

State of the Nation Forum - Reflections for Waitangi Day 2009
Whangarei 4 February 2009 & Waitangi 6 February 2009
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He mihi nui ki a koutou
Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

Greetings to Ngati Wai and Ngati Hine, Ngati Hou and Te Parawhau

I feel very honoured to be here at Waitangi on yet another historic occasion.

I honour this whenua and this Marae which reflects so much of the promise and the history of this conflicted relationship based on Te Tiriti o Waitangi. I feel the presence of all those tupuna who have stood here before me and I honour them.

I remember my late colleague and mentor Irihapeti Ramsden.

I also feel the presence of my own Irish ancestors who struggled against the tyranny of colonisation in Ireland and fought in the land and sovereignty wars of Irish history. I honour them today.

I take a moment to recognise all those Maori and Pakeha who have worked hard to break down the profound institutional ignorance about our colonial history – the NCC Programme on Racism, ACCORD, the Waitangi Action Committee, Project Waitangi, Network Waitangi and a myriad of groups and individuals who have inspired and challenged this country about the colonisation and racism of our colonial history. I honour them.

I am in this country Aotearoa - because of the Treaty - which gave the British and settlers the right to settle here and build a relationship of equality with Maori. It was not intended for the subjugation of Maori or to give settler Governments the right to control Maori activities.

As a fourth generation New Zealander I am in this country because my ancestor Thomas Sweeney was deported to Australia as a prisoner and convict from Tipperary in 1823. He had been sentenced to hang because of his struggles for liberation.

For me this is a particularly significant moment as I celebrate 20 years as a full time Treaty educator - on the road from Kaitaia to Invercargill. I have always felt deeply honoured to be doing this work – which is never finished.

My purpose as a Treaty educator has been to enable Pakeha people to have an informed involvement in all the issues emanating from the wider Treaty debate. It is ironic in an age where well researched information on New Zealand's colonial history and the Treaty of Waitangi is accessible, that there continues to be so much misinformation, cross-cultural misunderstanding, racism and ignorance. Why is this so?

I would contend this is because most New Zealanders are forming their opinions on local and global issues based on constant misrepresentation by the corporate media. Some of the themes that emerge regularly in my Treaty workshops are what I choose to reflect on today.

They are the way in which the corporate media, despite a few exceptional journalists, destroy any constructive public debate about Treaty issues; the way Maori and crime are treated in the media; the consequences of colonisation; child poverty and the rich/poor gap in Aotearoa.

The only bright area is the advent of more Maori media, particularly Maori television which reflects the dramatic changes in Aotearoa during the past 30 years.

Media – Flat Earth News

We now live in an age of what media insiders call *flat earth news*. In short it means if someone announced that the earth was flat the media would want another side of the story – it would not matter which version was true. Every day we are exposed, by all media, to ‘stories that appear to be true, widely accepted as true, is heresy to suggest that they are not true – even if they are riddled with falsehood, distortion and propaganda.’¹

The great blockbuster myth of modern journalism is objectivity; the idea that a good newspaper or broadcaster simply collects and reproduces the objective truth is a classic flat earth tale widely believed and devoid of reality. The primary goal of all media now is to cut costs and increase the flow of revenue.

Recent research states that the rules for cutting costs include: running cheap stories, selecting safe facts, the need to be inoffensive to the rich and powerful, select safe ideas, giving both sides of the story – regardless of what is truth. This produces a bias against truth and understanding, it goes with the moral panic, and follows the motto: if others are printing it – print it².

If this is our media, how can we possibly have an informed discussion about any major issue in a democracy? The corporate media has become a highly destructive force for any level of democratic participation.

Media in New Zealand

Four companies, all overseas owned, dominate the New Zealand print media. Two of those overseas owned companies are responsible for 90% of our daily newspapers. Media insiders tell us that all media in the most advanced countries ...now revolves around cutting costs.³ There seems little evidence to suggest that New Zealand is any different.

