

Joan Cook Memorial Waitangi Day Essay

Reflections on the state of the Pakeha nation

This essay remembers the Rev. Joan Cook, an Australian who loved Aotearoa enough to help educate us about the truth of our history, race relations, and the Treaty of Waitangi, for several decades. She died in 2009, shortly after her 80th birthday.

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Writer Mitzi Nairn was the Director of the Combined Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand's Programme on Racism, and has been actively involved in anti-racism initiatives since the 1960s including the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination. She describes herself as a traditionally built Pakeha woman with a background in community education, especially addressing the Treaty of Waitangi. She lives near Eden Park with her partner of 47 years, Raymond, and spends most of her time cooking, gardening, writing and 'wondering about stuff'.

The Pakeha of the future

In this essay I am going to ask what might we as Pakeha aspire to be in the future.

I think I should tell you a little about myself so that you can see where I am coming from. I describe myself as a Pakeha New Zealander of British descent. I was born in London and arrived in New Zealand when I was four years old. I have very few clear memories of England, and when I went there as an adult, it was not like home to me. So I have a sense of belonging only in this land – I don't fit anywhere else and I don't feel at home anywhere else.

I love this land, for its own sake. I love its landscapes and seascapes, its biodiversity of plants, birds, insects and sea creatures. I grieve for its endangered species, and its polluted waters.

I also celebrate its horticultural and agricultural excellence, the productivity of its farmers, fishers, industrial workers – the creativity of its people. So I see beauty in its modified landscape also – fields and crops, roads and bridges.

If this seems contradictory, it is because the balance between natural and modified is seriously out of whack. This stems from a lack of collective and individual responsibility. What gives with a person who loves the bush and the birdsong and builds a house there, taking a cat, a dog and a ginger plant?

Historically there have been cultural assumptions rooted in capitalism. We have thousands of stories and pictures of even the poorest people attacking the land to clear it, with a ferocious kind of hatred that will not rest until not a tree, not a stump, remains.

I suppose that from there it was a short step towards hatred of the people who were to be identified with the enemy-land. Certainly there was numerical dominance, invasive warfare, followed by governmental/parliamentary attack on the ways and resources of the tangata whenua, the land people – the people who are the land. Separation replaced contact.

There were early Maori expressions of disbelief that a system of taking offenders away from the community and locking them up in prisons was an effective solution. This seems borne out by the reality that we have come to a point where we have a huge imprisonment rate, with Maori a shockingly high percentage of that prison population. Let that stand in as an example of the patterns of racism that still are embedded in all our social indicators.

We inherit a colonial mess, where suspicion, hostility and ignorance still dominate the patterns of thought and experience of the population of European descent. Notice I haven't called them 'Pakeha'. That is because I am feeling towards using the word to designate a newer, modern group within the people of European descent. For those who are happy to accept the gift of a Maori designation, and are seeking an appropriate way to live under Te Tiriti o Waitangi in an Aotearoa/New Zealand.

I am happy to identify myself as Pakeha because it is part of my belonging in this land. A word from the first language and people of this place. I regard it as something of a gift. In terms of Te Tiriti o Waitangi I partly try to discern and model myself on the 1840 Pakeha of Maori hope and expectation. When Maori set out to make formal provision for the new arrivals, what was in their hearts? Surely there were the cultural obligations of care and protection, but there must also have been respect. Although they already knew the excesses of whalers, sealers, ex-convicts and speculators, they also had formed some of their ideas from contact with missionaries, naval officers, explorers and naturalists. It was this group with whom they sought formal agreements.

So while they made provision for the Queen's people to be self-governing (like every hapu), to live in safety and according to laws, I think that Maori believed that Pakeha would share their respect for the lands, forests and fisheries, even if the guardians might not be named as Papatuanuku, Tane or Tangaroa. They must have been impressed by the enthusiasm of the naturalists as they collected and drew every tiny plant, the explorers as they asked interested questions about every rock, reef, headland and inlet.

We know that to the Maori leaders of the time, conversation, knowledge, and ideas were of paramount interest and importance. By 1840 they had adopted reading and writing with enthusiasm. They were taking on board aspects of the new European debate about humanism and human rights – illustrated by their freeing of slaves. Their experts were taking on scientific and technological ideas like ships with hulls and sails, ploughing, dairying and horticulture with new crops like peaches, potatoes and wheat, and the mills and bakeries to process it.

