

THOUGHTS ON MAORI SOVEREIGNTY by Coral Broadbent

(Prepared for inclusion in the Schools' Resource Kit to be sponsored by the Programme On Racism)

Maori Sovereignty is a phrase that has recently come to prominence. It is based on the premise that two sovereign powers - the Maori and the British - met at Waitangi in 1840 and signed a treaty between equals. At that time the Maori outnumbered the British in New Zealand ten to one and there is no indication that any Maori chief acknowledged or even hinted that he understood the negotiations required him to relinquish any part of his sovereignty. The Maori came to the negotiations expecting protection, co-operation and the advantages of technology in return for their acknowledgement of Queen Victoria and consent to allow the Pakeha to live alongside them.

Captain Hobson, on the other hand, had orders to:-

*".... look rather to the permanent welfare of the tribes now to be connected with us, than to their supposed claim to the maintenance of their own laws and customs. The Queen's sovereignty must be vindicated and the benefits of a rule extending its protection to the whole community must be made known by the practical exercise of its authority." (1)*

It would consequently appear that the British did not perceive that such sovereignty could or should exist amongst people whom they regarded as pagan and uncivilized.

The Treaty that resulted reflected this ambiguity. There is confusion of words and meaning between the English and Maori language version. The Maori word for sovereignty is 'mana' but the word was not used in the Maori translation. Instead the word 'governorship', a new concept for Maori people, was used. In the English version the chiefs yielded to Queen Victoria the exclusive rights to pre-emption over certain lands - though this was not mentioned in Maori translations. There were other such discrepancies. In 1842 a missionary Octavius Hadfield (later Bishop Hadfield) wrote:-

*"....it is broadly hinted that the Treaty was not a bona fide act, but a mere blind to deceive...The Queen takes possession of the soil and the Maoris are looked upon as nonentities...." (2)*

In the hundred and forty-three years following the signing of the Treaty there have been numerous unsuccessful attempts to petition the British sovereign to have its terms ratified. A deputation of Ngaa Puhī chiefs attempted to gain access to Queen Victoria for this purpose in 1882 and another deputation led by King Tawhiao went to England for the same purpose two years later. A bill to give Maori lands, fisheries and seafood sources the protection promised under the Treaty was drawn up by Kotahitanga mo te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Maori Parliament) and introduced into Parliament where it was

finally rejected in 1896. Twenty-eight years later the prophet and leader Ratana again attempted to have a petition presented to British royalty, and once again the effort was a failure. Ratana's subsequent petition to make the terms of the treaty binding on the New Zealand parliament also failed. In recent years further unsuccessful attempts have been made to petition the Crown with grievances under the treaty.

On the simplest level the promoters of Maori sovereignty assert that the treaty which should have guaranteed a mutual sharing and advantage for two sovereign peoples in actual fact began a process of undermining Maori autonomy and replacing it by exclusive British control. The mono-cultural institutions and practices in New Zealand today with their purely British origins, the loss of Maori land, the struggle to retain the language and the social and educational disadvantages suffered by Maori people all reinforce this view.

If Maori sovereignty is to be recognised then the Pakeha will have to be prepared to "go back" and re-negotiate the treaty as between two sovereign peoples. Power would have to be analysed and shared. Institutions and practices both cultural and economic, would have to be re-shaped so that they became bi-cultural. The individualism of the Pakeha community with its pervading capitalist ethic would need to be re-assessed in the light of Maori values of communal possession and New Zealand's colonial inheritance would have to give place to a truly Pacific future.

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1. Interpolation by Lord John Russell on Colonial Office Permanent Secretary Steven's instructions to Captain Hobson.  
cited: "A Show of Justice" by Alan Ward. O.U.P. 1973. p.38.
  2. Letter to his mother, written at Port Nicholson ,Wellington. January 27th 1842.

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For further reading on this topic see:-

Maori Sovereignty - Donna Awatere (Broadsheet June 1982-  
Jan. 1983)

The Treaty of Waitangi - R.J. Walker

Church & Society Commission Submissions to the Waitangi  
National Trust Board

Nga Tamatoa, Submissions on the Treaty of Waitangi Bill, 1975

Maori-Pakeha Relationships: an obstacle race - S.M. Mead

(All the above papers are available on request - P.O. Box 68-148,  
Auckland.)