

Waitangi Day 2008 – State of the Nation

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Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena tatou katoa

Thank you for the opportunity tonight to share some personal thoughts about the Treaty of Waitangi and where I feel we might be as a nation in 2008. I say personal thoughts because I've discovered over the last thirty years that my experience of the Treaty, as a journalist, has helped me to learn more about myself as a person. It's improved my interactions with other people and helped me to understand what really matters to me in human relationships. I can recommend this engagement with the Treaty and looking at how it applies in daily life.

For instance last year, I surprised some people in my profession when I said that it's time to do away with Maori specialist reporters in the mainstream media. For decades most broadcasters and newspapers have tried to employ Maori reporters to cover the bulk of their Maori stories. In theory it sounds good but in truth the practice demonstrates a lot of what's wrong about our approach to the Treaty of Waitangi.

Using Maori Issues Journalists to do the reporting on Maori matters in our general news coverage suggests that Maori are not part of the fabric of our society but something tacked on to the mainstream. It's as though they're not like other New Zealanders who're affected by all aspects of life in this country.

I'll give you an example what happens. A Pakeha reporter goes to do a story on pre-schooling in New Zealand but leaves out the viewpoints of people involved in kohanga reo. Perhaps the reporter doesn't contact the kohanga because he or she thinks that's the domain of the Maori affairs reporter. A finance reporter might do the same thing...write a story about taxes or rises in the value of the New Zealand dollar ... and almost never seek the views of the many Maori businesses who are an integral part of the economy.

If you think about it, the media doesn't have separate 'Pakeha Affairs Reporters' who're asked to interpret Pakeha perspectives for viewers and listeners. Of course they don't have to. The mainstream news is primarily written by and for Pakeha. It's owned and dominated by Pakeha and rarely serves anyone else's needs.

Now I assure you that I'm not talking about banning special programmes for Maori in broadcasting or special articles in print that are aimed to inform Maori audiences. I'm referring only to the way our general news and current affairs either ignores Maori perspectives, or puts them in a box to one side.

As a result, many Maori issues reporters have complained that they're pigeon-holed and burdened by unrealistic expectations from their employers and their own people. Frequently they've been used as oracles to interpret the views of all Maori.

Often there's pressure too from the Maori community on the solitary Maori reporter to be the one who has to counter-balance negative stories that are written by

others in the mainstream. No wonder many of these reporters have burned out quickly and left their jobs after a short time.

It's not only unreasonable to place so much responsibility on one person in a newsroom but this system severely limits the capacity of news organisations. Other journalists are able to disregard any Maori angles that crop up when they are covering stories. And when they do cover Maori angles they have a convenient excuse if they don't have the experience or skills to report on Maori. It doesn't really matter if they mispronounce Maori words and take a shallow approach because that's not their real job. They don't see it as their professional duty to have an understanding of indigenous culture in this country.

So here's the nub of it. Ideally every journalist in this country should be well enough informed to be able to cover Maori stories as part of their everyday work. By ghetto-ising Maori news into a separate box, our news organisations are presenting us with a distorted view of Aotearoa New Zealand society.

This is a fundamental factor in the misunderstandings that we experience across cultures in this country. It is mirrored in our community at large. Many Pakeha don't see it as their responsibility to know about the Treaty of Waitangi and Maori culture because it's up to someone else. We don't have to engage personally with the Treaty. We don't have to learn much about it at school because it won't be part of our worldview when we grow up. It's more convenient to stay disengaged from any cross-cultural dialogue.

It's been interesting for me to watch how Maori Television, with its kaupapa of promoting Maori language and culture, has positioned itself with other groups in the community like Pakeha.

I'm enthusiastic about the example they've set for us.

In general, Maori Television has achieved what the Pakeha media often fails to do. It's been inclusive. Maori Television has presented Maori in a positive light without detracting from any other New Zealanders. I don't get the sense, as a Pakeha watching Maori Television, that other people are any less than Maori ... just different. The channel has embraced so many other cultures from around the world in the documentaries and films it screens. It's helping to shape a truly Aotearoa New Zealand culture that includes everyone. It's also a more accurate picture of what's happening out there in our homes and workplaces.

Take cross-cultural families for example. Pakeha who go to bed with Maori partners every night can't disengage from the Treaty of Waitangi. I'm fascinated by the impact of cross-cultural marriages in our society. We marry each other much more than is common in most other countries.

Recent statistics show that half of all Maori have partners from another culture. Since the earliest contact they've made marriage alliances with other peoples. And it's from such intimate relationships that we can learn so much. These families are living the treaty in their homes every day.

What can they teach us? What makes Maori/Pakeha partnerships work? Well it's the usual stuff really – willingness to compromise, learning about difference, respect, sharing, and those old chestnuts – love and affection.

People in Maori/ Pakeha families say it's not easy to either marry someone from another culture or to be the children of such a union. But most enjoy being able to walk between cultures with comfort and the chance to understand life from different perspectives. I feel excited about it because they're doing the groundwork to help us understand who we're becoming as a nation.

So despite the fact that our country's painted so often in the media as though there's a huge divide between Maori and Pakeha, hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders are living and working together, and making friendships across that artificial gap.

From a personal point of view, I've had reason to engage with Maori and the Treaty of Waitangi. Like a number of Pakeha of my generation I first became aware, during the seventies, of the injustices that Maori have suffered through colonisation. Gradually I read some New Zealand history and began covering Maori stories for television as a journalist in Auckland.

