



On writing political biography

Stafford: the first New Zealand statesman

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If one has to justify the writing of political biography, and I don't see any serious need to, the first obvious justification is going to be that the subject is or was an interesting person whose career and personality deserves to be retained in the greater public consciousness. From the moment I started on the Stafford essay for the *Dictionary of NZ Biography* I was struck by the attractiveness of this ebullient and many-sided man as a biographical subject, and I was frankly astonished that no one else had attempted to write about him before. Here was a Scottish-Irish intellectual of considerable erudition on a wide variety of subjects who was also a farmer and businessman; a racing man and a sportsman who was a committed conservationist in an age before the expression as we understand it was even coined; a passionate Chartist who for all his gentlemanly social position never ceased to fight for the ideals he had absorbed in his Irish youth and student days at Trinity Dublin during the turbulent 1830s; the indigent heir to a bankrupt Irish estate who had to make his own way and create his own wealth yet who preached for nearly forty years the need for income tax and a fair distribution of land – even if that involved the breaking up of large estates. Here too, was a handsome and, in private life, a charming man, the most successful politician of his age and recognised in his day as perhaps the only colonial politician with a claim to genuine statesmanship but who at the same time had the dubious distinction of being also the most unpopular public figure in New Zealand amongst his social and political peers and with the major colonial newspaper editors.

In short, I found Stafford a splendid subject for a book at a particular moment in my own career when I was considering a change of direction and was looking for

Sir Edward Stafford. Tiree Studio Collection, Nelson Provincial Museum.

something interesting to write about. And, I repeat, no one else had ever written about him. He had, in effect, been ignored by our historians – dismissed flippantly by Reeves and Sinclair, removed to the periphery of events in biographies of other men, and apparently underrated as a flawed 'man of mediocrity' by such sober heavy-weights as McLintock and Morrell.

Of course, they were quoting Sewell, who wrote that phrase in bitter rage one evening in 1865. On that evening Stafford, standing almost alone against every other major politician in Parliament, had turned the tables on them all. They believed him to have caddishly betrayed his friends – Weld especially – by striking a Machiavellian unconstitutional bargain with Grey – Stafford's own long-standing foe from the pre-Constitutional days and a man distrusted for excellent reasons by everyone. In fact Stafford, the most pragmatic of men, had revealed to Weld, FitzGerald, Bell, Sewell, Hall, Fitzherbert, J.C. Richmond, Reader Wood and J.L.C. Richardson, that they had failed and were not indispensable. Their hatred had reached an extraordinary pitch of intensity during a succession of late and dramatic sittings; and Sewell, FitzGerald and Fitzherbert especially were taking their ejection from office very badly; hence Sewell's late-night outburst to his journal. A year later Hall, Fitzherbert, Richmond and Richardson were happy to join Stafford in government, and four years later, even Sewell – that most indecisive political weather-vane – was imploring Stafford to form a nationwide opposition party to oust Fox and Vogel because no one else was of sufficient stature to unite all the disparate elements in Assembly and country. Yet Sewell's petulant outburst in the moment of his own political defeat during the heat of a parliamentary crisis was what Morrell and McLintock (for whom otherwise I have much respect) picked out nearly a century later as a suitable description for Stafford.

And this brings me to a second reason for political biography in New Zealand – the simple absence of reliable, soundly researched political history itself. In a sense we have written our political history the wrong way round. We have several general histories – far too many I think – and an increasing number of specialist studies, some of which are not entirely sound on political events; and we have biographies: not enough of quality. Some of the older ones resemble hagiography rather than biography proper. Our major historians have too often started

with a philosophical or ideological agenda of their own and have chosen facts to suit that agenda. Pember Reeves, for example, wrote his seminal work from his father's *Lyttelton Times* perspective, mixed with his desire to justify his own political career and to further advance the cause of Fabian socialism. His history was well-expressed generalization and his example was followed all too readily into our own times.

It was intended that we should have a parliamentary history, of course. That was Alex McIntock's mission in the fifties and sixties until his death, but as he told me at the time I was working as one of his research assistants on biographical matters and membership of the Legislative Council, Holyoake had no interest in history; so Government would not maintain the position of Parliamentary historian after McIntock's own tenure ended. That fact played some part in my decision to leave New Zealand finally and commit myself to a very different, rather insecure, but happily adventurous career – during which my continuing historical passions for Irish, Scottish and New Zealand matters were healthy antidotes to professional obsessions and were able to erupt from time to time in fiction and occasional articles.

