





# OF VESTIGES OF DEMOCRACY

A recent article in the journal *Nature* surveyed the impact of “recovery projects” in the aftermath of disasters. Most recovery efforts, the author concluded “do produce net benefits. But many boost social inequality and environmental damage.”<sup>1</sup> Canterbury was included in this global survey of disaster recovery, as a case study, but not one that we can be proud of. It’s worth quoting the brief case note as it appears in this historical overview, in full:

“A century later, in New Zealand, the Canterbury quakes of 2010 and 2011 consolidated national political power at the expense of local groups. Here, disaster recovery interfered with due process and procedural justice. Community officials and residents were excluded from decision-making processes over the status of their homes when a central-government authority was granted power to acquire and dispose of property and suspend laws and regulations.”<sup>2</sup>

Official New Zealand records describe the aftermath of Canterbury earthquake recovery differently. The NZ Statistics Year Book (2012) offers a colour coded official statement of reassurance:

“Soon after the February 2011 earthquake, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA) mapped the Christchurch land into four zones—red, orange, green, and white. Land was marked red if it was so badly damaged by the earthquakes it was likely it would take a prolonged period of time before it could be rebuilt on again; or it was affected by cliff collapse or rock roll where there would be an immediate or unacceptable risk to life; or where other engineering solutions were not practicable. In total, 7,857 properties were deemed red. By 31 December 2012, all residential property owners knew whether their property was zoned red or green, and if the government would offer to buy their house and land. The Residential Red Zone offer was crucial to Canterbury’s recovery. It gave red zone property owners the chance to move on with one part of their lives and find a new, secure, and safe home.”<sup>3</sup>

The struggle to make meaning from years of national planning, regional turmoil, local protest, and community and personal loss, can’t be captured adequately in academic assessments or government review. But it matters that we take time to reflect. In the coming years of disruptive climate, how we manage through disasters, listen, give dignity, follow due process, will be crucial as we collectively retreat from areas facing new risks of flooding, storm surges, sea level rise, and drought. But as philosopher Bonnie Honig reminds us, we can’t keep suspending democracy every time we face increasingly common, “emergencies”<sup>4</sup>. We need to find ways to maintain democracy. Beginning to understand what places mean for people, documenting loss, hope, and regrowth, as we learn to live within a landscape, not as an anthropocene we can control but a local landscape we inhabit with humility, is our first and perhaps most important step in learning how to live in hope and uncertainty.

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1: Sovacool, B.K (2017) “Don’t let disaster recovery perpetuate injustice” *Nature* 549, 433 (28 September 2017) doi:10.1038/549433a

2: Sovacool. B.K (2017) Ibid

3: CERA (2012) “Canterbury’s earthquake recovery progresses” Statistics NZ Official Yearbook 2012 [[http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/snapshots-of-nz/yearbook/people/region/cera.aspx](http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/snapshots-of-nz/yearbook/people/region/cera.aspx)] accessed 25/5/2018

4: Honnig, B (2009) *Emergency Politics Paradox, Law, Democracy*. Princeton University Press