

Auckland College of Education Seminar Series  
23 March 2004

*Maori and Non-Maori: Which Way Forward?*

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**Abstract**

A 'culturalist' orthodoxy dominates the nation's discussions of Maori issues, ethnic and cultural diversity, and the role of the Treaty of Waitangi. According to supporters of culturalism, recognising the Treaty leads to justice for Maori and provides a sound foundation for New Zealand's ethnically diverse society.

I argue the opposite case claiming that culturalism leads to the establishment of pre-modern, anti-democratic conditions with serious consequences for New Zealand's future.

An alternative approach to ethnic politics is proposed.

(The seminar draws on a lecture given at Georgetown University during my Fulbright Senior Scholarship to Washington DC in 2003.)

## **Introduction**

This seminar is about how we have arrived at the current Maori – nonMaori impasse. I draw upon a decade of research into the Maori – nonMaori issue to propose a new way of interpreting events of the past four decades and to recommend ideas for the future.

The orthodox explanation for the impasse ('culturalism') conceals and confuses more than it explains. In contrast I use a neotribal capitalism model of explanation. This model explains changes to ethnic relations in terms of economic changes. The main concepts I use are: 'neotribal capitalism', 'neotraditionalism', and 'culturalism'.

I begin by identifying the main issue then briefly outline the global context within which changes to ethnic relations in New Zealand have occurred. This is followed by discussions of 'neotribal capitalism', 'neotraditionalism' and 'culturalism'. I conclude by describing some of the essential concepts and policies required to maintain New Zealand's democratic society.

## **The Issue**

Establishing a democratic political system means that New Zealand, like all nations, past and present, must solve a fundamental issue of political organisation. Should society be organised according to kinship or according to contract (ie non-kin association)? The re-emergence of a pre-democratic tribal elite in recent decades has re-awakened this issue as this group makes a determined bid for kinship-based structures to be incorporated at an institutional, perhaps even constitutional, level. Until there is national consensus about this fundamental issue there can be little consensus about the type of political institutions, processes and practices that ensure social stability.

## **The Context**

Since the late 1960s there has been a reversal of the steady movement towards democracy that characterised the preceding two centuries. Mass democratic movements have given way to various ethnic or religious fundamentalisms under the leadership of undemocratic elites who control all of society's spheres; - the economic, political and ideological. Stable democratic nations are increasingly characterised by apathy, even cynicism, towards democracy's benefits.

This reversal is caused by the re-organisation of the global economy, a process known variously as late capitalism, globalisation, disorganised capitalism or post-fordism. It is a re-arrangement of access to global resources in favour of the wealthy. Political ideologies have been particularly successful in justifying the new economic organisation, often drawing on democratic rhetoric to do so.

The wealthy elites come from a range of backgrounds. Depending on local circumstances and the way these circumstances interact with global forces, the elites are as diverse as the re-emergent precolonial aristocracies (in New Zealand), or individuals and corporations with enormous wealth (legally or illegally acquired), or ethnic and religious oligarchies.

The New Zealand experience of this global trend is neotribal capitalism. Its justifying ideology is neotraditionalism, or the idea that the traditional tribal social structure has been revived for the benefit of the people.

## **Neotribal Capitalism**

I argue that the post-Treaty settlement tribes (neotribes) are privatised economic corporations. In contrast to other economic organisations, the neotribes claim political status. It is a claim justified by the belief in the historical continuity with the traditional tribe, a continuity expressed in the Treaty of Waitangi. Since the 1980s many Maori and

nonMaori New Zealanders have accepted the neotribal elite's claim that the neotribe is the direct inheritor of the past. Its document of inheritance is the Treaty of Waitangi. Its advocate is the Waitangi Tribunal.

It is true that some form of continuity exists between the traditional tribe and the neotribe. Lands and waters are the same physical phenomena. Tribal members are descendants of traditional kin groups. What has changed in a fundamental way though is the meaning of those economic resources and social relations. The change is so great that the social structure of the twenty-first century is not the same society as the traditional tribe.