Since those days of the early 1960s emphases here seem to have shifted away from political history to more modish preoccupations, which is a pity. How can a nation possibly understand itself unless it knows about its political past, however distasteful that past might seem in the shifting lights of contemporary preoccupations and assumptions? It follows naturally then, that in order to understand our historical political development we have to understand, or at the very least know something about, our past politicians – not only what they actually did as distinct from what we think they did, but why and under what circumstances.

When I started investigating Stafford I at once came up against a problem. Stafford wrote extremely good letters. Unfortunately comparatively few seem to have survived. His dilatoriness as a private correspondent was notorious, but luckily he was a man who valued history, was probably more widely read in it than any of his contemporaries in public life, so (aided I think by his youngest daughter, Mary) he preserved a good number of other people's letters to him. The Stafford Papers were the obvious starting point for research. There are errors of dates, incidentally, in the typescript collection edited by Scholefield.

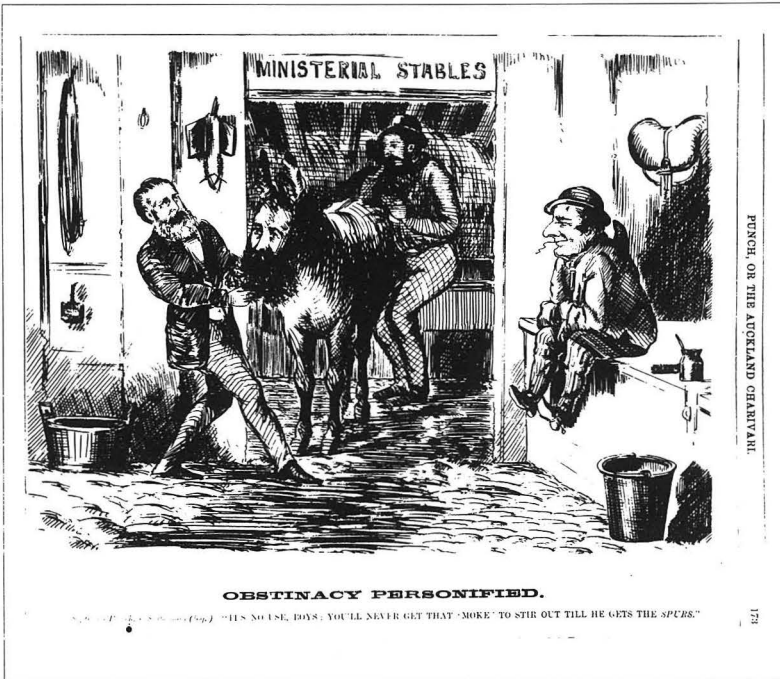
Even more important, however, are the letters people wrote to one another about Stafford, and to find these I combed other collections, the Sewell journals, the Monro and Saxton diaries and the vast and often ill-ordered or un-edited papers of McLean, Weld, the Richmonds and Atkinsons, Rolleston, Hall, Grey, those of the various Russells and others. The biographer's scope for research in some of these is vast and one could go on hunting for

years. Without doubt I've missed some useful material, but as it may be readily appreciated I was intent on producing a book within my own lifetime. At some point even the most happily dedicated researcher – and I freely confess to being that – has to cry stop and get down to the hard grind of writing something.

