

Nation's distinct identity

What does it mean to be a New Zealander on the threshold of a new millennium? The Minister for the Environment, SIMON UPTON, offered his opinion to last weekend's National Party conference. This is an edited version of his remarks.

ARE my children just part of a European diaspora that reached a high tide mark at the extremities of the globe a century ago? Or does being a New Zealander carry with it a distinct identity that, notwithstanding stories, traditions and memories rooted far from these shores, sets us apart?

I've no doubt it does. We share a distinct identity, and it starts with the land. The other unique thing about these islands is their remoteness. And because of that remoteness, New Zealanders face a uniquely problematic relationship with the land.

These were the last large islands on the face of the planet to be reached by land-based mammals (not counting a couple of bats). These mammals happened to be humans. It was to have incalculable consequences for an ecology 70 million years separate from other continental land masses.

This is the truly unique thing about being a New Zealander. I have for some time considered that the fundamental bond that Maori and Pakeha share in this country is our truly brief



Simon Upton

residence here. Unlike so many continental land masses on which humans have lived for thousands of years, the islands of New Zealand have only known people with all their ingenuity and destructiveness for a few hundred.

Ours is a landscape whose plants and animals have not co-evolved with people. Today, we occupy a space tantalisingly close to, but forever separated from, a vanished Eden. We are living amid the ruins of the last pre-human sanctuary on Earth.

The landscape we all love so much is a landscape still in the throes of a traumatic response to our arrival. Despite the fact that most New Zealanders live in cities, no-one believes the urban setting is the soul of our national existence: it is rather the rural hinterland and the back country that lies close to the centre of our national imagination.

It would be easy for me, a descen-

dant of colonising 19th-century farmers, to utter an anguished *mea culpa* on behalf of my forebears who helped change the face of this land. But they weren't to know, then, that they were walking into a spectacularly separate and ancient land.

They came from a boring part of the Earth – the last ice age left Britain with just two endemic (native) species. They had no emotional or practical experience of living in a country like this.

Of course, they weren't the first to blunder on to these shores. Only a split second earlier, in geological terms, Polynesians had arrived and created the same sort of problems through fire and the hunting of prized bird species.

But whatever the damage, or its cause, New Zealand remains a landscape about which you can't be indifferent. And it is in the identification of a people with its physical setting that some of the most enduring elements of national identity are rooted.

In many parts of the country we have managed to re-create a rural European landscape. Near my home, the Waikato Plain spreads for miles, green, manicured, hedged, with dark black-green blocks of macrocarpa and pine standing out against vivid dairy pasture.

It is the sort of pastoral landscape that is deeply embedded in the European mind. This farmscape, with ancient forests still hanging on at the margins, underlies our nationhood.

So does the fact that we are all relatively new to this country.

We are all immigrants. The different cultural inheritances we have brought here will be transformed with time and separation. But they cannot honestly be shrugged off or disowned as something foreign.

New Zealand may be a young nation but its immigrant peoples bring with them very old accretions of

forged in vanished Eden

culture and prejudice.

You would need to ask me whether I was a New Zealander of Maori or European (or some other) descent to understand how I identify with the world around me. If my answer were Maori, then my sense of nationhood (in a human sense) would be steeped in 800 years' familiarity with these lands, their plants, birds and seasonal variability.

It would also be anchored in a sense of community and culture that has evolved in the Pacific over a much longer time. I have no doubt that, so long as the Maori language survives, at least one group of New Zealanders will have a completely intuitive grasp of what national identity means for them.

More recent immigrants, be they Dutch, Cantonese, South African, Korean or Scots, bring their own cultural base.

I am happy to label myself an English speaker of European descent, firmly rooted in the southwest Pacific. I don't understand every nuance of European living and most Europeans wouldn't recognise a deserted beach or a barbecue if they stumbled upon one, but their cultural inheritance is my inheritance.

I am not Polynesian. And I am certainly not Asian. I am European. It is not a question of being able to talk about the Thirty Years War or recite the kings and queens of France and Britain. It is the unconscious embrace of ways of thinking, speaking, visualising and making music. And if, as a European New Zealander, you want to understand why you think or speak as you do, your search will lead you back to European roots.

You can't shrug off cultures. Like it or not, the myths, symbols and intellectual cross-currents of Pakeha culture are rooted in the experience of the peoples of Europe over, say, 2500 years.

My cultural roots do not start in 1840. Neither do those of Maori or anyone else. We are all immigrants in this land; we all carry our cultural baggage, and we all belong here.

Another profound influence is our size: we're small and intimate.

Although it's starting to fade, New Zealand is still a country where everyone has a relative somewhere who's in the news.

Notwithstanding our remoteness and small population, however, we have never regarded ourselves as an experimental colony on a different planet. Since the mid-19th century, New Zealanders have either been part of, or culturally fluent with, the nations that have defined the currency of the age. Kiwis are technologically voracious.

Similarly, in all sorts of cultural and creative fields New Zealanders continue to excel (and it certainly hasn't been the result of overspending by the Government).

We've produced a long line of world-class opera singers. Now we seem to be producing our share of film directors. Kiwis have spread out and occupied every niche. These aren't achievements for which governments or bureaucracies should try to claim credit. They are all to do with regarding ourselves, despite the distances, as plugged in to the global nerve centres.

Kiwis expect to be able to foot it in the leading countries of the world. The question that lies behind so many of our successes has been, "Why not me?" There is an underlying confidence which propels New Zealanders on to the world stage.

And where we contribute, be it in the fields of business, culture, sport or technology, as peacekeepers or mine-sweepers, it is taken for granted that a New Zealand job will be no-nonsense, first class and professional. And it is.

A sense of who we are and where

we've come from is what binds us together as a people and gives us the confidence to maintain our identity in the world.

In an increasingly global market, the only thing that will differentiate many of our products is the place of their origin. Which is where our culture, our environment and our identity intersect with our economic well-being. Setting trade, environment and national identity at odds with one another is a ruinous and outdated ideology. Our natural environment and our culture can be the keys to our future economic success.

To support the living standards we want and to own our own future, we must be prepared to grasp opportunities at the premium end of the market.

Global consumers are willing to pay a premium for a component of national specialness from many countries: Swiss watches, French cheeses, Italian clothing. Notwithstanding globalisation, there is a seamlessness between business and the creative world in these countries which makes these premiums possible.

More than a century ago, people flooded to the Otago gold fields making it, for a brief period, one of the richest colonies in the British Empire. The new century's gold mines are no longer in the hills. They are in our minds and talents.

We are a young nation, built on an extractive economy striving always to produce more for less. This beautiful land now needs the chisel of the mind to realise its new gold mines. An entire nation has to learn how to sell less for more. Part of the answer lies in technology and hard work.

But much of our future success will rest on our ability to saturate our products and services with the flavour of our environment, our culture and the magic of our unique way of life.