The reason for the break lies in the new forms of organising tribal resources. Economic resources are available for commodity production and wealth generation in ways that did not happen in the traditional tribe. Importantly the changed meaning of the resources also changes the relationships between people. Traditional tribes are redistributive economies with hierarchical status-based social relationships. Capitalist neotribes are, like all capitalist corporations, accumulative economies. It is accumulation that alters the meaning of the resources, of peoples' relationships to the resources, and of the relationships of people to each another.

However, despite the real difference between the traditional tribe and the neotribe, many New Zealanders believe that they are one and the same social organisation. As a result of this belief in the inheritance claim, the neotribes have become incorporated into government and public institutions. This process rapidly acquired its own momentum and is already in its third stage.

The first stage, beginning in the early 1980s, was the neotribes' inheritance of the Treaty settlements. The second Treaty inheritance stage began with the post-1987 neotribal claim for a political partnership with the government. Since that time 'partnership' has been brokered into government legislation, policy and practices through Treaty principles. The third Treaty inheritance stage goes further, into the area of sovereignty.

From the late 1990s Margaret Wilson's enthusiasm for Eddie Durie's 'strategic plan for constitutional change' has the Treaty as a 'basic tenet' in a new constitutional order.

In this way, - that is, through the acceptance of the neotribes' claim for Treaty inheritance and through the stages of increasing political institutionalisation, what is, in reality, a private economic corporation has become a powerful political entity. Its elite is in positions of power and influence within government institutions.

The result is to seriously undermine an essential condition of democracy, - the constitutional separation of the economic and political spheres.

### **Neotraditionalism and Culturalism**

The intriguing question is; - how has a non-democratic elite been so successful? How has the process happened so rapidly and smoothly? The neotribes and their elite leadership are recognised as the inheritor of the economic resources of the traditional tribal social structure, as the legitimate inheritor of a Treaty-based political partnership with the government, and as a claimant for constitutional status. These claims are open to considerable dispute yet, until recently, that dispute has not occurred. Why not?

The answer lies in the two groups involved, - the supporters of culturalism (mainly people who self-identify as Pakeha biculturalists) on the one hand and the neotribal supporters on the other. Despite efforts to regard these two groups as fundamentally different, both are in fact remarkably similar. This is why they work together so well. Both groups belong to the postwar new professional class. Educated together, radicalised together, and employed together, they experienced the 'goodness and power' paradox of earlier generations of educated liberals, who, on attaining power, must put their 'goodness' into effect.

As part of the late capitalism phenomenon, new middle-class liberals abandoned class politics for identity politics in pursuit of the answer to social inequality. Identity politics

goes by various names: multiculturalism, identity politics, diversity, and cultural politics. It was to be the new liberal route to social justice (and cheaper too). Its ideology is 'culturalism'. Its political method was direct participation by identity groups into political institutions and processes.

It is here that the identity politics approach of the liberal left has come unstuck. The brokerage of un-democratic groups into these institutions and processes has enabled the self-serving neotribal elite to acquire and maintain positions of power, influence and privilege. This elite is no longer accountable to the marginalised group. They represent no one but themselves but still justify their position in terms of the original claim to represent marginalised Maori.

Identity politics has unintended and serious consequences for the political left. It creates an elite group of brokers. Brokerage politics in social organisations based upon kinship leads to nepotism and corruption. This form of politics has entered New Zealand institutions to an, as yet, unknown extent. People who are not in an identified group tend to be overlooked despite their needy status. Ultimately the political philosophy of the left becomes confused and confusing even to its own supporters. These unintended outcomes of identity politics disillusion the liberal left. Many have turned to the liberal right in their search for democratic answers to issues of social organisation.

## **Culturalism**

The next section contains brief comments about the culturalist approach to ethnicity, culture, and history. The similarity between culturalist ideas and the neotribal beliefs go a long way towards explaining the neotribal elite's success.