Dealing with such personal papers, of course, the biographer has to be familiar with the personalities and attitudes of diarists and letter-writers. This was usually easy enough to establish. At some stage everyone had critical things to say about Stafford. After their early friendship in Nelson, Fox came to hate him with a rather charming straightforward intensity. McLean's and Ormond's implacable dislike was never charming because neither were capable of Fox's wit. Hall thought him a humbug and like all the other Weldites in 1865 considered him a constitutional brigand who had to be destroyed. The Richmonds and Atkinsons were profoundly irritated by his brand of Irish ebullience, yet all at the same time relied on him politically and admitted his abilities and influence. FitzGerald, occasionally brilliant but almost always exasperating, (and the subject of the new biography I'm at present working on) was consumed by such jealousy of Stafford that it blinded him to facts, obliterated common sense and finally destroyed his own political credibility. Ironically, Stafford, with inspired perception, then made him our first Comptroller General of Finance and freed his energies for useful work and happy fulfilment of his many abilities. Similarly Vogel, after enduring for ten years Stafford's merciless jibes about his ignorance and incompetence as a parliamentary performer, and after having assailed Stafford in turn with his own effective brand of venomous misrepresentation, finally from 1874 came to rely on Stafford's crucial support to carry abolition of the provinces and to remain in office. Sewell veered from admiration in 1854 to impotent loathing in 1865 before veering back to grudging admiration and a place in Stafford's last Ministry in 1872. And Stafford's own oldest and closest friend, David Monro, was his bitterest provincial opponent. He disliked Stafford's Chartist ideas, and what he and so many others saw as Stafford's treachery to their class; yet their personal friendship lasted until Monro's death.

For his own part, Stafford saw no barrier to being friendly towards those whose ideas and measures he daily assailed in the House of Representatives for a quarter of a century. Few others were so easy-going or reasonable. From the moment he emerged in 1843 as one of Nelson's leaders in the settlers' struggles against Governor Grey and the British Government, until his last session in parliament in 1877 when the young Stout harried him like a solemnly merciless terrier, Stafford made enemies. And many either owned newspapers, edited them or wrote leading articles.

Naturally we go to the colonial newspapers for what



'OBSTINACY PERSONIFIED

Septimus Punch, a stableman (loq.): "It's no use boys : you'll never get that 'moke' to stir out until he gets the spurs."

Auckland Punch Files, Macmillan Brown Collection, University of Canterbury.

we would like to think was reliable information; and they are veritable mines of information – especially the local news columns, the shipping notices and the often brilliant parliamentary reports whose quality, I think, is not often matched by our modern press. But the biographer must know as much about each particular paper's own policies as those of any private correspondent.

During the 1840 and up to the late fifties, Stafford had the support of the *Nelson Examiner*, a splendid paper under Domett's early editorship when it was probably unequalled in any colony. Stafford held shares in it and wrote for it occasionally until he became Premier of New Zealand in 1856 and set out to create an effective central government and to develop the ideal of a New Zealand nationality. Then the *Examiner* and later Nelson's second paper *The Colonist*, turned against him for failing to advance his province against its rivals. *The Colonist* under David Luckie admired his democratic and liberal ideals but hated his centralism; and when J.C. Richmond became editor of the *Examiner* he was usually far more critical than friendly – although he continued to ask Stafford for funds to keep the paper going. He opposed most of Stafford's ideas for public works and immigration.

The *Lyttelton Times*, one of the most frequently quoted and hence continuously influential early newspaper sources because of its ready availability in libraries, was anti-Stafford almost from its inception. FitzGerald in early editorials sneered at the Nelson settlers' advance of democratic beliefs. Crosbie Ward, a dedicated Canterbury provincialist and one of the most brilliant wits we've ever had in our public life, was Stafford's rival in politics and one of his sharpest critics. He was followed at the *Times* by William Reeves, an even more extreme Cantabrian and the most ardent of Foxites. Stafford destroyed Reeves' parliamentary credibility and political career in a series of scarifying onslaughts during the 1870 and 1871 sessions and the Reeves family never forgot or forgave. When Vogel adopted Stafford's

centralist views in 1874 Reeves' anger knew no bounds and he used his sharpest pen against Vogel too. William Reeves' dutiful and affectionate son was Pember, who mentioned Stafford twice in *The Long White Cloud* and deliberately, I think, got him wrong.

Nor was the Christchurch *Press* particularly friendly to Stafford. FitzGerald founded it, and the syndicate which eventually bought him out was dominated politically by the shrewdly formidable and influential Edward Stevens (ironically, Stafford's business and land agent and eventually New Zealand executor of his will), who demanded abolition of the provinces in 1867 and did not forgive Stafford for making instead a practical parliamentary alliance with the provincialists to stay in power. Stevens and Tancred were crucial members of the assorted coalition which eventually defeated Stafford in 1869, after which although the *Press* backed Stafford's harrying of the incompetent Fox Government, it nagged Stafford to form a new party to replace Fox and Vogel. Stafford refused. Most of those who turned to him had just defeated him and Stafford had taken his defeat badly. He was a pragmatic man with no illusions; and in politics he no longer took prisoners. He had, after all, promulgated a public works

