

'Blessed' vision harmed by politics of grievance, academic says

# Risk of permanent pain down Waitangi path

Every time I come back to New Zealand, I am fascinated by the spectacle of the happy country of my childhood wracked by elements of recrimination and resentment. New Zealand has become an "interesting" country, in the Chinese sense.

Blest with fertility and physical beauty, technically advanced (even if its electricity supplies are occasionally fitful) as well as agreeably far from the nastier hot spots of international politics, New Zealand ought to be the "isles of the blessed". Instead, an important part of its public life seems to be dominated by the spirit of complaint.

It is politics, of course. Not so much the ordinary politics of the Beehive, of elections and the legislation necessary to keep up with a dynamic society, but politics in a new key. It is the politics of collective grievance, whose point is to plunder the public treasury.

I'm sure this sounds provocative. It may also be unjust. But in a politically correct world, where people are afraid to speak out for fear of offending, it is worth coming right out and saying what one means, so that

the real issues get an airing.

The modern version of grievance politics was invented by feminists, unelected spokespersons for the supposedly oppressed class of "women". But real living women (as Marx would have put it) are so variously situated that it is absurd to describe them as an oppressed class. Indeed, most real, active women hate having "victimhood" foisted upon them.

However, this is the modish thing called "the politics of identity". Smart operators invent a victim class, declare themselves its leaders and their self-importance never looks back.

In New Zealand, the interesting case is Maori. But any move of this kind runs directly into reality: the fact is there are a lot of Maori and they come in all shapes, sizes and situations. Some are tribal, others urban and many have made their way, often very successfully, in the modern New Zealand economy and abroad. Indeed, the reality is that it is often hard to know where Maori ends and pakeha begins.

Some visionaries see in this merging the beginnings in the next century of a distinct new nation, two (and more) streams of New Zealand people

creating something quite new. And since both of these two main streams already have many kinds of success to their credit, we may be confident that the new nation would have a lot going for it.

As a vision, this is deeply repellent to some people, especially some Maori. But we can drop the talk of "vision" because what we are actually talking about is a continuing reality. Many New Zealanders have chosen to live that vision. Yet some Maori want to block that intercourse by setting up artificial barriers. They want to get a lot of old practices out of the museum and on to the streets.

They see Maori the way evolutionists see species: as fixed and static. "Maori" stands for the pre-European culture of language, law and beliefs. Often this revival is commended as having fashionable mystical properties — a deep relationship with the land, for example. This invention (and that is largely what it is) is to be preserved in cultural amber, at public expense.

It is possible, no doubt, to construct one's happiness out of a sense of historic injustice — many of the Irish have done it for centuries. It is not altogether the best recipe for zest and fulfilment, however. And it pre-

sents one major problem — the need for subsidy. The pure life of the iwi, if possible at all these days, would require a lot of outside cash.

Those providing the cash — pakeha and Maori alike — will not like it much. They are not, in the long term, likely to be sentimental about preserving cultures in an expensive iron lung.

Maori now find themselves inextricably entangled in the modern world, where jobs and independence are the normal thing. Westerners are not, of course, so attached to this basic principle that they are deaf to the needy. But they are attached to it enough to feel impatient with permanent pensioners on the economy.

Most Maori, of course, realise this. They have long felt unhappy at the way things went in the last century and they fully supported the work of the Waitangi Tribunal. They felt Maori had a raw deal. It is to these Maori that the process of righting historic injustices appeals. But reparation cannot become a way of life.

The remit of the Waitangi Tribunal is a remarkable political ambition — to redistribute the lands and other resources of New Zealand in order to remedy, in so far as that is

possible, past injustices. The aim is to wipe the slate clean.

Few New Zealanders realise what a dangerous operation this is, because most of them take for granted the stability of a fortunate land. The problem is that collective grievances, unlike those of individuals who die off, have a certain kind of immortality.

An immortal grievance is a permanent pain in the body politic. In the extreme case, the pain leads on to civil war and fraternal strife.

Any sensible New Zealander reflecting on this situation might well think of Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Rwanda and many another scene of miserable desolation where ethnic conflict slid into civil war.

It is the business of authority to steer away from the shoals of passionate internal division between different groups in society. What New Zealand undoubtedly needs is firm, clear and considerate direction from a government that recognises the problems of the past, but also the moment when the Waitangi process must be wound down and a proper and valuable sense of the essential unity of New Zealanders restored.

New Zealand-born **KENNETH MINOGUE**, emeritus professor of political science at the London School of Economics, recently visited this country to launch a book published by the Business Roundtable called *Waitangi, Morality and Reality*. This article reflects the broad thrust of the book.



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