



The Gospel of Equality

An address by Sir Apirana Ngata to the House of Representatives

Date: 25 July 1939

Background

The following description of Sir Apirana Ngata's speech is taken from Chapter 37 of *Speeches that shaped New Zealand 1814- 1956* by Hugh Templeton, Ian Templeton & Josh Easby.

‘On July 25, 1939, some forty days before the outbreak of war, Sir Apirana Ngata gave one of the most powerful and sardonically eloquent speeches ever laid out to the House of Representatives. Echos still resonate. Sir Apirana was a measured, logical but ‘magnetic’ speaker, aware that when he stood to speak it was to do battle on behalf of those who he believed to be oppressed.’

Source Retrieved 5 May 2015 from Templeton, H and others *Speeches that shaped New Zealand 1814- 1956*, (2014) p293.

Speech

One of the most remarkable events in later Maori history was the opening of King Korokia's house at Ngaruawahia... it was a strange feature – a very remarkable one – that the representative of the king of England should be performing the opening ceremony of a private dwelling built by his people for the person called by the Waikato tribe, the Maori King. One could see a long history of misunderstanding, of armed clashes between the two peoples, following by a confiscation of land and a great deal of soreness on the part of many Pakehas. The misunderstanding lasts up till this day- the misunderstanding that in setting up the Maori King, a large section of the Maori people throughout the North Island did in fact, seek to establish a rival to the Sovereign in England.

History is a peculiar thing that solves many problems; and it came about that in the later representatives of the sovereignty of the British Empire in New Zealand we should have England gentlemen like Jellicoe, Lord Bledisloe and our present Governor General (Lord Galway), interpreting in a much broader fashion the institution of the Maori kingship and showing that there was nothing

This speech forms part of *Nation Voices*; an initiative of the McGuinness Institute that aims to explore the role of New Zealand prime ministers over time. See www.nationvoices.org. This speech is provided here to work alongside a talk given by Dr Bernard Cadogan at the Institute on 8 May 2015.



that the Pakeha could cavil at, and no ground for the misconception that an attempt was being made to provide a rival for the King of England (but) deem it to be his rightful duty to be opening the private dwelling of one recognised throughout Maoridom as the representative of their highest and oldest aristocracy. In view of their impending departure, the Maori farewell to their Excellencies should take place, if possible on the occasion of the Maori celebrations in Auckland, very suitable recognition of the broad minded attitude of our present representatives of the Crown towards the relationship between the two races in this country.

We all read with pleasure of the visit of their Majesties to the American continent, and right through the British Commonwealth – the expression Empire I heard in the debate is not in favour with some – there was a hope there would be a display of the co-operation and friendly feeling, between the two branches of the Anglo Saxon people, which would have a direct and beneficial influence on the complicated and difficult international situation, where the fortunes of the human race are concerned.

I come now to the debate, the overshadowing feature of which has been defence. After listening to my friend the Minister of Agriculture I felt more optimistic that some of the complaints of the Maori people, which I hope to put forward, would not be considered malapropos.

While the world is talking in terms of aeroplanes, artillery, battleships, here we are debating about butter and cheese, accusing one another of offences in the past, taking all the credit for what God Almighty sometimes gives us, in the form of good grass, but when we do not get the grass blaming God Almighty for giving us droughts. I have heard that story in this House for over thirty years. In the end we hope that New Zealand will go on and still prosper. Our grass areas should become more extensive, our butterfat should increase. There should be more of all those things being produced today than twenty years ago... These things however, seem small compared with what is happening on the other side of the world. Are not we in a humiliating position today as an Empire? One does not know what has happened at Tokyo, but the position is very alarming. We are beginning to retreat from the position the British Commonwealth of Nations has consistently taken up since before I was born.

What is happening today? There was some attempt ... to apportion blame as between the previous and the present government. That is not the question at all. After the war that was waged to end war one could feel a relaxing all over the world, and particularly among the English – speaking peoples.

The whole talk was of disarmament. At the foundation of all the talk of the League of Nations was the assumption that some radical change had taken place in human nature – the world was better, Christian principles were at length dominating the universe.

