Mitzi Nairn: Thoughts on social justice
ACCEPTING THE NAME PAKEHA
Transcript of recording 20/11/09

I want to talk about myself as being Pakeha, or what I mean when I say I'm Pakeha and why I'm really positive about Pakeha as an identity. I want to say a bit about how I think Pakeha is an ethnic identity, how I think it is a cultural identity, and some stuff like that.

I came to New Zealand when I was four. I very quickly realised that all migrant parents raise their children for the place they've left behind and the children find themselves in a friction sort of area because they're actually not growing up in the place their parents left behind. So I got a whole lot of stuff about being a Pom and not belonging, and (because of my English accent) being snooty, all sorts of very negative stuff straight away.

Jen: What's Pom an acronym for?
I don't think it's an acronym. I don't know where it came from but Pommie or Pommy was a New Zealand term for – English, often with an added expletive or two around it. It was clearly about rejection. So I decided quite early on, about six or seven, that I needed to blend in here and that what my parents thought I was and who I thought I was were always going to be slightly different. So that I had a kind of home voice and persona and I had a kind of out-there voice and persona which was quite different. For instance I very quickly realised that if I lost my basic English accent I could blend in better. To do that, because I couldn't really quite suss the New Zealand accent, I began to draw very heavily on my mother's Cockney accent which she could lose very readily when she wanted to but when she wasn't concentrating it sort of drifted back. To this day I have elements of Cockney in my speech, even in my quite posh speech. Cockneys - we say things like "wiv". We don't do a 'th' very much we do a 'v' for a 'th' and we often exchange v's and w's. There's a whole lot of just traces that I've got in my accent that come from not wanting that sort of posh received pronunciation English accent. Also, because I was interested in where I was and so was my family, I began to study the world around me physically, the hills, the plants and to find out their names, wanting to identify myself as a New Zealander, as a person of this place. I didn't actually use the term Pakeha in those days but this was something that I did inside me as a child. I wanted to belong. I think that was really the thing. And that tension between your family's previous environment and their present environment I think gives me quite a lot of insight into what goes on for migrants generally, and particularly for migrant children. I expect NZ born children of migrant parents have that same experience, it just doesn't quite fit you know.

I've been to England and I am not at home when I'm in England. That was one of the things that really interested me. Finding that I had no sense of coming home, no sense of familiarity. On the occasions when I met English family I felt strongly that I was a bit of a horror to them and they didn't seem right to me, in areas like hospitality, expressiveness, showing one's feelings. There are a whole lot of differences there that came across not exactly as disapproval, but you could see them filing me as a colonial, in some way. And I thought 'good, I don't fit here and I don't want to fit here'. I didn't take all that well to a lot of my relatives. In fact if we hadn't had some ancestors

in common, we'd have had nothing in common. And I suppose that could be partly how I got into issues around peace and justice and development and poverty and those things, being aware of boundaries and margins generally.

I guess to me, saying I'm Pakeha is partly a signal of my commitment and increasingly of my confident identity as belonging here not somewhere else. I think that's a question that all settlers' inheritors have to answer somehow, 'Do I belong here or is somewhere else really home?' Because for generations people talked about England as home and if they were rich enough they sent their children there to school: and New Zealand universities are still geared to things like Oxford scholarships and senior scholars you know, the colonial go home structures around higher education.

As I got into Tiriti work I became more and more aware of the word Pakeha as a Treaty word and prior to that I think it comes also in the Declaration. I'm sure Pakeha is a pretty early Maori word. Like many words, Pakeha as a word has gone through lots of shifts in usage. After being a Treaty word, it then fell more and more into disrepute as Maori became more and more disillusioned with the breaking of the Treaty and the heavy-handed and aggressive behaviour of the colonists from Britain. And so eventually by the 1940s or 50s you could probably say that Pakeha meant 'honky' you know it was really negative. There were all kinds of folk myths about what it really meant like, I don't know, like white fleas in the pa, those sorts of things. So when it came through in the Treaty I thought to myself, 'Hey the guy who used this word in translating the Treaty draft, he was a reasonably uptight Victorian clergyman. I do not think he would have used a rude word when he was translating something that was going to be signed on behalf of the Queen'. I mean it was a sort of a posh-prose occasion if you like, so he's hardly likely to suddenly put "and all the honkys that are here" in something. So I thought 'Hello, here's a word that's got a history, here's a word that started out one way and has gone through some adventures'. As a huge number of words have. In English, it's a kind of, you can trace many, many, many words through their ups and downs in respectability and coming and going and being used and not being used and so on. And Pakeha seemed to me particularly in Treaty terms to be an honourable, good identity and one that Maori really were positive about.