and immigration policy in his speeches on the Otago Loans Bill in 1869 and in a revelatory speech to his Timaru constituents in early 1870 – before Vogel had become a convert to such ideas – and Stafford was determined that any such policy would be supported as long as it was capably and honestly administered. Stafford knew there was no true kindred feeling between the various strands of opposition to the Fox and Vogel Governments, other than the understandable desire to get rid of an increasingly incompetent and even corrupt government. The opposition groups were, he once said, bound together only by a rope of sand. Stevens and the *Press* found such realism unpalatable and wrote Stafford off as an effective opposition leader. In fact he was a highly effective one – as I hope to have drawn.

The Auckland papers veered from liking Stafford when it seemed that he was sympathetic to Auckland's interest, to disliking him when he seemed to favour the welfare of the colony as a whole. In Taranaki and Hawkes Bay the settler press condemned Stafford's sympathy for Maori aspirations and his reluctance to allow easy access to Maori land. In Otago, Vogel's *Daily Times* was, during the sixties, totally opposed to Stafford's vision of a unified New Zealand state, which seemed to them to be a deliberately anti-Otago, pro-North Island dream. In Wellington the *Independent* was equally anti-Stafford because of his moderation and refusal to countenance provincial log-rolling, which it saw as a pro-South Island bias. The *Independent* was Fox's and Featherston's mouthpiece. Stafford was their ally during the fight for self-government, but his rejection of the idea of federation, his parliamentary victories in 1856 and his determination to establish central government as a viable institution earned their undying enmity, which naturally was expressed through their paper.

So now I come to the third great source of information about Edward Stafford: Hansards, parliamentary papers and the racy parliamentary reports on day-to-day politics in the newspapers themselves. These are the best sources, the most revealing in general about the man and his pub-



NOLENS VOLENS.

Sir G—e B—n: "WHAT CAN I POSSIBLY SAY TO ALL THESE PETITIONS?"
Mr. St—ff—d: "SAY, YOUR EXCELLENCY? SAY THAT HERE I AM, AND HERE I MEAN TO STOP."

'NOLENS VOLENS.

Sir G—e B—n: "What can I possibly say to all these petitions?"
Mr. St—ff—d: "Say, Your Excellency? Say that here I am, and here I mean to stop."
Stafford is determined to stay in office in spite of Bowen's alarm as petitions for Stafford's resignation pile up.

Auckland Punch Files, Macmillan Brown Collection, University of Canterbury.

lic life. Stafford was a totally committed and superb parliamentarian. It was his world and he sacrificed at various times everything to it – his family, his own sometimes precarious health and even his beloved horses. (He was judged by contemporary sportsmen to be the best horseman, racing jockey and shot in the country). He was passionately immersed in political practice and history, which is hardly surprising when one considers his background. His mother's family, with whom he remained close all his life, were the Tytlers: famous Scottish historians and intellectuals, high-ranking judges and eminent lawyers. He was immersed in politics from his youthful days at Trinity and in Edinburgh, where he spoke at Chartist rallies to advocate the secret ballot and universal suffrage, and he never ceased to read omnivorously late into the night. His eyesight suffered irreparable damage. And in his speeches

in the House he never spared friend or foe the benefits of his vast knowledge of constitutional practice world-wide.

He is also revealed through the Hansards to be a very effective debater, at his best on the big occasions when the galleries were crowded with Wellington's highly political ladies, who admired him loyally and who even played a crucial part in the fall of Waterhouse's Ministry in February 1873. He could be circumlocutory and tiresome as he repeatedly lectured the House on procedure or British, American or French history, arrogant as he deflated Fox and Featherston with facts and logic, ruthlessly wounding as he flayed Bell for inconsistency or Vogel for breaching House rules and trying to ride rough-shod over the rights of private members to debate what they considered necessary – no matter how inconvenient that might be to Government. Above all, in the age before the party system Stafford is revealed to be the supreme parliamentary manager; his success highlighted by the absolute failure of all rivals to sustain any ministries as long-lived as his own. When MMP is finally with us there will have to arise new Staffords.

