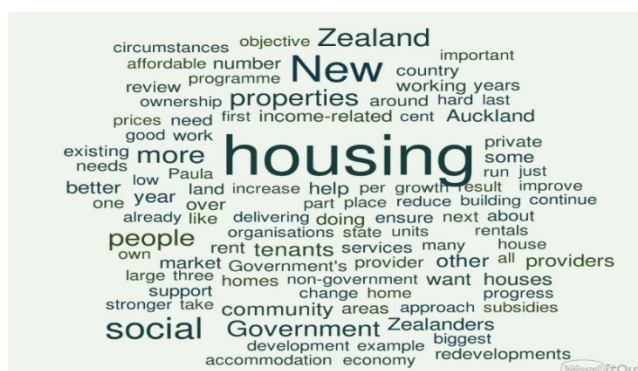
State(s) of the Nation

(Ronji Tanielu, Policy Analyst)

Have you heard of a *word cloud*? Word clouds are a popular piece of software that provides visual representations of text data¹. Word clouds, also known as data or tag clouds, have become a simple and useful tool used to communicate key messages based on a speech, document, report or other body of information.

Over the last two months, the leaders of the two major political parties in New Zealand have both delivered their now-annual (and rather grand-sounding) “State of the Nation” speeches. These speeches are seemingly modelled off the annual State of the Union speech that the American President delivers to their Congress and the entire nation. In February, The Salvation Army also released its eighth annual (and also rather grand-sounding) State of the Nation report² looking at the social progress of New Zealand across 22 social progress indicators or sets of data.

Rather than re-hash in great detail the two speeches and one report, we have decided to present the content of these speeches, and report introduction, in the form of word clouds. In a crude yet pictorial way, these clouds illustrate and highlight the key themes that John Key, Andrew Little and The Salvation Army pushed in their communications to the New Zealand public.



Prime Minister John Key (28/01/15)



Andrew Little, Labour Party Leader (28/01/15)



Major Sue Hay, Director, Social Policy and Parliamentary Unit, The Salvation Army (11/02/15)

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tag_cloud

² <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/research-media/social-policy-and-parliamentary-unit/>

At first glance, it is clear what focus each communication had. For Mr Key, the unanimous main message was around housing. The Prime Minister talked at length about what his government was currently doing in the housing space, including reforming the Resource Management Act 1991, and the various Housing Accords his government had entered into. Mr Key then outlined major reforms in the social housing sector. These reforms have created, and continue to create, quite a stir nationally as people and organisations have reacted to them. For Mr Little, as evidenced by his word cloud, the key messages were much more focussed on jobs, business and the economy. But Mr Little also referred to income inequality and living standards in New Zealand, child poverty, and the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi. In The Salvation Army's report, titled *A Mountain All Can Climb*, Major Hay in the written introduction and foreword, talked generally about the report and the social progress indicators it analyses. But Major Hay also appealed to our sense of nationhood, national identity and shared cultural values, using the iconic Sir Edmund Hillary and Aoraki/Mt Cook as an organising metaphor to discuss social progress and ensuring we progress together as a nation.

The differences in the word clouds of these communications are clear. Mr Key and Mr Little's speeches were obviously political speeches structured and delivered in such a way as to frame their party's view on national priorities and inform the public about these priorities and the legislative and policy reforms required to implement them. Conversely, Major Hay's word cloud is based on a non-partisan report that analyses and comments on what is mostly public or government statistics that record ebbs and flows in social progress in our nation.

In terms of the detail in each communication, the results are varied. The Prime Minister talked at length about his government's work in housing, including mentioning their Homestart Programme being launched in April 2015 that is meant to help approx. 90,000 into their first home over the next five years. He also outlined some basic details about the social housing reforms his third-term government will be implementing.

One group of reforms that has not really been discussed much since Mr Key's speech are the emergency housing reforms he announced, which includes a \$500,000 one-off cash injection into the emergency housing sector across New Zealand. At this stage, it is unclear where or how this money will be spent. What is clear is that the Ministry of Social Development is currently reviewing funding for the emergency housing sector with a report due in July 2015. Since November 2014, The Salvation Army in Auckland has been doing some work around acute housing needs that our clients present to our community ministry and supported accommodation centres with. The preliminary findings from these surveys are very worrying. Consequently, it is highly questionable whether these new emergency housing reforms will truly and effectively meet the acute and complex emergency and transitional housing needs that The Salvation Army is observing regularly. Of course, you have to start somewhere, right? But it is more likely that a robust programme of emergency housing funding and reform that is both long-term and an integral part of the wider social housing reforms will help address this severe housing need, particularly in Auckland.