That was the kind of fool's paradise we built for ourselves after the war of 1914-18. But right at the termination of that war the so-called Christian nations laid down the seed of discontent which has since produced Hitler and Mussolini and all that is occurring in China today.

No I will not say the Labour Government. Civilised countries conspired to carve up the territory of the Teutonic peoples and to arrange an impossible kind of Europe. I do not want to justify dictatorship but someday history will be written from another angle and will seek to justify the ambition of a man imbued with a determination to put together again the pieces broken by the Treaty of Versailles.

And the whole world was forgetting the eternal truth that man was put here in a world of strife and he will have to continue in a world of strife until one predominates sometimes the other, but the two are always present.

The whole trouble with the British Empire is that in its self-conceit it says that the good in the end had always prevailed over evil. We are the chosen people; we are the people to carry the banner of Christianity – we are the British Empire. But conditions have changed. They forgot that there are other peoples, and to the extent that our Empire as expanded, it has trodden on the corns of all sorts of nations; it has called up the jealousies of all kinds of peoples; it has established precedents that other people are attempting to follow, and we are trying to tell them they must not follow the bad precedents of the last two or three centuries.

An Empire founded upon blood and rapine! An Empire extended by iron ruthlessness, the treading down of primitive people! That is the Empire which is saying now to its latest rivals, 'You must not do it. You must accept the principles of Christianity.'

What fools. What should this British Empire remember. It was built on the gospel of might, and it will survive only so long as it keeps its armour bright. So when after the great war it relaxed, made peace with the world and established the League of Nations, it was entering a fool's paradise. We must blame the whole English speaking race for this, the poison went right around the world.

The Minister of Defence tells us the government is acting on the best advice of experts... Well I will leave that to the experts. But I cannot follow the member for Waitemata when he says we are only going to get raids, that is not a very serious problem. But I hold that it is invasion that we must

prepare against; and history says that once we lose our seapower, all sorts of raids and invasions take place. New Zealand may not be raided at all. A hostile power can take New Zealand by taking Singapore. This country would fall into the lap of any Power that was strong enough to take Singapore or neutralise the strength of the British Navy.

When I heard the Minister of Defence speak about the Highland regiments, stating that every city was to have one, I began to have hope of the Maori people to revive the Maori Pioneer Battalion.

Although the Maori people have a good fighting record in this country, that is our intertribal wars, and in the fighting years ago against the Pakeha, the only occasion on which they were given the opportunity of distinguishing themselves abroad in the service of the British Empire was during the last war and among the NZ units that represented this country at the front I do not think I had anymore honourable record than the Maori Pioneer Battalion.

It can be accepted on all sides of the House any by all races represented here that there will be no hesitation in that appeal to the manpower of New Zealand; and having said that I think it would be a waste of words to give any assurance that the Maori will be with the Pakeha as the Maori is so much part of the New Zealand nation now that that can be taken for granted ... and I do suggest to the Minister of defence that so far as a substantial section of are people are concerned the best appeal would be this; 'A Maori Pioneer Battalion went overseas? Will you today give the Sate two, three, four or five Maori Battalions of the same kind? The Maori of today is one that his ancestors might well be proud of, and I hope this country will be equally proud of him.

That is the offer we make; that is the sentiment of our people now – they have only the one past to look back to so far as service to the British Empire is concerned overseas, and that is the work of the Maori Pioneer Battalion at the Dardanelles and on the battlefields of Flanders and in France.

That brings one to a completion of the centennial celebrations. We have got into a difficult position in regard to the forthcoming celebrations, owing to the attitude the government took up, by simply stating to the Maori that he should take his place in the celebrations like his Pakeha friend. The Maori is asked to co-operate. Our job as Maori members is to sit down and interpret what the statements mean, how I as a Maori am going to take a suitable part in the centennial celebrations.

My friend for Northern Maori told Parliament what is a fact – that the Maori is approaching the centennial year in anything but a jubilant mood. I told my Pakeha friends in the Wairarapa on Sunday that we would forgive them for all that happened in the last hundred years, and that would be the best way of disposing of the whole thing. I said you can break out the history books and so

on. Well, I may break out before I finish. But that is the mood of the Maori people as they approach the centennial. Why? Leaving the past aside, that is our puzzle.