And I came to understand that Maori didn't actually use the word Maori for themselves until there were other people here from other areas and that's pretty true universally. When a new group comes in that were previously not even known about, the local people find they have to rename themselves. Like the Hopi Indians use 'people' for themselves and 'the others' for the others. And in the same way, Maori began to name themselves against the new people. Maori was already a word and it meant 'ordinary', 'normal', 'what you'd expect', 'the home team'. And Pakeha, particularly if you look at it around Treaty time, seems to mean 'the others' or 'the new ones' or 'the not us ones'. But rather than saying 'the non-Maori' it's put more positively, it's an actual 'The Pakeha'. And one of the things that confirmed that for me was when we were doing some work in the North among Anglican people and the Maori Anglicans are extremely coherent and they gave a lot of helpful, feedback when I was working in the church programme with people like Susan da Silva. About that time there was that discussion about using Tauiwi instead of

Pakeha, 'the people who have arrived', partly, and that's another sign that the word Pakeha has moved in how people understand it, because that pressure really came from Pacific people at that time who didn't think that they were Pakeha because they weren't white. So clearly along the line Pakeha had acquired being of English descent and being white skinned. On the other hand, in Treaty terms, everyone who arrives in New Zealand under the auspices of the kawanatanga, the governor side is actually Pakeha in Treaty terms, but in ethnic terms no. So I guess you can begin to see that there is a specific Treaty understanding of the word Pakeha but then there is also an ethnic understanding and a cultural understanding. And culturally Pakeha is, as I've said, quite different from English. You can test that by going to England.

Now where was I? Yeah, I was talking about the introduction of the word Tauiwi for people who have arrived since the sort of Treaty times, major Pakeha influx in the colonial era. We've now moved on to talk about Tangata Tiriti, which has somewhat replaced Tauiwi. But going back to the Northern Maori Anglicans they said, "No, don't call yourselves Tauiwi. Tauiwi is the word in the Bible that translates 'strangers' and 'outsiders' and 'Gentiles'. But you're not strangers to us, we know who you are, you're Pakeha. You belong here." And it came to me quite clearly that to be given a name in the language of the land and of the Tangata Whenua is a huge gift and a huge gift of identity. So it is to me, to say I'm Pakeha is both a claim and a reassurance that I belong here, that I'm supposed to be here and my home isn't somewhere else. Which is just as well because when I try somewhere else I don't feel at home. So taking, accepting or claiming the word Pakeha for me is actually an act of belonging and commitment. It's a gift. You can't be much more belonging that that really.

One of the pluses of Pakeha identity, which is descended from European identity, is that self-criticism is quite a high value. That in my culture and in the wider European culture, or certainly the wider British culture, self-improvement is a very acceptable thing. That you try to learn more and become a better person and/or move yourself in the direction of the person you'd like to be. To critique your own culture, it's not a majority thing, but it's not an unacceptable cultural thing to do. And that's really helpful in terms of change. It must be really difficult if for some reason you're under pressure to hang on to every little bit of the inherited culture and not change anything. Because real live cultures change all the time and you might as well be part of that change in a positive way and try and steer yourself in some way. So that sort of self-understanding, self-critique, self-development if you like is a really important cultural benefit of being Pakeha. And therefore it's a perfectly feasible project to become more like the person you want to be. In which case what I want to be as Pakeha is more like the people that I think Maori who signed the Treaty thought or hoped we were or would be.

