

Mallard hits at 'sexist' Maori ritual

RACE RELATIONS: Time-wasting claim wins support from Maori Affairs Minister and a blast from Titewhai Harawira.

BY STUART DYE AND JON STOKES

SOME Maori ceremonies in schools are time-wasting and sexist, says Education Minister Trevor Mallard. Mr Mallard, who is also Race Relations Minister, used a speech to the first-time principals' induction programme in Wellington yesterday to urge a rethink on the influence of Maori culture in schools.

He said he was struck by the number of powhiri he attended where female students were relegated to a supporting role.

"While it is important to respect the traditions and place of rana whenua, it is important that this is not at the expense of the ideals and traditions of New Zealand education and its commitment to equality for all," he said.

He told the Weekend Herald his comments were triggered by recently attending a function supposed to take 20 minutes which dragged on for an hour and a half.

"I know it is treading in sensitive waters, and I know some people are not happy with the comments I make.

"I have a responsibility as Minister of Education to ensure kids in schools, especially girls in schools, have the type of education which does not exclude them."

School principals the Weekend Herald spoke to yesterday were divided on the issue.

Brent Lewis, principal at Avondale

College in West Auckland, said powhiri were a rare and infrequent occurrence that did not disrupt the school. Robin Staples, from Sir Edmund Hillary Collegiate in Manukau, agreed powhiri could take a lot of time, "depending on how important the visit".

The school has an ethnic mix of about 40 per cent Samoan, 20 percent Cook Islands, 15 per cent Tongan and the rest Maori and a small percentage of others.

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TREVOR MALLARD
EDUCATION MINISTER

"We have to recognise all cultures and languages spoken," Mr Staples said. "That's an inclusive and positive thing."

But he said females were not sidelined by the ceremonies; they simply had a different role.

"We acknowledge different genders, different ways and different cultures. It's not one is right and one is wrong; it's cultural tolerance."

Another Auckland principal, who declined to be named, said he understood Mr Mallard's view, but the minister needed to concentrate on serious education issues, not "minor problems".

"With NCEA and staffing issues, the minister wants to talk about this? Give me

strength."

Mr Mallard said he expected to be criticised for his stance.

"There is always a danger when you raise issues that people who have problems with the fact we have Maori culture in New Zealand will jump on to a bandwagon."

But a big group in the middle was uncomfortable with the fact that people were expected to be quiet and put up with practices with which they were not happy.

Maori Affairs Minister Parekura Horomia supported some of Mr Mallard's concerns.

He had been to an opening at Wairoa College where the powhiri took nearly five hours. "I have heard from students saying, 'Crikey, this is taking so long we don't have a chance to have our say'."

Maori Council member Titewhai Harawira took issue with Mr Mallard's comments.

"Who does he think he is?" she asked, describing Mr Mallard's comments as an insult to kaumatua and kuia (elders).

But she said it was up to those present to ensure speeches did not take too long.

"If I am sitting there for half an hour and the men go on for more than that, I just stand up and tell them to shut up.

"Now, if Parekura wants to sit through something like that for five hours, he's got no balls, typical of Maori men."