I enjoy reading the early Hansards. The standard of debate was high because the members during the fifties and sixties were literate, surprisingly tolerant, and possessed wit. The rot started to set in during the seventies when new hard men entered the House; less urbane, less tolerant and less well educated; men becoming impatient with parliamentary restraints. I have read all Stafford's speeches and those of most of his opponents. The judgements I make in my book about men and politics are based on that reading.

Stafford's memory was famous amongst his contemporaries. He read all the relevant papers, did all the necessary research and he always faced the House armed to the teeth with facts and statistics. He was an enthusiastic pioneer statistician, as befitted one reared on Benthamism who was a disciple of Mill and who modelled himself on Peel. None of his contemporaries except possibly Hall, Fitzherbert and John Larkins Cheese Richardson were as well prepared; but Hall, while a superb committee man, often bored the House and seldom fully commanded its undivided attention. Fox always did but, for all his famous oratorical brilliance, he was careless with truth and for a lawyer surprisingly slovenly in his marshalling of facts. He excelled in repartee and heavily sarcastic attack and he was a great hater, which gave his speeches splendid bite and make entertaining reading. Fitzherbert, who listened to debates with his eyes shut but who would then reply to every point made, without notes, for anything up to five hours at a stretch, was also a wit. Featherston and Reader Wood were splendid orators. So were Bell and FitzGerald, although their grasp of fact was often approximate and neither could sustain an argument consistently. Bell, cousin to Stafford's first wife Emily Wakefield and his business partner in a profitable sheep

run, was the butt for Stafford's most regular and often painfully cutting put-downs; politically they were miles apart and implacable enemies. As for Grey, (whose political career after 1875 I hope to embark on after I've done with FitzGerald) – he was a spell-binding speaker, a man of genuine charisma, but a flawed personality who uttered some of the most extraordinarily paranoid nonsense one could ever hope to come across.

Stafford matched every one of these men and he was seldom bested. His manner, however, tended to be condescending and there was too often a superior smile about his lips. Frequently, too, his knowledge about all kinds of things from history and constitutional precedent to gardening, forestry and climatology, practical farming, or geology, let him into byways, from which even his skill at parenthesis did not always extricate him easily. But when he spoke on matters which touched him deeply he could be outstanding and even inspiring – on his vision of New Zealand as a truly unified nation of different races bound together by equal rights and economic stability, on education and religious toleration, on constitutional freedoms and in defence and a sometimes deliberately assumed passivity his beliefs were held passionately and consistently and he did not care in the least if they were unpopular. Thus in the midst of war and scares of war he defended the Maori right to resist forced and unfair loss of their lands, championed their fitness to vote and take part in general politics, and insisted on the need to allow them to help administer their own affairs. Year after year he pleaded for the secret ballot, or the rights of the mentally ill, for a national system of education, for toleration and plain common sense to prevail in everything. In short, Hansards reveal the development of a dedicated, professional politician into a statesman – a man who for all his intense desire to hold onto office once he had achieved it, was prepared to risk short-term advantage for the sake of the greater and longer-term national good as he saw it. The Hansards reveal the first consistent New Zealand patriot who year after year would flay British Governments and Imperial policy whenever they seemed to threaten the interests of the new nation which he was so confident would eventually arise here.

So much for the sources of this biography. What of the gaps? And how far have I been able to find the essential man? It was easier to find the public man, although something of the private man does emerge clearly in his surviving letters, such as that to Emily Richmond after the sudden death of his first wife Emily Wakefield. This is a remarkable one, in which Stafford looks into his own nature with bleak honesty. He reveals himself too in his increasingly exasperated letters to a very surly McLean who, strongly resented Stafford's administrative reforms in 1866 because they threatened to curb his own personal power in Hawkes Bay. And from his youthful narrative of a memorably incompetent exploratory expedition, pub-

lished in the *Examiner* in early 1843, there emerges an attractively enthusiastic young man, imbued with all the contemporary romantic sensibilities. We find a young man steeped in classical Greek and Latin but with acute powers of observation, wide knowledge of geology and botany too, and a splendidly ironic view of both his companions and himself. Similarly his 1859 letters to Christopher Richmond from Europe reveal the same ability to stand aside and mock himself – even while describing his enthusiasms – and to recognize the reasons for his essential inner loneliness. That loneliness is another paradox, because Stafford enjoyed company, sought it amongst his friends and was criticized often enough for being excessively talkative and egotistical. It's possible that neither of his marriages were wholly happy, but there are only hints in a few letters between the Richmonds and one from Monro to Rolleston. Whereas FitzGerald tells us a great deal about his private life in almost every letter he wrote to Godley or Selfe, Stafford is, for the biographer, usually exasperatingly reticent.