The history of the Treaty relationship is riddled with *flat earth news*. The police raids in the Urewera in October 2007 are a good example. New Zealand and International media were rife with stories linking Maori and terrorism. Media-generated conflict and fear were endemic. The Crown chose to call this an anti-terrorist operation in its initial press releases; politicians and several sections of the media then continued to use this terminology – even after it became evident that the terrorist label was wrong.

Professional historian Professor Judith Binney offered a background article on the raids to the NZ Herald and then the Listener. Both turned it down. The only newspaper willing to publish was the Otago Daily Times in Dunedin – which happens to be the one independent newspaper in New Zealand. Perhaps it was the title that made it scary: *Ignore the past at our peril*.

Crime and the media

Another major example of *flat earth news* in New Zealand is the representation of crime and Maori. Crime sells. Linking Maori and crime in the media feeds moral panic, plays on emotion and drama – which equals higher ratings and profits.

We are all familiar with the crime statistics for Maori. There appears to be an almost universal unwillingness to look at the real causes of crime. It is far easier to respond to the event after the fact, than to look at the more complex issues that might enter into a prevention response. The elephant in the room is colonisation, dispossession and poverty.

Research completed by Craig Coxhead in 2005 discusses the way in which media has reported and continues to report on Maori in a predominantly negative manner.⁴ Combine this fact with the preoccupation of media with crime. Whilst crime may well be valid news, it is the media who then go on to define it. Historical examples of the media's negative portrayal of Maori are numerous. The operation of the media in New Zealand assists in the maintenance of Pākehā domination.

One obvious association is through race-labeling – which is the unnecessary use of racial or ethnic references where such labeling adds no newsworthiness value to the report or serves no public interest. The visual imagery of the media contributes to stereotypical beliefs that continue to damage Maori-Pākehā relations.

Research states that Maori are frequently portrayed by the media as privileged, poor managers, financially incompetent and squabbling.⁵ Combine that with the fact that Maori are over-represented in nearly all negative social statistics, and it paints a poor picture.

There is rarely any context. Colonisation and the dispossession of Maori are seldom mentioned. History is forgotten, or judged irrelevant. We should not be surprised.

The most vociferous proponents of more punishment and more jails appear to live in a narrow ethereal world which excludes any context of the history of the colonisation of Aotearoa. The original crime, never mentioned by Governments or the media was the crime of colonisation, of dispossession, of a solemn agreement made by the Crown and then discarded.

The dominant media consistently portrays the wider Treaty dialogue as a Maori issue. It also is consistently, and I believe incorrectly, presented as a struggle between Maori and Pākehā. This fails to recognize the diversity of Maori and Pākehā.

This excludes the thousands of Pākehā actively supportive of the Treaty relationship, self-determination, Maori development, and recognition of our past.

Consequences of colonisation

It is not hard to conclude that many major problems in New Zealand society go back to our failure to honour the Treaty and colonisation. The question is why, in our public debates, is this such a threatening statement for some to acknowledge?

In 1840 New Zealand became part of the British Empire – an empire built on slavery, the slave labor of the industrial revolution and the dispossession and subjugation of indigenous people throughout the world. It is an empire which created mass starvation in Ireland and India, concentration camps in South Africa and Kenya.⁶

The British Empire was also the biggest drug pusher the world has ever seen. Opium was the world's single most valuable trade commodity in the 19th century. This trade was promoted and controlled by the British Empire.

Consequently as the late Michael King sums up the present is ‘a complex outcome of acculturation, military defeat, land confiscations, contradictory legislation, population displacement, racism, personality conflicts and continuing cross-cultural misunderstandings.’⁷

The corporate media continues to ignore the impact of New Zealand’s colonial history on the present.

