

FROM THE LEFT

When Push Comes To Shove

CHRIS TROTTER
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ONCE AGAIN, the New Zealand state must decide if it should answer a Māori push with a Pakeha shove. The Māori King, Tuheitia, has summoned the leaders of Maoridom to the Kingitanga marae at Turangawaewae to formulate a response to the Coalition Government’s “de-Maorification” agenda. It is doubtful whether most New Zealanders, back at work now and already missing the sunshine and surf, are at all aware of the potential for disaster inherent in the King’s hui of Saturday, 20 January 2024. Not since the early 1860s have Māori and Pakeha risked so much over the meaning and status of te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The big difference this time is that the New Zealand state cannot count on brute military might to enforce its will. In the original stand-off between Māori and the Crown, the settlers were supremely confident that if push came to shove, then they would have access to massive military force. Rather than see their new colony compromised by an indigenous rebellion, the British Government was willing to deploy considerable military resources. Indeed, it was the arrival of approximately 12,000 imperial troops under Lieutenant-General Duncan Cameron that kicked off the Pakeha invasion of the Waikato in 1863.

So devastating was the British victory over the Kingitanga that the movement tacitly foreswore any further assertions of political will. Henceforth the Kingitanga would represent a shadow kingdom. The kingdom of what might have been if the Pakeha settler government had been willing to keep faith with the letter and spirit of Te Tiriti. What also remained unspoken, however, was the Kingitanga’s understanding that if the settler state’s ability to enforce its dominance ever faltered, then the substance of Māori power would return, and the shadow kingdom would turn into something much more solid.

Small wonder, then, that the Prime Minister, Christopher Luxon, is said to be seeking an urgent private audience with King Tuheitia. The Coalition Government needs to know just how pushy the Kingitanga and its allies are prepared to get if the National-Act-NZ First de-Maorification agenda is not abandoned. If, as seems likely, the King replies “wait and see”, then Luxon’s and his cabinet’s next step will be to assess the New Zealand state’s current capacity to enforce its will. One thing’s for certain: In 2024 the British will not be sending the New Zealand Government 12,000 troops!

If Luxon hasn’t convened a meeting of the Officials Committee for Domestic and External Security (ODESC) in response to the Kingitanga’s ominous re-entry into New Zealand politics, then he’s not doing his job. Like the rest of the country, Māori leaders would have observed the enormous difficulties experienced by the New Zealand Police in assembling sufficient non-lethal force to clear Parliament Grounds of anti-government protesters in March 2022. Were such occupations and disruptions to be replicated all over the country, the ability of the Police to both keep the peace and enforce the law – without recourse to deadly force – would be seriously compromised.

According to Wikipedia, ODESC “comprises the chief executives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Defence Force, the Ministry of Defence, the Security Intelligence Service, the Government Communications Security Bureau, Police, the Ministry of Civil Defence and Emergency Management, the Treasury and others. The group is headed by the head of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Andrew Kibblewhite.”

On paper, at least, this group looks formidable. The presence of the security services and the Police should guarantee a continuous and accurate feed of political intelligence to the politicians. In reality, however, it is most unlikely that the SIS, the GCSB and Police Intelligence personnel have been monitoring the communications of the Māori king, other iwi leaders, Te Pāti Māori and/or Māori activists generally. The political fallout, should such interceptions be exposed, would be politically catastrophic.

Ever since the Christchurch Mosque Massacres of 2019, the eyes of the spies have been firmly fixed upon New Zealand’s tiny community of Far Right extremists. Spying on Muslims and/or Māori would be construed by a large number of New Zealanders as evidence of state-sponsored white supremacism. ODESC’s ability to predict with any confidence the tactics and strategies of the rapidly coalescing Māori resistance movement is, therefore, negligible.

It is also probable that New Zealand’s defence chiefs would urge caution when assessing the capacity of the Military to come to the aid of the Civil Power. Morale in the NZDF is said to be at an all-time low. Intense dissatisfaction with successive government’s underfunding of the armed forces is reportedly running very high. Called onto the streets to reimpose civil order through the application of deadly force, the willingness of servicemen and women to open fire on their fellow citizens must be rated as exceedingly doubtful. The great danger would be that the soldiers would go over to the people – thereby transforming nationwide protests into a full-blown revolution.

The New Zealand state has been here before, of course, back in the 1980s and early 90s, when Māori nationalist activists were tootling off to Libya and Cuba to pick up the rudiments of “freedom-fighting”. Back then, however, there were still plenty of concessions in the state’s briefcase: action on Te Reo, forests and fisheries, Māori health and education, cultural production of all kinds and – most important of all – the Treaty Settlement Process.