That means for me I need more skills in being cooperative and collaborative and I need to abandon some of those skills or habits of bossiness and competition and being so self-reliant I never let anyone know what's going on for me, you know. Yet one of the things that I do, and I don't know if it's to do with a few centuries of Christian background or what, is I try to do good things to and for other people. So why the heck shouldn't I encourage or be gracious when other people want to do good things for me, or with me, or to me. Why should I be so darned prickly? I

was raised, in a way to be the only one allowed to give, if you see what I mean, and that's not helpful is it? There's a lovely Peanuts cartoon where Lucy says "Why are we on earth anyway?" and I think it's Charlie Brown says "We're here to help others". And Lucy thinks for a bit and then she says "Oh, what are the others here for?" That pretty much sums up the need I have to find a kind of give and take generosity of spirit, which I think is really hugely important. I think it is a spiritual question about identity. I think it is quite a central one because over and over again the first things that people say in a critique of Pakeha culture are how competitive and individualistic we actually are. And that sort of standing on your own two feet sort of thing and having a very small circle of family that you actually take any real responsibility with. Those are differences between us and some other cultures. So I suppose trying to interact, well, finding that we actually have historically and in the present day that we have interacted with Pacific culture, particularly Maori culture but also being really open to that without wanting to take over somebody else's culture. There are things to be learned and admired that we could do with a bit more of. I don't want to become Maori but there are many things that I have learnt from being with Maori that I think 'Yes. I could do with being a bit more hospitable. I could do with being a bit more encouraging to other people or whatever'. Which isn't to say that Maori can't absolutely bite each other's hands and feet off if they get going, but you know there's that kind of manaaki, that kind of positive nurturing, the best translation I can find for it is generosity of spirit.

If I want to be a bit more theoretical one of the things that Pakeha do, is because we're the dominant group and very powerful, we don't actually carry much awareness of ourselves as cultural beings. You often hear Pakeha people saying "We don't have a culture." And we probably don't even see ourselves as having an ethnicity, the way we talk about "ethnic things" as if fish and chips wasn't ethnic food. You know, ethnic food is curry or stir-fries or you know what I mean, sushi or something. But actually fish and chips is jolly ethnic and so for that matter is roast leg of lamb and roast potatoes, you know, it's very ethnic food. But we tend to have a history, we have a long history of cutting out our culture and ethnicity and taking a national identity and saying "We are New Zealanders. I'm a New Zealander." You hear that a lot don't you. Or "I'm a Kiwi". Not "I'm a Pakeha New Zealander" but "I'm a New Zealander". And what that does is it means that all New Zealanders of other backgrounds are somehow put on a back foot as if they've got to jump three hurdles and be like me before they have that belonging. Well goodness knows Maori belonged before my people did. And in fact in the Declaration they named, they accepted the term Niu Tireni, New Zealand for the country because they knew that's how it would appear on maps and they wanted to talk to the international mapping world if you like, and get into all that flags and nationality stuff. So to be Maori New Zealanders and to be Pakeha New Zealanders seems to me to be very, very sensible. And once you've established that there are Pakeha New Zealanders of often maybe Dutch ancestry or Jewish ancestry or Polish ancestry lots of people of Croatian ancestry who've been here for yonks. So cutting out that ethnicity and cutting out that culture and going straight to the nation is actually I think a habit of dominance. To say we are how things are and everyone has got to assimilate, I think assimilate is the word, be like me, be similar. And it's hugely unjust when you come down to it. It's a denial of the identity of other New Zealanders, it calls it in question.

There's this stupid advertisement on TV, that's been on for a couple of years now, and it's got an Indian family at a barbeque I think and the jingle goes, "You'll never be a Kiwi till you love our Watties sauce". Now that may well be Watties wanting to sell a few bottles of tomato sauce but if you actually dig a little around that, what's that actually saying? Why the heck should an Indian, a person of Indian extraction who may be from Fiji, or who may look Indian but may actually be from Sri Lanka, or you know that sort of sub-continent ancestry, why the hell should they have to like tomato sauce? Or sausages for that matter? Imagine how annoyed we'd be if Watties said "You'll never be a Kiwi till you love our curry sauce". Or you know it just wouldn't be, they wouldn't think of doing it. Now that's something to do with power and dominance of a culture and an ethnic group. So I think one of the things I try to do always is say, when I say "I'm a New Zealander", I say, "I'm a Pakeha New Zealander", or "I'm a New Zealander of English and Welsh ancestry". I try to name that, to claim a little more space in the identity market if you like.