The Native Department was asked by the Centennial Exhibition people what sort of scheme would portray Maori participation in the life of New Zealand in the last hundred years and they deprecated.. 'depicting the background – the starting point'. I agree so far a cannibalism is concerned. We do not want to start there. Let us start a little further on this side. Fortunately there was no cannibalism in 1840, therefore we can start with a clean sheet so far as that item of Maori culture is concerned. But so far as those other things which characterise our people are concerned we were told that background was not to be displayed. We were to show how far we have progressed from that ... there were in fact restrictions from doing anything outstanding in regard to the Centennial Exhibition.

I accept what the oneness of the two peoples means. The Maori and the Pakeha can be considered entirely one, but each one can display his characteristics in his own fashion. This is how the Maori interprets the approaching centennial Exhibition we are going to have an easy year during the centennial. All we will be required to do is to sing God save the king ... For He's Jolly Good Fellow ... Auld Lang Syne, and that will be the end of it. Somehow we got the idea that for whole tribes to strip the only way our ancestors did, and which their descendants still do was being deprecated.

It has got to this exasperating length, the only way to show the progress of the Maori race is to display the influence of civilisation on the Maori – a gentleman dressed in plus fours with a bag of iron sticks behind him, fooling around acres of paddock. We presented that picture to the Exhibition authorities. When the question was raised that we should display carvings and stage hakas we were told that carving can be seen in the museum..(But) where are the Maoris? And we would have to tell them they were in the museum.

There is still time to put things right. The position today is that they are going to do something although not nearly enough for a Centennial Exhibition which is to be one of the most prominent features in the publications of New Zealanders, Maori and Pakeha over the fact that we have reached the hundredth year of our constitution as part of the British Empire.

Let us consider the historical reasons for the hesitations of the Maori people to take a pronounced part in the 1940 celebrations. After the Treaty was signed ... an old chief called Panakareao asked a number of questions, as also did others; but the reply to his query as to what was going to happen to his land in terms other the Treaty of Waitangi was that he could retain his land. That which went to the Queen was something invisible, a thing called mana. He made one of the most eloquent

speeches made in any part of New Zealand by any Maori at that time. He said: 'All right. After all the shadow goes to the Queen, but the substance remains with us.'

Can anyone conceive of a generation of Maoris agreeing that that Treaty has been a good one from the Maori standpoint? Will the Maori throw up his hat and sing God save the King and will he say that His Majesty and the white men are jolly good fellows? Can he say that with any heart in the light of the experience of one hundred years?

What is the position at the present time (with) the work of various governments to put the Maori on the same footing as the Pakeha?

Have we succeeded? I should like to read an extract from the Sydney Daily Telegraph dealing with Orakei. 'Orakei is a fresh sparkling green hillside which overlooks the panorama of Auckland harbour. It is quiet, peaceful and happy. When the Englishmen came to Auckland for generations ago Orakei was the pa of the proud and brave Ngati Whatua tribe. Today one hundred dirty disease ridden Maori, wretched descendants of that great tribe, live in ugly dank whares at the foot of Orakei hill. They are doomed survivors of the Auckland Maoris.

'Their squalid ramshackle settlement sprawls over 38 acres of the hillside, below the 700 acres on which aristocratic Auckland first built exclusive homes ten years ago, and on which a Labour Government is building 200 workers homes today...

'A young and intelligent Maori commented: "Government build homes for Pakeha? Why government no build homes for us too?" Today looks for an answer to the question put by the young Maori. Where have we to at the end of one hundred years. All over New Zealand one will find small but dangerously situated with regard to civilisation and the relentlessness of civilisation.'

