

It's time to look at what treaty partnership really means

SIMON UPTON

One of the most refreshing things about Tariana Turia is her directness. There's no dissimulation to spare the sensitivities of her colleagues. No fudge to blur the media reports. It's between the eyes and from the heart.

The most recent morsel to marvel over was her "colonisation of the minds" speech to Victoria University's Te Herenga Waka Marae. Young Maori had to be on the lookout to see that their minds were not being subtly infiltrated to turn them into the new colonisers of the people.

Citing black, feminist, post-colonial theorist, poet, essayist and philosopher Audre Lorde, Ms Turia warned that "the master's tools [would] never dismantle the master's house." The nest had to be protected from the colonial cuckoo.

As reported in the media, it sounded like thrilling stuff. I rushed for the text but the dizzy heights of post-colonial theory were missing. Departmental speechwriters are apparently more nervous than their forthright minister. But it was an important speech nonetheless and it brought into sharp relief some of the incoherence that lies at the heart of the government's social thinking.

Embedded in Ms Turia's speech were three ideas – one romantic, one muddled and one remarkably sensible. They're worth teasing out.

The romantic idea (which is just about hard-wired orthodoxy in the politically correct Wellington circles in which policy is incubated) is that Maori are autochthonous – an indigenous people nurtured in the womb of the land from time immemorial. Blood, soil and land are inextricably inter-woven. It is this that leads Ms Turia to assert that "around the world it has been shown that indigenous people progress at a far greater rate when they are in control of their own development."

When we think of the extraordinary leaps people have made far from the often suffocating rigidities of deeply rooted hot-house communities, this seems questionable at least. Diasporas have been among the most dynamic and creative crucibles of human endeavour. The challenge of isolation can both intensify cultural identity and spur creative adaptation. But leave that thought to one side for a moment.

The really tricky question is whether this view of culture is compatible with Ms Turia's (and the government's) belief the Crown has "a responsibility to ensure Maori progress in the same way as other people in New Zealand."

What sort of "progress" are we talking about? If it's the sort that's measured in economic terms, there's a fundamental conflict between a marketplace that is culturally icon-

oclastic and consumer-driven, and a view of progress that must be culturally sanctioned. So much of the new wealth that is being created in societies like ours depends on a spirit of openness and risktaking to which the control Ms Turia speaks of is inimical.

In a sense, none of us is "in control" in either a political or a cultural sense. To believe any of us can create a cultural cocoon at the farthest edge of the southwest Pacific while expecting to progress alongside the rest of the peoples of the Pacific rim (and they are culturally polyglot) is, in my view, a romantic dream. Whether we like it or not, we will be caught up in the creative destruction of a global age. But are we open-minded and adaptable enough to surf that wave or be engulfed by it?

Ms Turia is not the only romantic here. Large numbers of pakeha dream of their own destiny in terms that vanished in the 1950s. We should be listening to the young Kiwis in Sydney and London before we conclude that there's a unique and separate development path open to any of us.

So much for the romantic notion. What of the muddled one? It's the old chestnut of Maori as "partners" with the Crown. There's nothing new here – every government in the past two decades has immersed itself in the warm language of partnership without knowing what it means. The problem, of course, is that the Crown is a phantasm without any independent existence. It's a disembodied entity that we wheel on to the stage every time we wish to make claims on one another.

The hard cold truth, of course, is that in terms of fulfilling any alleged obligations, this partner – the Crown – must revert to real people for its mandate – taxpayers and citizens. And, lo and behold, the Maori treaty partner finds itself on this side of the table as well. This may not have mattered when the focus of treaty settlements was on historical grievances over land and resources. But when the obligation is defined as one which involves a closing of the gaps, a serious problem arises: the same gaps in health, education and employment that Maori can point to apply to many pakeha.

We're talking about a straightforward redistribution of wealth to effect social change. That is contentious enough when applied to the population as a whole. But when it is applied specifically on ethnic lines it is potentially explosive. There is a very widely held view that if we're going to use taxpayers' funds as a means of closing socio-economic gaps, then it will have to be across the board.

People like Ms Turia don't have a treaty relationship with an abstract entity called the Crown. In practical terms they have a

relationship with a community of tax-paying citizens who have to be repeatedly convinced that the claims are good ones. To make them in a way that excludes identically disadvantaged non-Maori is not smart constituency-building. The muddling of partnership and redistribution is a potential flashpoint that the government would be wise to defuse in short order.

Finally, the sensible stuff (and there was rather a lot of it). Once we've decided how much redistribution of income is needed to secure adequate access to health and education, there's still the question of how those services should be provided. And here Ms Turia is right. There's no reason why a centrally designed system is the only way of guaranteeing good outcomes. And you don't have to be a raging right-winger to support vouchers or contracting out.

Ms Turia was the only Labour minister to question the absurd re-centralisation of health services being pursued by Annette King. During the 1990s, Maori health providers made real progress in contracting with health funding authorities to bring health services much closer to Maori communities that the monolithic system couldn't adapt to.

Ms Turia is placing great store on the "capability-building" initiative that she and her colleagues have put together. It's designed to enable Maori organisations to "build their own strategies, systems, structures and skills so that they can move forward." It sounds exactly like the sort of direction that the health reforms unleashed. She talks of "allowing communities to respond to their own needs and preferences." That sounds just like the sort of flexibility that bulk-funding of schools was designed to deliver.

We're faced with a huge irony. While Trevor Mallard and Annette King are grinding away re-centralising social delivery systems in the name of equity, Ms Turia and a host of Maori are demanding empowerment to use resources flexibly and imaginatively. As Ms Turia says, "[d]evelopment is a changing and evolving process. It should never be treated as static. Nor should the mechanisms and processes by which it is achieved."

I am convinced Ms Turia will win the third argument. The rest of us had better win it as well. Otherwise we're going to be living in a country where only Maori are given leave to use resources flexibly while the rest of us are told our treaty right amounts to no more than a duty to pay up and shut up while politicians and ministers spend our money for us.

Simon Upton's weekly political column, *Upton-on-line*, can be accessed at www.arcadia.co.nz