I think those are most of the things that I was thinking about.

Jen: Mitzi I heard you saying that Pakeha was quite a negative term and got that negativity in the 1940s and 1950s in particular. And it seems to me that there are still a lot of people who have a feeling that it's a very negative term and don't like to be referred to as Pakeha and use the word New Zealander without any indication of ethnicity because they don't know another word to use. And so I wonder what your perspective is on why that negativity is still there, why it is an issue that we can't have that as an option even in the Census and how you respond when people express their uncertainty or unhappiness about using that term.

I think it is easy to underestimate how much hostility many Pakeha still feel towards Maori. Partly because it's not that respectable since we got good race relations and all that stuff. Actually when I started doing anti-racism work the amount of venomous hostility and anti-Maori feeling was terrifying to me. It was like, I don't know, popping horrible pus filled boils or something and it just came jetting out. And that's all gone somewhere and while I do believe that for some people their prejudices have dissipated as they've had more contact with Maori or learnt more, I think there is still a large number of Pakeha there in the woodwork, or people of European descent, or English descent or British descent who are actually still carrying a lot of hostility or suspicion or wariness. And there is a lot of, still a lot of white superiority and white supremacist thinking. And I don't mean chaps in Christchurch who wear leather and shave their heads and go around being skinheads and calling themselves white supremacists. I think it is quite well embedded in very large areas of society. Some of it is based on growing up with huge separation so there is an unknown aspect to Maori and to things Maori. There is a fearfulness. I don't know if you could say it has been cultivated, you can't really say it's been, but it may have been cultivated, but it's been entrenched for a very long time. So people who haven't had positive experiences or some reason to think their way around what their thoughts and attitudes are, people are just kind of carrying nasty little germs here and there, or something. You know it's like those bad bacteria you can have in your guts but they don't usually flare up.

Because one of the things that shocked me in the early 1960s when the Hunn Report came out, which was a big government review of how Maori were succeeding or failing in all the major social

indicators or aspects of society, that was the first time I read with shock about our policies of assimilation. I'm quoting, "Our policies of assimilation have not fully worked". And that was the first time I actually knew we'd had policies of assimilation. That's how hidden some of the origins of some of this stuff are. But we've actually had official policies of assimilation of Maori. Either dying out or becoming us were the two options really for about 100 years at that point. And then we went on to say "We're not going to call it assimilation. We're going to call it integration". And then most of us go to school, have been to school if we've grown up in this country and a large number of people have been teachers or members of school boards or whatever. And I think one of the things that makes teachers a bit twitchy is that, how can I put it, is that formal education, schooling, has been one of the handmaidens of assimilation. That was where Maori children learnt how to be nearly as good English people as English people if you like. I mean we all know, or most of us know the horror stories of being punished for speaking Maori in the playground and so on. But if you go back over heaps and heaps and heaps of the resources that were used in primary schools right through the 20th century till about the 1960s certainly, it's very assimilationist. It's very where the colonists, the settlers, are the brave good guys and the Maori are fairly ambivalently treated. They're a mix of dangerous warriors and cannibals and rather feckless kind of guitar playing, happy-go-lucky people. The image, the image is very patchy, it comes and goes, it's contradicted and so on, but the overall result of all that stuff is that if you had a choice you wouldn't want to be one - a Maori person. And that assimilationist agenda has been like a selling agenda. It has sold settler culture and it has in all sorts of ways, not huge attacks but undermined things Maori - language, culture, customs. Maori efforts to be assimilated have also been belittled so that those no win messages to Maori send some messages to Pakeha at the same time. So I think if we really historically unpicked our education system we would find some fairly strong generators or maintainers of some of those negatives about Maori language and identity.

There has also been a certain amount of prejudice and name calling in both directions. I think Pakeha as a term of abuse or negativity has been quite strong at times for Maori children for instance. People have had, I can't say everyone had the same experience in their playgrounds, but I suspect there have been some pretty raging hostilities and a certain amount of bullying. A certain amount of name-calling and so on and that may all have fed some of those things. And there has been a great absence in, on the whole, in media generally and not only school resources but TV, the radio or the newspapers, very little counter information or propaganda or positive information - whatever you like to call it. So that by its absence from media, say newspapers, probably the word Pakeha has joined other rude words. I mean one of the marks of a rude word is that it is not used in the paper. Does that make sense?