Finally, what is there that remains to be re-investigated about Stafford and his times? I suggest a very great deal: especially about the crucial work of the 1856-61 Ministry which established our parliamentary system and took the first steps towards creating a nation state. Again, I think it time we looked closely again at the parliaments of the 1860s. And at the often unsatisfactory governorship of Sir George Bowen who twice refused Stafford dissolutions – most crucially and controversially in 1872 when, for the first time the Maori members held the balance of power and were deliberately misled by McLean and Bowen himself. I have, hopefully, revalued the Stafford Ministries between 1865-69; that of 1865-66 was perhaps one of the most crucial in our constitutional history because it seemed then as though the very continuance of responsible government was at stake. From Stafford's defeat in 1861 until his resumption of office in 1865 there had been a new government each year and each had been a disaster. In those years of Fox, Domett, Whitaker and Weld, borrowing got out of control and the provinces were allowed to run free. Responsible government itself was called into question, and the Maori was alienated by confiscation and the inconsistent policies fought over by Grey, various generals, the Colonial Office and weak ministries. The infant civil service faltered in confusion and the colony seemed likely to fall apart into separate island administrations at least. Stafford halted the slide into anarchy by achieving stability and reform. He brought financial order out of chaos, consolidated debts and restored New Zealand's credit abroad. His retrenchments hurt and his moderation angered the abolitionists, the provincialists and the hardliners on Maori affairs. He returned confiscated lands where he was able to, insisted against McLean's opposition on issuing numerous pardons, and brought the Maori into Parliament – although McLean and FitzGerald have

most undeservedly been given much of the credit. By moderation and parliamentary skill, and because even his enemies acknowledged that he was a superlative administrator, he survived until 1869. I hope I have gone some way to rescuing the reputation of his coalition government (1866 to 1869) from some of the ill-founded historical judgements which have been made about it. It was, arguably, the strongest and best government in our history before 1890; not just the haphazard affair drifting without a rudder of historical legend. The famous accusations of 'drift' which have been so boringly and uncritically parroted by so many historians was a brilliant debating invention of Fox and the Opposition press. Like every other generalisation – including those I make myself – it must be tested by rigorous research.

Perhaps, given the unsatisfactory nature of so much of our general history, such testing is for the present best and most easily achieved through political biography and there is much of that remaining to be done from this period. I suggest a brave scholar (and a patient publisher who will agree to produce a really long book) should begin with Fox. McLean also needs an acceptably detailed biography. So do Whitaker and Featherston and Christopher Richmond, Sir Thomas Gore Browne and Sir George Bowen. There should be extended monographs – far more detailed than the *Dictionary* articles can possibly be – on Fitzherbert and Sir John Richardson, Francis Dillon Bell (the first) and Crosbie Ward; Henry Tancred, Edward Stevens, William Gisborne, Pollen and Whitmore; William Reeves, Macandrew and Reader Wood. A biography of Hall is being done now, but Rolleston deserves to be looked at again. And someone ought to investigate the shadowy pressure-group of political women who watched from the galleries and exerted influence behind the scenes – Harriet Gore Browne, Lady Diamantina Bowen, Mrs Rolleston, Fanny FitzGerald, Mrs. Hall, Mrs Fitzherbert and her daughter, the Russell women, Mrs Pharazyn, Miss Cargill and many others. The powerful Richmond and Atkinson ladies were not unique.

Above all, we need to revisit – with fresh perceptions and the keenest of eyes – the first decades of our political nationhood. The period 1854 to 1870 was not merely a dreary waste until Vogel arose in all his glory; nor was 1870 to 1890 an unfortunate time of prevailing depression and confusion until the glories of so-called liberalism could be revealed by Ballance, Reeves and Seddon. These years were the times when our parliamentary system was established and developed, when crises not so very unlike those still facing us were encountered and faced – and we still live with many of the consequences of the decisions made then. In order to understand our present we must re-discover and re-interpret those crucial decades, and given the gaps in our historiography, political biography is one of the most direct means of doing so.