Maori seats vital to New Zealand identity

Because there has been no serious public debate over the existence of the Maori seats since their inception in the nineteenth century, it should be no surprise that their existence is regularly hauled out at election times for political purposes. In previous campaigns, however, this criticism was often faint, and sometimes ambiguous.


Paul Moon

The strongest comments a mainstream political party could muster seemed to be that perhaps the presence of the seats was anachronistic and ought to be put under review at some future point.

By and large, the electorate could live with these vagaries, but that changed this election with the determination by the National leader that, should his party become the next Government, the seats would be abolished. This promise was matched by the Maori Party's commitment to have the seats entrenched in legislation, thus making their removal far harder for any future Government.

Getting back to the opening issue, the lack of debate on the Maori seats allows for all sorts of ugly opinions to pop up – like weeds in an otherwise well-tended garden. The most common of these sentiments is that the existence of the seats is racist, and there is much hand-wringing about this from individuals who might otherwise never concern themselves with matters of racism, and certainly do not huff and puff to the same extent when it comes to the many other forms of racism present in our society.

The argument against the Maori seats in the election campaign was that as we are all now one people, separatist political arrangements have no place in our modern democracy. It makes perfect sense, in a superficial, anti-intellectual sort of way, but looks just like the crudity it is as when analysed closely.

The Maori seats are not about biology or race at all and certainly are not racist. Instead, they are there to represent a distinct, indigenous, and constitutionally discrete (according to the Treaty) group of people who not only make up our society but are fundamental to the identity of New Zealand and to its system of government. The fact that they add to the diversity of Parliament can hardly be seen as regressive by even their most rabid opponents. And the recognition of Maori by governments happens all the time, making the claims of separatism all the more illogical. The Crown has had no qualms about claiming sovereignty from Maori, and successive governments have repeated the mantra about Maori underperformance in certain social and economic criteria, but when it comes to Maori maintaining some representation in Parliament, suddenly, Maori are told not to be separatist, and the fanfares of equality and unity are trumpeted.

Yet the Maori seats have worked spectacularly well in the last 140 years. They are one of the few enduring symbols of success in our political system and for that reason alone need every effort at protection. They have also been responsible for producing some of the finest leaders of the country – for both Pakeha and Maori. Among them, Sir James Carroll and Sir Peter Buck. There can be no doubt that our country would be the poorer without them.

So should the Maori seats be entrenched in law? No – for the simple reason that this would make them taken for granted, and could reduce them to being a token presence in the House of Representatives. Every time the Maori seats come under threat from a government hostile to them, then this should be an opportunity for the proponents of the seats to go into battle and to explain and remind the public of the benefits the seats have delivered to the country, the great leaders they have nurtured, and the opportunities for diversity and partnership that they – and they alone – allow for in Parliament. If anything positive can be drawn from the recent election campaign, it could be that the Maori seats have been made a major public issue. Maybe we can hope the same amount of attention will be given by politicians to explaining why the seats exist, and their benefits to the country.

The results of the election are sufficiently close that the alchemy of turning policy into practice will probably not occur as far as the removal of the Maori seats are concerned – even if a National minority government is formed. "Safe for now" might be the sigh from the proponents of the seats, but a narrow escape hardly constitutes a victory. The challenge of explaining and demonstrating the value of the seats to the country remains the challenge that no politicians have yet announced they will tackle.

Dr Paul Moon is a senior lecturer in AUT's Faculty of Maori Development

Gay parents can give kids the best of Mars and Venus


PHOTO: SUENJE PAASCH-COLBERG

I'm sure my mother is secretly delighted that my relationship has recently come to an end. Her theory seems to be that every time I break up with a guy I might just see the light and decide I actually like girls.

The fact that I will not have a Big Fat Italian wedding and spawn thousands of Big Fat Italian grandchildren for her to display proudly has long been a source of shame for her.


Jonathan Williams

This is in spite of her seemingly overbearing acceptance of the procreation predicament she finds herself in.

She is one who subscribes to the view that gay people just can't – no, actually, shouldn't – have children. Civil Union Act and human rights aside, it's just wrong – enough is enough, blah blah blah.

So, in order for me to produce the aforementioned grandchildren, I need to find a woman. As you can probably imagine, I'm not too keen on this idea.