I made an unsuccessful attempt to learn Maori but promised myself that at the very least I would always try to pronounce the language as well as I could as a mark of respect.

It sounds a bit absurd now but that commitment was one of the most difficult of my life. By pronouncing words as correctly as I could and showing a keen interest in Maori current affairs I had exposed myself to considerable ridicule from my family, friends and colleagues at work. They felt somehow threatened by my views and thought I was being phoney or affected when I didn't say Maori words as they did.

I lived in a street with a Maori name Waitakere Rd Taupaki.. When I gave my address I got: "Oh you mean Waitackery?", or "Do you mean Towpacky? I wanted to swear at them. No I don't bloody well mean "Waitackery". But I realised that was not a helpful way promote the Maori language. I had to exercise some self-restraint.

This all gave me a tiny inkling of how Maori might feel about being corrected and seeing their language mangled every day. I was seen as an odd-ball and I often felt very isolated.

At dinner tables I found myself an easy target for Pakeha who condemned the so-called Maori radicals and denied that colonisation had been anything but good for Maori. During the Springbok tour period, when tensions were really hot, my husband and I stopped going out because my presence regularly wrecked social occasions for my hosts.

I didn't think of myself as anything other than a Pakeha ... never did I want to be some sort of quasi Maori ... but most of the Pakeha around me seemed to see me as a traitor to my own kind for seeing the indisputable facts of our colonial past - that huge injustices had been done to Maori and were still very much a part of our

daily life. Even then, Maori were bearing the brunt of the economic and social changes under Labour's policies in the eighties and it was clear how destructive this was for Maori families.

Looking back I realise that a good deal of my misery then was my own doing. I was impatient with other Pakeha for not seeing it my way. I became argumentative and angry when people questioned me, instead of trying wisdom and tact.

For the most part I am much better at that now. I've learned to tell people about my own experience and understanding in a calm way and not engage in fruitless discussions where I feel trapped in a corner and somehow forced to explain and justify the actions of all Maori. I can say that my engagement with the Treaty has been an important part of my own self-development.

Over several decades I was fortunate, as a journalist, to cover many Maori events and stories of all kinds as a reporter in the mainstream /slash/Pakeha media and later for a Maori organisation, Mana Maori media.

So when I'm talking to other Pakeha journalists I'm able to encourage them to have a go at reporting on matters that concern Maori, to overcome awkwardness and visit a marae, to learn some history, to feel the sense of place that Maori culture can open up, to encounter the wisdom and humility of Maori elders, and for those journalists to stop and analyse what perspective they're coming from when they write their stories.

I assure my Pakeha colleagues that I've been treated in the Maori world with respect, encouragement and warm hospitality by my Maori hosts – even though I've made some awful gaffs at times. Any efforts I made to come to grips with the culture, language or historical background of a story were usually met by an appreciation out of all proportion to my contribution.

Of course it's not just the media who don't engage enough with Maori and Treaty matters. The government does this too. Its refusal to vote for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples last year was a prime example of that. The Foreshore and Seabed legislation showed that the government is prepared to deny Maori their legal rights and treat them differently from other groups in New Zealand.

Successive governments have been resolute in ignoring the guarantee of tino rangatiratanga in Article Two. When is this fundamental promise from our founding document ever addressed in public discussion? When do we ever talk about how tino rangatiratanga might be expressed in 21st century Aotearoa New Zealand?

I believe we can't move on as New Zealanders until we've had that dialogue and looked at how the Treaty will shape our political future together. The tendency Pakeha have to disengage and put Maori into a box off to one side isn't working.

It may be one of the reasons why the government tried to distance itself from the police use of the Terrorism legislation in its raids on Tuhoe in Ruatoki. I can imagine

much greater public outrage if the police carried out similar raids in the largely Pakeha suburb of Kohimarama where I live.

If we had more dialogue on tino rangatiratanga then Pakeha would better understand the desire of many Maori to have more control over their own affairs. If the relationship was better, there would be no way that Maori movements which date back to the nineteenth century could be associated in anyone's mind with terrorism.

The United Nation's Bali conference on Climate Change last year was a reminder about how difficult it can be to get human beings to trust each other and work together for the common good - even when the destruction of humankind might be the outcome if we don't act together to halt global warming.

In this country, we must debate our contribution to saving the planet. Fortunately we have a wealth of indigenous knowledge about the environment to call on. Scientific research is beginning to converge with Maori concepts of whakapapa and kaitiakitanga. Matauranga Maori tells us that humans are related to all other organisms and environments. For my part I really value the Maori emphasis on the need to respect and care for the spiritual well-being of this inter-connected environment if humans are to prosper.

Climate change is probably the biggest challenge we've ever faced as people of Aotearoa New Zealand. You can't disengage from that. You can't disengage from the people with whom we share this land.

We're all in a cross-cultural relationship whether we acknowledge it or not. We're in this together. That's why, for me, the Treaty is personal. It will be a good basis for our political and social future if we use the recipes tested for us in marriages and friendships between Maori and Pakeha over generations.

We can talk things over together and not be afraid when others have different viewpoints. We can discuss subjects that have been largely off-limits in the past like tino rangatiratanga and constitutional change. We can agree on ways to safeguard our environment for future generations. We can show a willingness to listen and to compromise.

The path is well-trodden. The spirit of the Treaty is not just for specialists, it's not just for odd-balls like me - it's for us all to engage in.

Tena tatou katoa.