### ***Ethnicity and Culture***

According to culturalist ideology, ethnicity or race causes culture. This means that a biological or genetic fact is regarded as a social fact. Once ethnicity or race is accepted as

a primary social category it is a short step to regarding ethnicity as a political category. This leads to the view that Maori, as a historically distinguishable ethnic group, should be treated socially and politically as different from other ethnic or racial groups. It is a 'two worlds' approach to New Zealand's society, one that actually creates rigid ethnic boundaries out of the very fluid ethnic mix that is the actual social reality.

The 'two worlds' view supports the neotraditionalists' belief that Maori culture (including tribal social organisation, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, even ways of thinking), expresses a primordial ethnic identity. The collusion between neotraditionalists and culturalists has many consequences.

Educational research is one of many deeply affected areas. The idea of 'ethnic ways of knowing' (a kaupapa Maori epistemology) is common. Only those 'of the blood' can fully understand and participate in this Maori 'way of knowing'.

Neotribal brokers (those charged with crossing the newly formed ethnic boundaries) are included on a wide range of research committees that monitor, fund and audit research that involves Maori interests. Separate Maori research methods courses exist in many tertiary institutions and at the national level. A government-funded Maori Centre for Excellence in Research and a separate Maori committee for the Tertiary Education Commission's Performance Based Research Funding Scheme have been established in recent years.

There are many consequences that flow from including Kaupapa Maori research into institutions, such as universities, that are responsible for the 'open' and critical nature of the public sphere. Most serious is the weakening of that critical function itself.

The academic role is also affected. Academics become political lobbyists rather than political critics. Research is undertaken on behalf of the researched group and tends to confirm rather than scrutinise the group's position. What people say about themselves is taken as given rather than critically examined. Because commitment to a kaupapa Maori

approach is necessary for access to research funding, the pool of critical researchers rapidly dries up.

Culturalism has become the intellectual orthodoxy through an identifiable whakapapa. Anne Salmond's 1985 'Maori Epistemologies' was seminal in promoting the culturalist-informed research. The writings of Sydney Mead, Linda Smith, Graham Smith, Russell Bishop and Mason Durie are also highly influential in many undergraduate and graduate courses.

Despite the abundance of writing that criticises culturalism, it is difficult for students to find them. Publications by Peter Munz, W. H. Oliver, Andrew Sharp, Erich Kolig, Stephen Webster and myself (people based in New Zealand), and Roger Sandall, Brian Barry, Adam Kuper, Jonathan Friedman, Maurice Godelier, and Alain Babadzan (to name a few based in overseas universities) offer substantial criticisms both of culturalism and its propagator, postmodernism. The problem is not the existence of culturalism as an intellectual approach. There must be room for all intellectual approaches. The problem is its stranglehold as the orthodoxy.

### *History*

Supporters of culturalism and neotraditionalism share the view that 'history makes people', rather than 'people make history'. This 'history as destiny' approach underpins the Waitangi Tribunal reports. It explains the commitment of people to the Treaty of Waitangi as a 'living document' or 'covenant' that exists above and outside peoples' real lived circumstances. It is an appeal that resounds with the religious, the romantic, the postmodernist and the culturalist alike.

It is also an approach that weakens the materialist philosophy of democracy at its core. Democrats are people of this world who believe that human action, not 'destiny', 'spirit' or 'history' changes circumstances to make history. For democrats, the Treaty of



Waitangi is one of several important events in the road to building a democratic nation. It should be honoured for its place in history not treated as a political manifesto.

Despite evoking the otherworldly 'history is destiny' approach in its service the political interests of the neotribal elite are very much of this world. The Treaty is not only its document of inheritance but also the doctrine of its neotraditionalist ideology and political-economic interests. In that role it has been extremely successful.

