

Becoming Tangata Tiriti - one person's story

Waitangi Day 2008 presentation at Kaiapoi

What did I know about the Treaty when growing up?

I knew very little about it - though I knew a lot about issues of being fair - from a grandmother who told me that it was love that makes the world go round and that if I stopped loving everyone would fall off; a rich involvement in ecumenical events; a family who talked about everything including the news.

I realise now that our whole environment was very British in orientation. I knew lots about the history of Britain - I knew about the Wars of the Roses but called the Land Wars that occurred in this country the Maori Wars, because they were understood to be the fault of Maori. Another example is that even the Nursery Rhymes were British - though it was not till I was older that I found out the real story behind some of those. The revelation that Ring a Ring a Roses was about the Black Death plague in the 14th Century was a horrible discovery.

So I had no knowledge that there was a Treaty that Britain had entered into, with a nation state that they had formally recognised as having title to the soil and sovereignty in 1835. I think that I had a vague idea that there was a Treaty and that "Maoris" (yes I did put an "s" on the end because I did not know anything about Te Reo then) - those Maori that wanted to - could be just like the rest of us New Zealanders.

So I was brought up believing that everyone was important - unlike some of my generation who understood that they were a cut above some others. There is one particular example of this which has been important in retrospect. That was the treatment of a Moriori boy at my primary school. He was treated as being a bit thick because he was Moriori and, we were taught that he was not even as clever as a Maori. I thought that was wrong, fundamentally wrong.

When did I begin to learn more about the significance of the Treaty?

It was really when I was teaching in Wales. But, looking back, it started when I went to live in Britain for the first time in the 1960s. I thought of it as Britain - but I was actually living in England, which turned out to be living in Hampshire. I was the one with the accent, and what I experienced as a broad Hampshire accent was not an accent!

I thought it would be like living in this land. And it wasn't. I was a sun-worshipper - I tried to sit in the sun even if I had to put on a jersey. I called jandals jandals - they were flip-flops in the shop. I came to realise that the locals would probably stand at a red light all day if it stayed red - whereas I knew no self-respecting Kiwi (me included) would! Basically I felt a foreigner, even though I had a warm welcome from my husbands' relatives.

But as I said earlier, it was in 1976, when in Wales, that I realised I had married a Welshman! I learned that most of the children at the School were from Welsh

speaking homes, many staff were Welsh speaking but the language of instruction was English. When we walked in to a pub, no-one would speak to us till someone would come in having spotted the NZ sticker on the back of our Mini- and then the conversation would turn to Rugby.

But after a while we were told the stories of the history of Wales and of what had happened to the rivers being diverted to England, and I began to wonder if there was a story I did not know about in what, I felt, was "my" country.

When we returned to this land it was 1976 and the Waitangi Tribunal had been set up, to allow Maori to express their concerns from 1975 onwards. Over the next ten years it became really clear that it was not possible to cut these stories off at 1975 - so the Tribunal was authorised to hear the stories back to the signing of the Treaty in 1840.

This still did not allow the full story of this country to be explored, so in 1984 our group responded to an initiative called Project Waitangi, of which the then Governor General, the first to be Maori, Sir Paul Reeves, was patron.

The idea was that we would educate the whole country before the commemoration of the 150th signing of the Treaty! We wanted to pass on information which had not been available to most people - and still is not - about the history, the difference between being fair in a monocultural way and being fair in a culturally-safe way and about what we saw as exciting possibilities for a Treaty-based future.

The indigenous language of this country was formally recognised as an official language in 1987 and much was done, but the Project did not complete its work! Many of those involved left the Project following the commemorations in 1990, but some stayed and we in this place reformed as Network Waitangi Otautahi. Queen Elizabeth noted at those commemorations that "Today we are strong enough and honest enough to learn the lessons of the last 150 years and to admit that the treaty has been imperfectly observed. I look upon it as a legacy of promise".

The significance of the Treaty to me now, is that this work is a priority.

What does the Treaty mean to me now?

I and others who are not of Maori descent have a possibility, if the Treaty is honoured, to belong with dignity to this country. This country can offer a new and relevant future for this Pacific nation and a model for the rest of the world. I know the Treaty is often regarded as being all about grievances but I think the exciting possibility is that it is a framework for future sustainable development in this land.

Most of us now know that Tangata Whenua are the people who are the land - this indigenous concept has been lost from most Western cultures, which are only beginning to learn the depth of the mind-shift needed for the future. Here, in this land, we have an indigenous people who have generously extended an invitation to those of us who are not of Maori descent to share this land. That invitation - the Treaty - is the basis of our nationhood. It gives everyone a place to belong here, and is not just a Maori phenomenon. It gives a framework for us all to be able to hold on

to the things we value.

How do I see the Treaty in our multicultural society?

As a framework for healthy relationships between the Crown, Maori and all other new Zealanders, not just Pakeha.

At the time of signing the Treaty the word used for everyone who was not Maori was "Pakeha". These days, people who do not have Maori ancestry and who are committed to a Treaty-based future often describe themselves as Tangata Tiriti. Judge Edward Durie, stated at Waitangi, in 1989 “..... *we must also not forget that the Treaty is not just a Bill of Rights for Maori. It is a Bill of Rights for Pakeha too. It is the Treaty that gives Pakeha the right to be here. Without the Treaty there would be no lawful authority for the Pakeha presence in this part of the South Pacific. The Pakeha here are not like the Indians in Fiji, or the French in New Caledonia. Our Prime Minister can stand proud in Pacific forums, and in international forums too, not in spite of the Treaty, but because of it. We must remember that if we are the tangata whenua, the original people, then the Pakeha are the Tangata Tiriti, those who belong to the land by right of that Treaty....*”

I like to think of myself as one of the Tangata Tiriti, committed to building a multi-ethnic, Treaty-based, sustainable future. It is pleasing that under the Local Government Act 2002 Government has devolved a Treaty responsibility to facilitate participation by Maori. So local, regional and central Government need now to work out how to build consistency for a way forward in this Relationships Framework. One positive suggestion which I hope will be followed through is to have a Treaty Commissioner, whose role is similar to that of the Children's Commissioner. This could bring a focus on the Treaty in contemporary NZ life and would provide a practical basis for what a Treaty-based, multi-ethnic, sustainable future might look like. This is my hope for my grandchildren and all future generations.

Katherine Peet

Network Waitangi Otautahi <www.nwo.org.nz>