So, in effect, they were negotiating with the positive side of those they called Pakeha. Honourable, thoughtful, people, who loved and respected the natural world and brought knowledge and resources to improve human life. These seemed to be people with a willingness to live according to proper laws and customs, to converse and debate modern ways, and to negotiate the way ahead for the two peoples in co-operation and respect.

So why can't that still be us? Or again. Most of that description sits comfortably on me and on many of the Pakeha people I know.

Many of us struggle to live responsibly in a world threatened by global warming and an avalanche of waste. At the individual level we support green causes and don't drop plastic bottles. We may have a worm farm, re-use, recycle and so forth.

There are many things I feel proud about. This country has led the world in many social developments. Votes for women, labour relations such as the forty-hour week, no fault accident compensation, dairy co-operatives, a communication system covering the whole country based around the Post Office, and of course, Social Security. Social Security was a far different concept than Social Welfare, an Old World set of practices and ideas that has returned to replace it. The Social Security legislation was strongly supported by the Maori members. In the main debate, Eruera Tirikatene said that the legislation embodied concepts familiar and congenial to Maori – that we all take care of each other, that we make provision for everybody.

Taxation was somewhat thought of as the way people clubbed together to have things that only the richest few could buy for themselves – roads, bridges, X-ray machines, hospitals with staff, an accessible education system and so on.

The policies of a couple of decades that saw restricted imports and an emphasis on local industrial production, were driven by priorities of full employment and self-sufficiency. They did deliver considerably on employment, but became unpopular because they were seen as austerity, and the popular understanding of the reasons for, and benefits of, the restrictions was not sustained.

A couple of weeks ago I was very encouraged to read an article in the NZ Herald (Monday January 10, 2011) headed "Ethical business necessary to win back trust" by Phil O'Reilly, chief executive of Business NZ. Writing about the need for investment to enable the economy to grow, O'Reilly calls for a Regulatory Responsibility Act, which would require lawmakers to adhere to a set of principles of good practice. This would give various regulatory bodies power to enforce better dealing and socially and environmentally responsible behaviour by companies and businesses. He went on to list areas for improvement, which made sense to me and caused me to cheer when he concluded that we also need:

"better education for managers, more customer responsiveness, scrupulous environmental and waste management and wider investment in the local community. We need more export ambitions, transparency in reporting and accounting, inclusive hiring practices, win-win thinking when bargaining, more results-oriented pay, respect for staff, customers and community, and more action on productivity growth."

Those aspirations fit with a people- and earth-respecting future. The movement for ethical investments has produced stunning evidence that ethical companies are strong and profitable long-term for their investors.

So there is hope for Pakeha like me, that this country could be a place to be proud of, for its social policies, its inclusiveness, its biodiversity and conservation, its research and development, and its thriving economy, all under Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The population of European descent would have some work to do. We need to turn around our ignorance of Maori values (tikanga), both traditional ones and modern expressions which come as a response to current changes and developments; and we need to repair our ignorance of colonial history.

Then maybe we could get our heads around the minimal restoration being provided to Maori in various settlements. For example, we could understand that Maori are getting back what is theirs. We are not giving away something to them that is “ours”. As a nation, whether under Maori or Pakeha management, resources are ‘ours’ unless we short-sightedly enter into deals that siphon them or the profits overseas. We could take on board that Maori are getting back in settlements less than 10% of the resources which were alienated without consent and illegally. So who are these settlements generous to? We need to find in ourselves a generosity of spirit to welcome and celebrate these moves towards justice.

As we begin to see improvements for some Maori groups in health and education under kaupapa Maori (Maori agendas, input and control) at local hapu level, why not move faster towards restorative justice? Why not seriously prioritise employment for youth, with better, agreed strategies rather than mumbling the words?

Further, remember what Moea Armstrong wrote in this essay last year, ‘Maori did not cede sovereignty’. We need to put forward some of our best national treasures – people resources - into considering constitutional questions. How does that Rangatiratanga sovereignty come to expression today? How can governance work for us all?

We need something far more wide-ranging than the minimal nuts and bolts inquiry that National and the Maori Party have come up with. It will need time to get people from different perspectives and persuasions involved, from the newest immigrants to the oldest identities. Such a review will need to come up with a shared vision of how we could be as a nation, inclusive, life-loving and taking care of the natural world of which we are part.