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Neill Gordon: What is co-governance? I organised a meeting to try to figure it out

Hawkes Bay Today

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OPINION

What on earth is co-governance and why are some people so rarked-up about it?

Unpacking that takes you into tricky territory – into stuff so messy and important most of us try not to think about it.

A big part of the problem is community leaders have been reluctant to foster useful public discussion and the void has been filled by voices using co-governance as an excuse to peddle bogus history and put people down.

Like many Pākehā, I know only a little about the Treaty and less about co-governance so on Monday night in Hastings I helped organise a public meeting to learn more.

Two hundred people came to St Matthew's Church to hear from a panel of locals with experience of co-governance in action here in Hawke's Bay.

What did we learn?

Co-governance, in a word, is partnership and that partnership - this bit is controversial - is written into the Treaty of Waitangi.

Like it or not, the Treaty is the founding document of New Zealand. Our government, and more importantly, its people, are bound by it – that is bound together by the Treaty, committed to working it out together.

Some would have you believe that in 1840 when Māori numbered 100,000 and the settler population was 2000, Māori chiefs signed over the nation to the Crown and said 'you can do what you like with it mate'. To think they might have done so defies common sense, the historical record and the words of the document they signed.

What Māori did, generously, was to agree to share this country.

It's no newsflash to say the sharing didn't work out very evenly and led to today, for example, Māori dying about seven years earlier than non-Māori.

It turns out co-governance is no big deal and it's the way some churches, schools and council committees have run for 20 years. What does it look like, this scary sharing?

On Monday, Mark von Dadelszen's explanation of how the Hastings District Council's wastewater treatment plant has operated under, and benefited from, being run by a co-governance committee for more than 20 years was illuminating.

The committee has an equal number of council and tangata whenua members, the chairmanship rotates yearly between a councillor and a Māori member, and the chairperson does not have a casting vote.

All but one of the committee's decisions since 1999 have been made unanimously.

It was Māori input that led to the building of New Zealand's first biological trickling filter plant and the end of Hastings' discharge of largely untreated human waste to the sea.

Here's a question: How far should you walk with a stone in your shoe? After listening to Monday's speakers, it is clear that coming to grips with the agreement to share our nation is necessary and inevitable.

Until we do, this issue will remain a stone in our gumboot and New Zealand will be hobbling on pretending - ouch - there's nothing wrong really.

If you need a reason to embrace the Treaty and co-governance - aside from it being the right thing to do - how about self-interest?

You could argue that Pākehā would be better to sort this out now while they still hold all the cards.

New Zealand is rapidly transitioning from a predominantly European-origin population to a multi-ethnic society.

In 1996, our European-origin population was 82 per cent; by 2026 it is projected to account for 62

per cent. The future is young and brown.

Pākehā should, finally, do the right thing and embrace the Treaty or kick the can down the road and face the wrath of a justifiably impatient younger generation.

*** Napier event manager Neill Gordon was one of the organisers of Monday's meeting alongside David Van Oeveren, Jill McDonald, Maxine Boag and Geraldine Travers.**