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Some Reflections on 'He Matapuna'

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I meet a lot of people who ask what is special about the place of the Maori view in any plan for the future of New Zealand. Sometimes they are not even clear whether it should be accepted as a separate view. Although racial issues are now being stated much more bluntly there is still a lingering reluctance to accept that a Maori view of the New Zealand scene can be so different.

In the latter part of 1979, much of my time was spent working on "He Matapuna", a publication in which the Planning Council invited several leading Maori thinkers to say it the way they saw it. The authors challenged all Pakehas to decide whether they could now listen to what the Maori is saying. In the recent Listener editorial, "Listen, Pakeha" the question was again put; "How does one learn to listen?"

It is important for the future of this country that we each find our own answer to this question. There can be no government edict or social plan which tells us how to do it. Race relations do not exist in the abstract; they exist only as the sum of all our personal relationships and all our personal decisions. One can however share one's own experience - in the same way as the authors of "He Matapuna" - and this is what I have set out to do in this article.

Thinking back to the post-war period, I can remember the impact of the first wave of the Maori urban drift to Auckland. Those were the early years of the Maori Women's Welfare League, and my mother did some door-to-door research on housing conditions in Freeman's Bay, where the motorway now cuts through to the Harbour Bridge. My father was arguing for the introduction of the first Maori Studies course at a New Zealand university. Both were up against the blind spot of the Pakeha - the belief that Maori people ought to be thankful for the benefits of European civilisation and leave their own ways behind them.

That is the sort of talk I remember around the tea table. The puzzled Pakehas were everywhere, but especially in positions of authority, and I suppose it became second nature to me to question their judgement. Another thing about home life influenced me in those years. Because my father was an anthropologist many of his colleagues were non-European and I remember a number of Maori scholars who stood tall in my eyes. Not until a couple of years ago did I realise how different this experience was from that of most city dwellers at that time.

Like many New Zealanders I then became fascinated by the glimpse of cultures further afield. The study of languages led naturally to an immersion in the European heartlands. The renewal of contact with our Pakeha tap roots was not so easy in the 1950s. With modern travel and communications, thousands of New Zealanders can now enjoy some sort of encounter with Western, and other, cultures each year. The jet can quickly take you a long way from white Auckland, and even further from brown Auckland, but it brings you back just as quickly. When New Zealanders go abroad nowadays it is painfully obvious that these encounters are pretty superficial. By contrast, I remember vividly what it felt like to be stranded for a year as the only native English speaker in a town of 20 000 Frenchmen. The BBC cricket commentary offered moments of great ecstasy! Perhaps that too had something to do with helping me to see the minority viewpoint a different way.

During the work on "He Matapuna" there were times when once again the awareness of total non-communication struck home. It cuts both ways of course. Many of the authors will have puzzled the Pakeha by recommending a return to traditional Maori values, or some form of "limited autonomy", to use Sid Mead's phrase. It is not immediately apparent what this strategy has to do with the kids in South Auckland or the problems of productivity and economic recovery. One would however be blind not to recognise that greater separatism is inevitable unless all forms of decision-making in New Zealand can become more responsible to the needs of minority groups.

By the same token, it became obvious that the Pakeha has not transmitted the deeper values of the European mainstream all

that effectively. Talking with some of the authors shortly after the state funeral for Lord Mountbatten, I was struck by their comment that this was something in Pakehatanga to which they could relate. There was genealogy, history and the shared emotion of the tangi. Part of the answer may lie in knowing our European heritage a great deal better and in making a judgement about what is still relevant in the New Zealand setting, because some of it is not. Maybe the next venture for the Planning Council should be "Pakeha Perspectives".

Another part of the answer may lie in the realisation that the best place to learn sensitivity to another culture is not on the other side of the world, or in some Asian village, but right here in New Zealand with people we know but scarcely ever listen to. The world outside will probably be a richer experience for all New Zealanders when we have learnt that cross-cultural communication begins close to home.

I think that the link between what happens at home and our success or failure in the non-Western world is particularly puzzling to the Pakeha. What for example are the prospects of Maori salesmen in Asia and the Arab world? Better than even perhaps so that's an incentive. What if we have to rethink the idea of "one nation - one people"? In "He Matapuna" some of the authors go as far as to suggest that the acceptance of the maxim "two people - one nation" could lead to direct identification by Maoris with the non-white world. First, therefore the Pakeha is being asked to forget the assumption that we are destined to become one people. Secondly, New Zealanders are forcibly reminded that the historical period of world wide European dominance is drawing to a close.

There are other assumptions which need to be discarded. Take those well-meaning comments about the Maori progression from stone-age culture to sophisticated urban civilisation. The implication is that the benefits of being part of a Western economy, even on the bottom rung, far outweigh the advantages of retaining a separate Maori identity. Perhaps the benefits of Maoritanga and the community support which went with it in a rural setting were not very visible to the Pakeha. But there is some-

thing ironic in hearing this line still being pushed at a time when Western society as a whole is going through a period of deep-seated change, when family structures are shifting and when assumptions about the Welfare State - which was the other half of civilised progress - are being widely questioned. Materially we may have moved out of the stone-age but there is ample evidence that other aspects of our culture impose stresses on the individual which are becoming unmanageable. When drugs of all kinds are taken to maintain the illusion of a happy civilisation, we must question the price of so-called progress.

