

It's time we got a grip on our country's destiny



TRADE deals tend not to be headline grabbers, but given their impact on our lives, they should be. Take the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations, which get under way again in Auckland next week: those talks range across huge swathes of our economy, from the affordability of prescription drugs to corporate power to copyright law to the hum-drum stuff we usually think of as trade — such as selling lamb chops and cheese to the Americans. Poke a toe into the TPP and you quickly find you're wading around in a giant swamp. And not just any swamp, but a very dark one. There's no sunshine here because the TPP talks are being carried out in super-secrecy,

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and if the people of New Zealand knew what was at stake — like transferring powers they currently hold to foreign corporations — they would surely call a halt.

There are 10 Pacific-rim and Asian countries involved in the TPP besides ourselves, but the one boosters and critics alike have their eyes on is the United States.

For the boosters, this is our big chance to crack open the North American market to more of our dairy produce. For the critics, well, where to begin?

The list of items on the Americans' shopping list is long and rather scary. There's dissatisfaction over our drug buying agency Pharmac, there are complaints about the structure of the dairy giant Fonterra, there's a desire to loosen up on bio-security protections and to give corporations the ability to sue us in foreign tribunals if they believe our laws are hurting

their bottom line.

If you think that last one is far-fetched, Big Tobacco is currently using a trade deal to go after the Australian Government over its plans to introduce plain packaging on cigarettes, even after losing in Australia's High Court.

For once, and sadly, National and Labour are on the same page on this one. John Key and his trade minister are telling us we should just trust them to do right by us, while Labour has defended the secrecy of the talks. Don't worry your pretty little heads, you don't need to know, we won't sell you down the river. Promise.

I'm not a trade geek, so I asked the business journalist Rod Oram what he thought of the secrecy and he was pretty clear. “I think it's dreadful.” What's worse, Oram told me he knew of a number of lobbyists who've had the opportunity to go in and talk to the negotiators at the same

time as we-the-people are being excluded. “If the lobbyists can,” he asked, “why can't the rest of us?”

Good question.

And here's another one: do we actually need more American market access for our dairy, given what it might cost us?

The US is already our second single biggest dairy buyer after China, and we currently can't produce enough milk for all the thirst that's out there.

Fonterra made this clear in its latest annual review, explaining that it plans to set up “milk pools” overseas because “demand in global markets far exceeds what we can produce here in New Zealand”.

It's also anticipating a big rise in domestic milk production to meet future demand, even though we can barely deal with the pollution and water access issues caused by the 4.5 million dairy cows we already have.

This isn't about being pro- or anti-free trade. It's about knowing what's being done in our name, and making sure we the people of this country get to keep control of our own destiny.