Taken together, these concessions bought the state three more decades of peace between Tangata Whenua and Tangata Tiriti. When “indigenisation” and “decolonisation” became the order of the day, however, all bets were off. Should those two projects become entrenched Crown priorities, then the economic, institutional and cultural dividends flowing from the Pakeha victories of the 1860s will be threatened, and the ability of the state to concede its way out of trouble will diminish towards zero.

So, what will Messrs Luxon, Seymour and Peters do to placate the Kingitanga and settle down the angry rangatahi that are Te Pāti Māori’s nation? If they are wise, they will either defer, or scrap altogether, their de-Maorification agenda. Erect those bi-lingual road signs. Keep calling Hamilton “Kirikiriroa”. If necessary, retain the Māori Health Authority. Then, having secured the peace, spend the next five years pouring resources into the Police and the armed forces.

As the bicentenary of the signing of Te Tiriti looms ever nearer, the Pakeha settler state faces two, equally unpalatable choices. It will either have to accede to a Māori-led constitutional revolution, or find its own, twenty-first-century equivalent of General Cameron. A Pakeha military leader prepared to shove back harder than the movement for tino rangatiratanga can push.

Chris Trotter is New Zealand’s leading leftwing political commentator, with 30 years of experience writing professionally about New Zealand politics. He now writes regularly for the Democracy Project, producing his column “From the Left”.

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39 Comments

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Ben Waimata 14 hrs ago
This article infers the existence of two separate entities, Tangata Tiriti and Tangata Whenua. In reality many of us share ancestry from both sides of this alleged divide, and many of believe this differentiation exists purely in the minds of the identity-obsessed extremists, not in any reality.

Very few NZ citizens (of any genetic background) want a civil war, nor do we want any one race or identity group to be given disproportionate control over our nation. Trotter’s suggestion of possible appeasement of racial extremism while we prepare for civil war is both obscene and absurd. What is required is for our nation to drop the identity obsession and appreciate our common humanity. No one alive today had any part in the ToW process and the suggestion that any descendent of immigrants who arrived since that time should have different political rights is fraught with such potential for violence that the idea should be rejected out of hand.

The only future for this nation is finding common ground, not separatism. Interbreeding has resulted in a situation where many of the radical Maori activists have less Maori DNA than ordinary NZ citizens who do not consider their identity grouping as the dominant element of their existence. A civil war based on self-allocated identity groupings is beyond ridiculous, and something that the vast majority of us have zero interest in. Not to mention the very real possibility of siblings etc finding themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.

But it also must be said, if a grouping consisting of less than 15% of the population attempts to overthrow the political rights of the other 85% they should seriously consider the possible repercussions first.

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Basil Brush 13 hrs ago · edited 13 hrs ago
Conjuring up the prospect of civil unrest, much less civil war, is far too simplistic, CT. Besides, if it came to that, any winner-loser resolution by that means would leave one side bitter and mutinous. The treaty cancer would remain untreated, free to do its rotten work on social cohesion and any prospect of a mutually advantageous future for this country.

There is another option which by-passes the fight or concede dilemma you propose.

That is – as a first step - genuinely open, frank, structured analysis of the treaty arguments on all sides. This is a vital circuit-breaker, I believe, because it gives the decent folks in this country an opportunity to have their say. So far, the mainstream media, academics and the public service have extinguished their right to speak by denying them a public voice. Understandably many, like me, are resentful as a result. Festering resentment is a first step to mutiny.

Second, in our free analysis, we must respect without rebuke the proposition that Māori did cede sovereignty in 1840, that there was no promise of constitutional partnership, that Māori are entitled to respect as endemic people but not to privileges which subordinate or extinguish the rights of other Kiwis, and that Māori are entitled to forms of self-determination which do not intrude on comparable expectations of other peoples of this country.

Let’s hear from the historians and academics on all sides of this issue, not just those whose research and conclusions advance today’s new-treaty agenda.

Imperfect though they may be, the Treaty policies of this coalition government give us a better shot at discussing these matters than Labour were ever prepared to offer. And this is me, a partisan Leftie speaking in support of the conservatives. Regrettably, the mainstream media’s progressivist claims of a de-maorification agenda militate against free consideration of the issues.

Free-to-speak analysis will be messy. Positions at the extremes will likely resort to nastiness. But sunshine has a habit of exposing mess. It is also healthy. Free debate has to happen. At the very least, we Kiwis have a natural right to determine our future collectively, equably and without fear.

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