Susan da Silva tells that lovely story about the woman in the workshop who said she didn't want to be called Pakeha because she didn't want to be known by a Maori word and Susan said "Oh, what do you like to be called?" and she said "I'm a Kiwi". And there was a sort of a pause and everyone started to giggle a bit and she said "Oh that's an English word now". What's going on there?

Jen: I was wondering too because there are lots of terms that are used - Pakeha, Tauiwi, Tangata Tiriti, if you could talk just a little bit about the distinction between those three in particular.

Okay. Well Pakeha is confusing as a word because it has all these different usages. It's got shifts in its usage across history. It's been in and then diminished and been a bad word and then it's become a positive and a pride word and an identity word in a way that it wasn't years ago. It's developed an ethnic meaning and a cultural meaning. It's become less appropriate for people who are aware of themselves as being ethnically or culturally different from Pakeha of English or British descent.

And one term that was tried for a while and didn't last very long was manuhiri, which in the marae setting means the visiting group. There are huge rituals at the beginning of a marae encounter that shift the manuhiri from a strange otherness to a belonging for the term of the encounter, so that the manuhiri become in some ways at home alongside the Tangata Whenua, the people of the marae. But manuhiri was too active a word, it didn't have any spare capacity really. It was a distortion, when it means visitors to the marae on this occasion, to make it mean people who have come to the country, particularly if they were then staying for the rest of their lives. So manuhiri as I say was not used for very long.

But then tauiwi was tried, that's tau and iwi. To tau somewhere is to arrive or to land. So the little birds that introduced themselves in the 1870s the tauhou, the silvereyes, you know they landed, came flying in and they tau. And Tauranga the landing place and so on. So to tau is to arrive or land so that people, the iwi who have landed more recently I suppose and that is quite a comfortable term in some ways for Pacific people. Certainly in the Methodist Church it is a well established term, but as I said earlier the, there are questions about it for using for Pakeha, people of Pakeha identity using it for themselves because it actually has a less belonging aspect than Pakeha does. So it's one of those words whose meaning is floating a bit.

A term that I think is a helpful one is Tangata - the people, Tiriti - the Treaty, Treaty people. So you have Tangata Whenua who are the people who are the land and Tangata Tiriti, the people who are here by the Treaty and really everyone who isn't Maori is here by right of Treaty - Tangata Tiriti. If you actually feel you are here temporarily, for instance you don't take citizenship, then you are still here by right of Treaty but you probably shouldn't use the term Pakeha for yourself. I don't know, I don't want to be rigid about that but Pakeha does have or is moving towards, 'this is where I belong and somewhere else is not. I don't belong anywhere else'.

Jen: What about people who are descendents of the Chinese who came in the 1880s for instance, what naming is there?

I think they would be entitled to call themselves Pakeha because they are here by right of the Treaty and they don't belong anywhere else. They could call themselves Pakeha of Chinese ancestry. It's about what they feel comfortable with really. I know quite a lot of people who would describe themselves as Pakeha of Dutch ancestry. And so I think sort of an unqualified Pakeha is probably of British ancestry or possibly Croatian ancestry. It varies, moves over time, probably because if you are New Zealand born and born of New Zealand borns then your connection to your ancestral identity is of a different nature probably. It's not unimportant but it is different in nature from knowing your way around the home village if you see what I mean. You

would have to be shown around if you went back to your village in Croatia or Holland or wherever you know.

But people who are of European or of English descent are entitled to say that they are a New Zealander of Scottish descent or a New Zealander of English descent if they want to. And certainly there would be people who think of themselves as New Zealanders with a strong Scottish identity in parts of Southland for instance and I've no idea how well they fit in when they go to Scotland, or whether they're the only one wearing tartan you know. All these terms I think are to some extent in flux. I think that there are probably shifts within decades, and people who are born in different cohorts possibly have different ways of positioning themselves. And that's healthy, that's as it should be.