But getting down to the last position. The question was whether anything could be done to make the Orakei Maori Pa worthy of the Auckland waterfront and justify the expenditure in that regard by the hope of some revival in the spirit of Ngati Whatua tribe. I argued all around the matter and in the end arrived at this solution; that if they wanted to rehabilitate Orakei Pa, the Crown could have given an area, readjusting the boundaries, gone for a housing scheme, established a branch of the School of Maori Arts and Crafts. The City of Auckland could have put behind those Maori its economic resources... By those means I think, the situation would be saved for the Orakei Natives.

The task is nothing if the government wishes to do it, and it could be completed in record time. The question is whether the Pakeha wants the Orakei Natives and, as it is described, the squalid pa there. Or does it want them out of the road. These are questions that could be asked about every little patch occupied by the Maoris all over New Zealand.

The question I now ask is this: Does this Parliament echo the views of the Australian writer? I am not speaking of apportioning blame: I am asking whether that is going to represent the views of the Pakehas on the Maori race, and particularly the views of officials when it comes right up against the problem at Orakei, Waiwhetu, and those other places.

What is the Pakeha going to do about it? Is the only solution that we should get out of the road? We have been getting out of the road for a hundred years.

Is that the only solution? Is the only solution to get Orakei out of the road? Waiwhetu is out of the road. If with the growth of the population the Pakeha finds us in his road, are we continually to get out of his way? Those are questions that may well be asked at the end of a hundred years. It all arises out of the Treaty of Waitangi and its gospel of equality. It arises, incidentally, out of what the present government says about equality. Take the matter of pensions, the injustice being done at the present time to the Maori old age pensioners in the differentiation between what they receive and what the Pakeha pensioners receive. Here is another instance of inequality, on the Native land development schemes, on housing, that some of these houses cost too much, that interest is a very substantial item in connection with housing, and should be made comparable in respect of houses built by the same government under other schemes.

Many of these houses are not of a type as suitable as they might be for Maori, who would be more comfortable with an architecture more in accord with their own race. I would like the Cabinet to see what Te Puea is doing. They are only half the cost of those being built under any other scheme. It had been decided to discontinue assisting the marae, the communal buildings of our people, proposals by the Wairarapa natives for the reconstruction of the Maori marae in the Wairarapa natives for the reconstructions of the Maori marae in the Wairarapa. The same thing is taking place at Te Oreore near Masterton, on the West Coast, up the Whanganui River, the Bay of Plenty, in North Auckland and right through. It is one of the signs of returning pride – that is a sign of revival, a sign of revived interest in the things of which our ancestors were proud in their time. The young folk of today feel they ought to take a pride in those things too.

I cannot let the occasion go without making reference to one more matter, and that is the request made by Maori communities that there should be some authoritative definition of the effect of the Treaty of Waitangi, that the Government signalise in some way the fact that this Treaty has been in existence for a hundred years.

The position may be the correct legal position, that the Treaty of Waitangi is a 'gentleman's agreement'. I do not think the Maori people will be satisfied with that, I can say that they are not. It

will not be satisfactory if we have to accept the view that this is a 'gentleman's agreement' – that it has no effect in law; that even where the government passes a law that is contravention of the Treaty, there is no recourse to the Court of Appeal.

The Honourable member for Northern Maori referred also to Maori grievances, and urged that during this centennial year the Government make a signal gesture by the settlement of those outstanding grievances. I support (him) in asking that something be done in settlement of those problems as part of our centennial ...

Now I will tell the Minister of Education (Peter Fraser) why after all we are going to enter wholeheartedly into the centennial celebrations. I go back to where I started, in regard to the question of defence, and what was happening abroad, and was likely to prejudice us in common with the rest of the British Empire.

The one thing the Maori has to be thankful for is that in spite of everything that had happened in the last hundred years – in spite of the loss of land; in spite of jeering's such as appear in the Sydney newspapers, instead of coming under some other flag, New Zealand, the Cook Islands, Nuie and Western Samoa came under the British flag.

When we look abroad and compare the position of the Natives' races in these lands, we must be truly thankful that we have lived in this country, under the British flag, with the least unsympathetic of the representatives of Western civilisation.

That fact is sufficient in my opinion to justify our appealing to our people to bury their grievances for a moment, and enter with our Pakeha friends wholeheartedly into these celebrations.