### **Democratic Conditions**

Democracy conditions are undermined by culturalism. Democratic societies are organised, not according to kinship, but according to contracts between individuals and associations of individuals. The constant balancing of the tensions between people with different interests requires the constitutional separation of the public from the private spheres, the separation of the political from the economic, the separation of the religious from the public, and balance between central and local government control.

The individual, not the kin-group (or any other form of closed group), is the basic unit of democracy. This means that groups in the public domain are associations of individuals. Affirmative action programmes can be based on this concept because the right to entitlements is based upon the individual's needs not upon the group's needs. A group-rights or 'diversity within unity' approach is incompatible with democracy unless the groups are recognised as such associations.

The concept of the universal human being is a fundamental democratic principle. It is undermined by policies that recognise ethnic identity as the primary social and political category. We are born as human beings and become acculturated into a particular ethnic, religious or social group. Our primary human identity makes a common humanity possible. Those who claim ethnic primacy (the belief that we are born with an ethnic identity already in place) deny the possibility of universal humanity. (Education is one area where the latter view is dominant. Because children are regarded as members of

their ethnic group education's main purpose is to recognise and develop this ethnic identity. The consequences of such an anti-universalist approach are considerable).

Culture is the 'raw material' of the social contract between individuals. Language, customs and values are shared in the public sphere. That sharing makes the national culture. Relationships and beliefs that could threaten the delicate balance of contractual cohesion are left to the private sphere. There, people can organise as they please, worship as they desire, and practise those customs of their ancestral groups that are not included in the national culture of the public sphere.

People create history as they change their circumstances. Beliefs in birth-ascribed status, the individual's placement within the group, caste-ascribed hierarchies, restricted knowledge, and a prescribed historical destiny limit the democratic principle of limitless human agency.

Democracy is not endlessly tolerant. Beliefs and practices incompatible with democracy are either not tolerated or tolerated only in the private sphere.

#### **What is required to strengthen democratic conditions?**

1. Constitutional and political changes to re-affirm democracy.
2. A future-oriented national culture that supports democracy.

#### ***Constitutional and Political Recommendations***

- Re-define the neotribes as private economic corporations
- Reject the idea that the neotribes are partners in a political or constitutional relationship with the government.
- Remove all political functions from the neotribes (except in their capacity as lobbyists and associations of citizens).
- Remove neotribal positions in all government institutions (eg. central and local government, education and health). Redefine as interest groups.

- Remove Treaty principles from legislation and policy.
- Limit Treaty settlements to specific historical breaches of the law and redefine Treaty settlement recipients as associations of individuals.
- Abolish the Maori parliamentary seats.
- Use affirmative action programmes justified by particular circumstances/need (eg. Anti-smoking campaigns with a Maori cultural focus and Maori language programmes).

## *2. Recommendations for strengthening the National Culture*

- Promote a future oriented national culture with a degree of historical continuity. This approach supports affirmative policies in employment, housing, education and health that provide the material base for social cohesion. People will commit themselves and their descendants to a unifying national cultural identity if the nation offers real material opportunities. A national culture should be the social expression of this shared belief in a common future. A sense of continuity with the past rather than a romantic desire to revive the past is based upon thorough historical knowledge of the history of New Zealand's diverse ethnic groups *and* the history of universalising democracy.
- Reject the causal link between ethnic/ racial heritage and culture and promote cultural mixing on a nation-wide scale.
- Value those aspects of Maori culture that are compatible with democracy. Define and value indigeneity in terms of uniqueness not priority.
- Replace 'diversity within unity' with 'unity from diversity'. Cultures that contribute to a unifying national culture are changed fundamentally within the process of contribution.

**Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the Auckland College of Education Research Grants Committee for a research grant in semester two 2003 that enable me to study intellectual influences on Maori research. I also wish to thank the Fulbright Foundation for a Senior Scholarship to the Centre for Australian and New Zealand Studies, Georgetown University, Washington DC. The Fulbright grant enabled me to extend the scholarship that informs my research.