Another social housing reform announced by Mr Key that concerns The Salvation Army is the additional 3,000 tenancy reviews that the Government will undertake from 2014 to 2016. Mr Key said in his State of the Nation speech that this reform was about moving tenants into independence, where appropriate, particularly if they are close to paying market rental prices. This is problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, if the tenancy under review is in Auckland, then securing healthy, affordable and available private rental will likely be very difficult. In January 2015, Barfoot and Thompson reported that rents rose 4.6 per cent across all Auckland suburbs and recorded property categories in the year ended 30 November 2014³. In the same article, it was clearly stated that a similar increase is likely for 2015 given the rising demand and tight rental sector. Secondly, given the current state of the Auckland property rental market, rental price hikes are definitely foreseeable as landlords enjoy the benefits of supply and demand economics. There are no effective mechanisms in play that can reasonably restrict rental property prices to ensure families potentially moving from extended state house tenancies do not suffer undue hardship. Finally, it would be extremely challenging to move people out of homes and communities they may have become very well established in. The Salvation Army has, when responding to recent questions about social housing reform, repeatedly stated that families and communities must be strengthened, particularly if they are facing major changes via tenancy reviews and leaving what has become their long-term home and community. The recent and continuing controversies around Housing New Zealand state houses in Glen Innes, East Auckland, illustrate that these types of reforms must be undertaken with great caution.

The detail in Mr Little's speech was very different. Mr Little has been derided by media and commentators for having, excuse the pun, very little policy detail in his own State of the Nation speech. Mr Little's speech was definitely broad, covering several areas whereas the Prime Minister's speech honed in on one policy area – housing. But Mr Little did offer some detail, including bold statements that New Zealand should have the lowest unemployment rate in the developed world, that GDP was the best measure for economic growth, and that his party would get rid of 'zero-hour' employment contracts when they were next in power. Mr Little's speech did hone in on a theme that jobs that were well paid, skilled and improved the dignity and security of the person were critical to a successful economy. But Mr Little clearly did not provide the in-depth detail that the Prime Minister did. We do not really know why that was the case.

The Salvation Army, in their State of the Nation report, included considerable detail about data and trends across 22 social progress indicators. While Major Hay's written introduction and foreword essentially focussed on nationhood, the bulk of the report detailed at length social progress in the state of our children and young people, crime and punishment, work and incomes, social hazards, and housing. In terms of key themes, The Salvation Army report highlighted some encouraging statistics such as the continuing decline in teenage pregnancy rates, youth offending for 14-16 year olds. This might potentially indicate some changes in attitudes and behaviour from our young people. The report also highlighted that there were mixed results for vulnerable children in New Zealand. For example, the numbers of notifications and substantiated cases of child abuse or neglect fell for the first time in 10 years. Yet, recorded violent offences against children increased by 3.5 per cent in the year ended June 2014 to total 5,397 offences. This is 56 per cent higher than the number of recorded violent offences against children in 2009. The Salvation Army report also discussed at length the housing debacle in our nation, particularly in Christchurch and Auckland.

There are both stark similarities and differences in the messages communicated by Mr Key, Mr Little, and The Salvation Army. One of the common themes in these communications was that each appealed

³ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/business/news/article.cfm?c_id=3&objectid=11385030

to some idea of nationhood or national identity. Mr Key talked about economic strength and security resulting in a stronger and more prosperous country. Mr Little stated that job security, alongside fairness and equality, was crucial to a healthy New Zealand. Major Hay wrote that a prosperous New Zealand should ensure that people and families were not being left behind and that the state of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our society should not be ignored.

In the end, all of them are right. A prosperous New Zealand must have a strong economy. But it also needs to ensure that our society promotes fairness and equality for all, particularly to ensure that all Kiwis have a chance to progress and enjoy the benefits of a strong economy and strong jobs. Surely that is the kind of nation that we want to belong to, participate in, and are proud of!