The negative social statistics of Maori are the statistics of dispossessed peoples – and they are global. It is no accident that the 300 million indigenous people in the world belonging to 5000 indigenous groups in 70 countries ‘are nearly always disadvantaged relative to their non-indigenous counterparts. Their material standard of living is lower, their risk of early disease and early death is higher, their educational opportunities are more limited, their political participation and voice more constrained and their lifestyles and livelihoods they would choose are very often out of reach.’⁸ Whilst poverty also plays a strong part in this, it is also enough to be simply indigenous to live with these outcomes.

52% of the men in prison in New Zealand are Maori, 58% of the women in prison are Maori. It is no accident that most prisoners in New Zealand jails are also poor. In a land of plenty, their poverty in itself is a crime. Since 1987 we have doubled our jail population. Are we safer? I don’t think so. Our commitment to building more jails is based on the naïve belief that we will be safer; this is a tribute to our complete lack of imagination. It also reminds me of the best definition of insanity I know – *keep doing the same thing in the same way, and expect a different outcome.*

The Global and Local - Rich/Poor Gap

Another significant issue facing New Zealand today is the rich/poor gap. In 2006 the United Nations published a first ever survey of world distribution of household wealth (figures 2000).⁹ This report reflects a terrifying global picture of the wealth/poverty gap. 2% of adults own half the global wealth; half the world’s population lives on 1% of the world’s wealth.

New Zealand is not far behind. In the last decades of the 20th century, the Child Poverty Action Group revealed New Zealand had the fastest growth in income and wealth *inequality* in the OECD.¹⁰ New Zealand is near the bottom of the rich nations index, for infant mortality, children’s health and safety, teenage pregnancy and immunization. In 2004 there were 175,000 children living in severe hardship and being left behind. This is a damning picture.

New Zealand’s widening income disparity is no accident. It is the predictable outcome of the economic upheavals of the 1980s and 1990s. Contributing factors include the deliberate strategy of reducing benefits relative to wage income. It makes no economic sense to keep people poor, and the social consequences are transparently predictable.

We are now faced with a global economic crisis created by the most educated and privileged people on the planet who cold-bloodedly used other people’s money for their own gain. This was a predictable outcome of a system inflicted on the world by some of those 2% who hold the world’s wealth. Their silence now is deafening. There will now be more human suffering on a huge scale.

Will the media provide commentary about the causes of this economic crisis and therefore real, humane solutions? Or will it merely rely on opinion pieces from each corner of the market and fulfill its flat earth news role by viewing the truth as irrelevant?

A hope-filled future

The gains for Maori in the last 30 years have been significant however it is worth remembering and honouring the fact that every gain has only been achieved through struggle, and with courage. The words of the slave abolitionist, Frederick Douglas remain as true as when he uttered them in the 19th century *'power cedes nothing without a demand – it never did and it never will.'*

Just as the men could not envision a world where women voted, slave-owners could not envision a world without slavery, and whites, a world where blacks had civil rights, so our society struggles to envision a world where power, is successfully shared in the way anticipated in the Treaty. We have the opportunity of honoring the Treaty in our time. We are not short of vision. The Treaty is about relationships. Those who signed it envisaged Maori and Pakeha living peacefully together – sharing power and resources. That vision has not changed.

Despite the ongoing struggle, there is much to be hopeful about.

In the recent election, the Maori Party has entered into an historic relationship with the National-led government. One aspect of the agreement is to establish, by no later than early 2010, a group to consider constitutional issues, including Maori representation. The Maori Party will be a member of the group, and be consulted on membership and choice of Chairperson.

Whether we should have a written constitution, a Treaty of Waitangi Court, or a constitutional commission and a parliamentary commissioner for the Treaty as proposed by the Maori Party we need to move away from the paralysis which currently imprisons the Treaty relationship.

We can have legislation, court cases, a constitution or a special Treaty Court – all are important - and in the end every New Zealander needs to carry the Treaty relationship in their hearts. Why? The wisdom of Sister Pauline O'Regan has the answer. 'Legislation for justice is one thing, forming a spirit of justice in our hearts is quite another.'¹¹

This reinforces the ongoing need for the New Zealand public to continue to be discerning as to what they are reading, watching and listening to about Treaty, justice and poverty issues in the media. Maori media is an excellent source of insightful and thoughtful analysis.

