

Race-based pork barrel leads to political blackmail

It's clear the government's strategy of closing the gaps between Maori and non-Maori is nothing but a bumper sticker.

There has been no analysis of the supposed problem, the options available and their respective costs and benefits and no decision for any action to be taken. The lack of analysis and logic is twisting the policy out of shape.

The policy falls over at the basic level of lacking a sound, easily explained rationale. The four reasons that have been variously and randomly advanced for closing the gaps along racial lines are neither particularly strong nor convincing, even by



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the government's standards.

The first reason is that it's a matter of honouring article 3 of the Treaty of Waitangi that promises Maori all the "rights and privileges of British subjects."

The socialists and treaty activists view it as promising

socio-economic rights – that is, rights to job, to house, an income, healthcare, and anything else they can think of. The argument is that if Maori as a group don't enjoy the same level of income as non-Maori article 3 has been breached.

Of course, this is nonsense.

Article 3 promises nothing of the sort. Back in 1922 the great Maori leader Sir Apirana Ngata explained it as stating "Maori and Pakeha are equal before the law." It wasn't a promise for a job or a house but a promise of freedom and the opportunity to earn an income and to buy a house. It promised equality, not the special treatment treaty entrepreneurs now claim and that Attorney-General Margaret Wilson now offers.

The second reason often given for pursuing a closing the gaps strategy is that group equity is a subset of achieving distributional equity. The thought here is that we are inter-

ested in a better distribution of income and also a better distribution of income among the races. This, too, is nonsense. Group equity must compromise basic concepts of distributional equity.

For example, boosting the income of a rich Maori would lift the Maori average and thereby advance the cause of group equity but it would do so only at the expense of distributional equity as poor Maori and poor non-Maori alike miss out. Group equity is nonsense even for the re-distributionists.

The third argument suggests socio-economic gaps reduce the ability of Maori to sustain a

vibrant culture. The argument runs that the government must support Maori to support indigenous culture. This argument falls over on the efficiency test. If the aim is to assist indigenous culture, the subsidy would be more usefully applied to indigenous culture directly. Race-based preferences are an awkward and inefficient way of propping up a culture.

The fourth and final reason is the argument that disparity is causing or is likely to cause inter-ethnic conflict.

This is a dangerous argument.

The worldwide experience of race-based preferences is that they themselves heighten inter-ethnic conflict.