I guess it is understandable that most Pakehas find the assumption of superiority hard to discard. For one thing it means reinterpreting a lot of history, and once we leave school we prefer to leave that to the historians. I find it helpful however to see the sequence of the last 30 or so years more clearly as a result of what people like Ranginui Walker are saying. In Auckland, even in the late 1950s, it was unfashionable to argue that a brown proletariat would inevitably emerge. This was the sort of sensationalism expected from left-leaning academics. Who can now deny that they saw the longer-term trend more clearly than their critics?

We are now in an essentially similar situation. The incident over the obscene haka at Auckland University, some of the hostile reactions to Maori Language Week and the difficulties which nearly all Maori leaders tell us they have experienced at various times in winning comprehension and tolerance - all of this is very reminiscent of the Auckland I remember. Now however it is a wider national problem. Perhaps the only new aspect is an awareness that the problem will not go away if we just ignore it.

This in itself should help to resolve the puzzle. One of the contributors to "He Matapuna" said to me that the Maori has seen himself as someone who ultimately has no choice - in a Pakeha dominated society - but who nevertheless has had to make an ideological choice in the way he has adjusted to it. The striking feature of the essays is the extent to which this choice has involved a rejection of Pakeha values and Pakeha solutions.

Now we have to look at the other part of the equation. This concerns the choices which are open to the Pakeha, and indeed to all New Zealanders who do not actively identify as Maoris. The basic choice is very simple and has been open for over a century. Either the majority can consciously reject what they see as an irrelevant remnant from the Maori past, or they can accept the reassertion of Maoritanga as one important and continuing strand in the fabric of New Zealand's national identity. When we wept together over the Air NZ koru stranded on the Antarctic ice, we could see the way in which this strand can be part of our nationhood. The elimination of King Tawhiao - who first advocated a Bank of Aotearoa - from the watermark on our metric banknotes is an example of a strand which was unravelled. And when a great man ends up as a design on a teatowel, we are witnessing a sad debasement of a strand that belongs in the common fabric.

All of us have the opportunity to decide where we stand. The choice can be given expression every time we meet a Maori or try to pronounce a Maori name. It is one of those decisions that makes people wonder afterwards why they put it off. That at least has been my experience and one which is being shared by a growing number of New Zealanders of all racial origins. In Wellington alone, about 150 people, during the last 2 years, have voluntarily spent six weeks studying Maori full-time at the Polytechnic. Each of those students has sensed that here indeed are new beginnings - he matapuna - a source of greater confidence in the diversity of New Zealand. When you get up at 4.30 am to dig a hangi in Lower Hutt you begin to learn about tolerance among our cultures.

The choice in the end is thus a personal one. One difficulty is that it is not possible to make it in response to an abstract notion such as multiculturalism. This is how we may have been led astray in the past. Long words or catch phrases do not resolve the doubts which we all feel when faced with the reality of violence, anger or indifference. As individuals we want to be part of the decision-making process but when we read our newspapers each day we wonder how we can improve matters.

I suspect that decisions of the type which now confront New Zealand society are very difficult. We are dealing with deep sensitivities and a range of prejudices of varying intensity. It can be awkward to start parading these feelings. As New Zealanders we were not so long ago very comfortable with a reputation for exceptionally good race relations. We have been less comfortable as it has become clear that the situation falls well short of the ideal. We are much more uncomfortable - and indeed less certain about New Zealand's future - when we are asked what we now intend to do about it.

My practical suggestions are twofold. The first would be to get rid of old assumptions, or at least to rethink them. I have mentioned some which I have had to discard. The authors of "He Matapuna" can help us all to find others.

The second would be to adopt a concept which offers a new view of New Zealand's future and brings this view to life. Such a concept needs to have meaning for each of us and at the same time help to project our national identity in the world setting.

I was thinking about this recently when attending a conference in the Overseas Passenger Terminal in Wellington. Around the walls are mosaics of various patterns, including Maori motifs. When you look closely at the mosaic you see the separate pieces. Each piece has its own colour and shape, but it fits as part of the pattern. The smaller patterns merge into a larger design. On this analogy, I would describe New Zealand society as a mosaic. It is however incomplete because some patterns are not clearly established. Other patterns have been there for a while. The larger design has not taken shape but it is clear that it must accommodate each of the subsidiary patterns.

So perhaps we could shift from the catch-cry of multiculturalism, which really leaves no clear message about what the individual can do. In its place we could see our country as a living mosaic, and try to interpret our own place within it, as well as the role of the wider groups - racial or cultural - with which each of us identifies. When the mosaic is nearer to completion, the separate pieces will be bonded together by a common sense of commitment to New Zealand and its unique identity. At present one is painfully aware of the lack of this bonding element.

The mosaic goes back in Pakeha history to a time long before the Maori migration to Aotearoa. In the early Mediterranean cultures it was part of the floor on which one walked. It was then elevated to the walls as a form of decoration. Like many other art forms, it came to offer inspiration and insight. Perhaps the idea of a social mosaic would help later generations to move closer to a common stance in the land which they will inherit.

I offer it in the knowledge that societies can suddenly go through great changes and be taken almost unawares by the result. It is clear that a change of heart rather than any concrete plan is what the Maori is now looking for from the Pakeha.

He kokonga whare e kitea,
He kokonga ngakau kore
e kitea.

No reira, e nga iwi,
Tena koutou, tena koutou
tena koutou katoa.

