

Was Colonisation *Really* That Bad?

Associate Maori Affairs Minister Tariana Turia caused a storm when she blamed many of Maori's current woes on the legacy of colonisation. Is it a legitimate excuse?

By Hugh Laracy

However much one may sympathise with Tariana Turia's concern for problems which appear unduly to affect Maori people, her recent utterances have scarcely enhanced public understanding on these matters.

Rather, she has displayed an inadequate knowledge of history and scant regard for logic together with recourse to pseudo-scientific terminology, that have distracted attention from matters of serious concern.

"Post-colonial traumatic stress disorder", indeed! Where in the clinical literature is that ailment described? Is it Maori specific? How are variations in its incidence to be explained? Moreover, the reference to the Holocaust was as ill-informed as it was crass.

Similarly, the comments on colonisation were superficial. To invoke an ill-defined abstraction to help explain such cowardly behaviour as child-bashing is as unhelpful as it is distasteful. It seems to offer a dangerously convenient extenuation for anyone who might feel tempted to argue for diluting the personal responsibility of the perpetrators of such outrages.

It was not fundamental disagreement with Tariana Turia's point of view that generated criticism, but the conceptual and verbal carelessness with which she presented it.

"Colonialism" and "colonisation" are related terms but they are not synonymous. Nor are they unambiguous. "Colonialism" began to be used increasingly in a narrowly political sense after the Second World War, to refer to the control by a Europe-derived state of people non-western origins.

That meaning was subsequently employed in an unequivocally pejorative sense in the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960. This called for the granting of independence to subject peoples, even though colonial rule had also brought certain benefits - medical, legal, economic - to many of its subjects.

As Clement Atlee, whose British prime ministership saw India separate from the empire, noted ironically of the Indian revolutionaries: "They base their attack not on Indian principles but on standards derived from Britain">

It must be regretted that manifestations of the harsh, hurtful and destructive side of European colonialism according to its narrow 1960 definition have not occurred in New Zealand. However, it should also be recognised that they do

not supply the whole content for more than 200-year-old history of its European colonisation.

Far from it. That history began with the visits of James Cook and, while there is a constant theme of conflict and of Maori resistance running through it, the more conspicuous one is that of mutuality. For instance, race has not been a serious barrier to intermarriage, but from the beginning Maori have shown a readiness to partake of whatever apparent benefits the Europeans had to offer.

Admittedly, participation in the musket trade of the 1820s for the purpose of waging war on traditional enemies may not have been to their overall advantage, but it did stem from choice rather than coercion.

So, too, were the adoption of Christianity and, despite some misunderstandings, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. These happenings were, in a sense, joint ventures, as have been most other episodes in the long and complex process of contact and interaction that constitutes colonisation.

Despite the contradictions that litter that process, if there is a public philosophy discerned within it is that of the recognition by Maori and European alike of an inclusive citizenship.

Thus, Ihaka Whaanga, of Nuhaka, near Wairoa, who as a child narrowly escaped death at the hands of rivals who had killed his father and other members of his family was, not surprisingly, consistently favourable to the Europeans. In the 1830s he became the patron of the whaling station at Mahia, and in the wars of the 1860s he fought alongside them.

Conversely, disregard of Maori interests has always attracted a significant measure of European criticism, from at least the 1850s with Octavius Hadfield and the rise of "philo-Maori" sentiment. Another such was GW Rusden who was severely - and self-sacrificially - critical of the Government's treatment of Te Whiti and of John Bryce's infamous raid on Parihaka in November 1881.

Notable among Maori responses to the changing world of the late 19th century was the effort of Maui Pomare, of Taranaki, and of other young men associated with the Young Maori Party, to assist their people by obtaining a high-class European education.

Indeed, they were encouraged in this by an influential colonial mythology that minimised the ethnic divide between Maori and European by arguing that both peoples were distantly related. In its first form the Maori were identified as a lost tribe of Jews, while in its later - but now disproven - form, which was taken up by the internationally distinguished Maori scholar Peter Buck, they were deemed to derive from the same Caucasian stock.

Many more examples of the complex, intimate and unforced interactions that have occurred between Maori and European in various ways and at various

levels of awareness could, of course, easily be cited to make the same point. That is, that they are all part of the phenomenon of colonisation.

And that process has been benign as well as destructive, and has brought benefits as well as produced victims, among European as well as Maori (although that distinction is not always clear or relevant).

Consequently, "colonisation" itself is too broad and diversely constituted a notion to be invoked unequivocally as an adequate explanation for the difficulties and grievances of many Maori. Which is not to deny that a large number of them have arisen within a context of European settlement and that some redress, as is currently being worked at, is in order.

Tariana Turia's use of the term "Holocaust" to describe Maori experience, though, was a more reprehensibly careless generalisation. That term now has a historically significant meaning and to use it even in analogy, let alone to claim equivalence, is inappropriate.

Its use in the Waitangi Tribunal's Taranaki Report was regrettable and ought not to be used as a permissive precedent. Not only was the loss of life in New Zealand not comparable with that in the Jewish Holocaust, but Nazi policy was deliberately aimed at the extermination of the Jewish people.

It has been difficult in New Zealand. Here much of the change - and associated losses to traditional culture - that the Maori people have experienced has derived less from hostility than from well-intentioned (if sometimes ill-conceived) policies of amalgamation and assimilation, and with which they have, as a rule, freely complied.

Change has been the mechanism and condition for engaging with the wider world and the historical record shows that Maori people have wished to do that almost from the time the opportunity first arose.

Indeed, considering small mercies, it might not be impertinent to suggest that they were better off in finding such opportunities under British rule than, say, under the French, for there was no way New Zealand could have avoided coming under the control of some European power in the 19th century.

In New Caledonia, which France annexed in 1853, tribes were being pushed on to reservations without compensation to make way for European settlers, while a decree of 1907 stated that "the Caledonian native has been excluded from the common law".

In New Zealand, in contrast, universal male suffrage for Maori and European alike and Maori representation in Parliament were introduced in 1867, whereas in New Caledonia Melanesians did not get the vote until 1951. That may be no consolation to anyone, but it is probably worth being aware that there were other and less sympathetic models of colonial rule than that which was planted in New Zealand.

As for the recent furore, what lessons may be learned from it? One is that politicians do not help their cause by using intellectual shortcuts and loose language in dealing with important matters. Another is that it shows the need there is to maintain the careful, critical and vigilant study of history, for if good history is not done bad history certainly will be.

It is the task of historians to make the past accessible. Politicians, like others with a current agenda, want a usable past. That is something to be guarded against. It is the principle that Socrates died for. As for a Greek word beginning with "h" and signifying destruction, though still analogical, what about "hecatomb"?

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