"I love you for who you are, dear, but a child needs a mother and a father – two dads or two mums just isn't right, dear," is her keynote statement.

Gay people can have kids. Not have them in the conventional sense obviously, but you get what I mean. It's hard and you get weird looks but it can happen.

My (now-ex) boyfriend and I experienced this. We took his niece and nephew to Kelly Tarlton's. Two girls looked at us and smiled. One said: "Look at those two single dads with their kids. That's cool." Her friend retorted: "No, they're gay. Look at them."

With the mention of the G word (almost swearing in some situations), everyone in the vicinity turned and glared at me as if the giggling blonde three- year-old boy on my shoulders was in mortal danger.

My fifth-form English teacher – a rampant butch lesbian from Illinois – adopted a child. Imagine this picture: two white women with a black baby girl. Doesn't take much to figure out that in that situation, the two most definitely did not tango.

Now, most people presume there must be a religious basis for my mother's stance. This isn't exactly true – my mother is far from a regular churchgoer. She just thinks that for a child to grow up balanced it needs to have both a feminine and a masculine influence.

This just shows her naivety I guess. Within the gay scene, there is every possible permutation of masculinity and femininity, independent of gender. From guys with handbags to women in steel-capped work boots, you can pretty much find whatever you're looking for. Provided they have the right attachments down below – if you get my drift.

My point is a child can definitely have a feminine and a masculine influence in its life from same sex parents.

So many people think that gay parents will raise a child in a den of iniquity, a valueless environment full of sexual perversion. I mean they're gay – they'll probably abuse the poor wee bairn.

This is a stereotype we, as homosexuals, will forever fight against. It is so easy to condemn someone you disapprove of as a child molester and say they should never have children – but in a few years, everyone will have forgotten about Graham Capill and gay people will still be reviled for wanting to become parents.

Jonathan Williams is an AUT Graduate Diploma in Journalism student

Was it the journalism or the alcohol that came first?

It's a bit like the old chicken or egg question. Which came first, the alcohol or the journalism?

For so many famous writers and artists throughout history, alcohol has been instrumental in greasing the gears of creativity.

Writer Charles Bukowski based entire books around his love of the drink.

Similarly Dylan Thomas crafted some of his best poems while under the influence, and influential painter Jackson Pollock died drunk behind the wheel of his car following years of alcohol abuse.


Bonnie White

And now this tendency extends to several professions, journalism included.

A 2003 fact sheet released by the Institute of Alcohol Studies explains that "some industries and occupations have higher than average alcohol consumption and alcohol problems. These include the shipping industry, the military, and journalists".

Now after instruction from more than one journalism lecturer, I too have discovered the magic that a couple of glasses of beer at the local can do for my writing.

In vino veritas, which is Latin for either "there is truth in wine" or "drink more", depending on the time of night, does have some justification.

Unfortunately most journalists don't understand Latin. No, it's not the pursuit of truth that drives us to drink, but the truth that lies in the uninhibited ability to be entirely yourself when under the influence.

When you're drunk, you don't care if your argument sucks, you'll still argue (and hopefully discover some ideas for the article that was due last Tuesday).

Ultimately, drinking allows the conversation and concepts to flow.

And the bonus of course is that if you can't remember the epiphany from last night that was going to change the world, the hang-over the next day can be just as fruitful. When your head hurts so damn much, you don't care what anyone thinks, and this kind of confidence is necessary for journalists.

Sadly alcoholism is a serious disease, and for many in the industry drink is not just a way to loosen up their ideas and kill writing blocks.

For journalists, stress can often be the major contributing factor leading to alcoholism.

War reporters or those sent to cover stories involving trauma have often been driven to the sauce.

A 2002 report by Australian journalist Phil Kafcaloudes highlighted a discernible trend among reporters who drink as a way of dealing with traumatic events.

As a Sky News journalist points out in the report: "Most work in journalist trauma is carried out in a bar."

Luckily reports such as this result in a higher awareness of the negative effects trauma can have on reporters and a change in the help available in the workplace.

So by my reasoning, confidence is still a great reason for journalists to drink, as long as it's not to excess.

I don't know whether the alcohol or the journalism came first, but in a couple of hours, I won't really care. Anyone for margaritas?

Bonnie White is an AUT Graduate Diploma in Journalism student