Everywhere I go in Aotearoa I meet Maori and Pakeha working together in a variety of creative ways. I am constantly inspired by the level of generosity and commitment of New Zealanders which has provided the inspiration that has kept me going for the last 20 years, and continues to sustain my commitment to treaty education – whether it be the building of Treaty relationships in our organizations and institutions or the promotion of indigenous national days such as the current campaign promoting 5 November (currently Guy Fawkes day) as Parihaka day. It is these individual and communal relationships which hold society together and create the basis for political solutions. How will history regard our generation?

My own tradition as an Irish Catholic Pakeha has always sustained me. In my values the starting point is that life is hard. Joan Chittister, a Benedictine nun and well-known prophetic voice throughout North America, who came to New Zealand recently, reminds us that there is no such thing as life without struggle....life forges us in struggle...if we give up in the midst of struggle we will never find out what the struggle would have given us in the end.¹² Many of our ancestors knew this. Many in our own times know this.

There is beauty and the sacred in every life which transcends how people look, behave and respond to the world. It is especially in the prisoners, the victims, the people who fail, the marginalized, the poor, the vulnerable. I am convinced the only way to live on this planet is to

put aroha - love, at the centre of our lives – to see the divine spark in every single human being and to treat them accordingly. It is the only way humanity will survive.

¹ The information in this section is based primarily on the book by Nick Davies; *Flat Earth News*; 2008; Vintage Books; London. Although the book is based on the British media its relevance to New Zealand is applicable given the large scale foreign ownership of the New Zealand media and the dependence of the New Zealand media on similar sources. *Guardians of Power: The Myth of the Liberal Media*; David Edwards and David Cromwell; 2008; Pluto Press; London, is another outstanding critique of the Western Media

² It would appear that the Christchurch Press now provides a weekly column which corrects mistakes printed in the preceding week. From 7 – 20 January 2009 there were 24 corrections from 1626 stories

³ Bill Rosenberg, CAFCA;

<http://canterbury.cyberplace.org.nz/community/CAFCA/publications/Miscellaneous/mediaown.pdf>

⁴ Craig Coxhead, Maori: Crime and the Media: The Association of Maori with Crime Through Media Eyes, *Yearbook of New Zealand Jurisprudence – Special Issue Te Purenga*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2005; Waikato Law School – Te Wahanga Ture Hamilton

⁵ Media & Te Tiriti; 2004; Box 78 338, Tamaki/Makaurau/Auckland; See the full report at www.trc.org.nz/resources/media.htm

⁶ John Newsinger; *The Blood Never Dried: A Peoples History of the British Empire*, 2006; Bookmark Publications Ltd; London; p7

⁷ Carol Archie; *Pou Korero – A Journalists' Guide to Maori and Current Affairs*; 2007; New Zealand Journalists Training Organisation; Wellington; p11

⁸ Ed. Robyn Eversole, John- Andrew McNeish, Alberto D Cimadamore: *Indigenous Peoples and Poverty: An International Perspective*; 2005; Zed Books; London; p2

⁹ James Davies et al; *World Distribution of Household Wealth, World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University*, 5 December 2006; UN Secretariat; New York

¹⁰ James Davies et al; *World Distribution of Household Wealth, World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University*, 5 December 2006; UN Secretariat; New York

¹¹ Robert Consedine & Joanna Consedine; *Healing our History: The Challenge of the Treaty of Waitangi*; 2001/2005; Penguin; New Zealand; Foreword

¹² This thinking is inspired by Joan D Chittister; *Scarred by Struggle, Transformed by Hope*, 2005; Eerdmans; Cambridge

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In the 1990s Robert introduced the Treaty workshop process to Canadian groups and in the 2005 election campaign he was No 6 on the Maori party list.

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