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New Zealand took critical look, changed economy, schools

Bob Campbell, Staff Writer
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A former New Zealand governmental official on Tuesday said South Pacific island nation's economy and public school system were transformed beginning in 1990 with a combination of pragmatism and leadership.

Maurice McTigue, now a professor at the Mercatus Center for economics at George Mason University in Arlington, Va., said leaders sometimes must disregard public opinion.

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"What you need are courageous leaders and what you tend to get in politics is people who want to be popular," he told 35 people at a Texas Public Policy Foundation luncheon at the Petroleum Club.

McTigue said a good example of leadership is the American pre-Revolutionary period of the 1760s and '70s, when the population was evenly divided among people loyal to Great Britain, those who preferred to negotiate for peace and those who wanted to fight for independence.

He said another is the late President Ronald Reagan's determination to oppose communism and seek the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, which he said was accomplished in 1991 with the support of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and the late Pope John Paul II.

McTigue was elected to New Zealand's parliament and then served in a succession of posts including minister of employment and ambassador to Canada. He said two problems then were abuses by labor unions and bad schools that were putting his country into a disadvantageous position in the global economy.

He said leaders of the seamen's union were jailed for contempt of court and their group's assets were seized after they authorized an Easter strike that was not allowed by their contract. "They went back to work and we haven't had any trouble since," McTigue said.

"The old school system was much better than the one that had developed over time. We were spending 70 percent of the funds for administration, so we gave control back to the parents and schools we couldn't build, we built.

"Every parent has a fundamental right to choose where their child goes to school."

He said the teacher-to-students ratio was lowered to 1-15 and spending reversed to apply more money to classrooms.

Describing how socialism was discarded in favor of a free market economy, McTigue said his native country welcomes foreign investments but uses a competitive system of granting visas by which a visiting couple, for example, must have at least two college degrees and make significant contributions to society.

He said a typical reform of the '90s was in the issuance of drivers licenses. Instead of continuing to make New Zealanders get a new one each year, lifetime licenses were offered while motorists were required to get an annual medical examination beginning at age 74.

"Here was an action that produced no benefit," McTigue said. "So we asked, 'If it produces no benefit, why are we doing it?'"

Foundation President Brooke Rollins opened by saying Texas has problems similar to those New Zealand suffered because a third of its high school freshmen never graduate and its graduates cannot compete with their counterparts in Australia, New Zealand, Great Britain, France and other countries.

Rollins said her conservative think tank is \$100,000 short of financing its \$1.8 million budget and is seeking new members at its headquarters at 900 Congress Ave. in Austin, where it produces "intellectual ammunition" for like-minded legislators and others involved in public affairs.

Foundation director Ernie Angelo and member Evetts Haley of Midland welcomed and introduced the speaker.