

Mitzi Nairn: Thoughts on social justice

RACISM

Transcript of recording 30/08/10

What I think now is that racism has always been around - at least it was a real basic component of the colonial era and the colonial enterprise. That you couldn't actually go around the world saying "Tickalock, tickalock, we're sticking our flag in and the sillybillys who live here and think they own it are nothing", you know we're the real people and we're jolly well going to own the world, that takes a lot arrogance. And sometimes it's around kind of class, 'We are the lords of creation' or something like that and sometimes it's about whiteness and attributing different abilities and aptitudes to different "races". So you get that kind of ladder that's got white at the top and black at the bottom and Christian at the top and heathen at the bottom and civilised at the top and savage at the bottom and so on, with people being darker or lighter sort of in between. And native Australians, Aborigines, falling off the ladder and being defined as not actually human and you've got all that stuff there in the colonisation projects. But we didn't actually call it racism and that meant we didn't have a term, we didn't have a vocabulary, for describing what was going on. If you don't have words it's actually quite hard to think about, let alone discuss something. So you don't process what you see. You put it in the too hard basket or you just don't see it.

Like when I left school in 1961 I think it was, well my last year was 1960, I knew we had the best race relations in the world. I didn't know that was a belief that I believed, I thought it was a piece of knowledge that I knew, if you can see the difference, and therefore there was a heck of a lot of unprocessed observation, or non-observation, I don't know which it was, in my life. See I'd been at a rural primary school with quite a lot of Maori children, probably, about half. It was only a one-room school anyway. And I liked the Maori children, partly because the senior one of them was a much more inclusive and kindly person than the previous person who kind of bossed the school. She was an out and out bully. So when she left and a Maori boy took over the pivotal role in the playground and in the school I experienced a huge pleasure and delight that the school was now much more enjoyable and fairer and generally a better place to be. And I've had people in workshops often and often, people of my age group and a bit older, talking about being at primary school with Maori children and how you were all just children together and you all played together and you were all equal and it was only later that you got prejudices and stuff like that. Well, there is a thing about being a child that has particular thought processes and it's often based on very incomplete pictures. Because if I go back now to where I was at the age of about eight and I walk over that territory, or I can do it in my head, and I see heaps and heaps that I never processed at the time. I see that the Maori children tended to be not only in bigger families but coming out of much smaller houses. In fact at least two of the families came out of what were basically two room cabins and there were four or six children coming clean and neat as a pin out of those incredibly strenuous and difficult circumstances to turn out clean clothes and clean children, never mind packing lunches. And almost all the Pakeha children came out of much bigger houses that their parents owned. Their parents tended to own the farms. The Maori parents tended to do labouring jobs around the farms, whether it was shearing or fencing or stock management,

whatever it was it tended to be seasonal. So that what I see now is that there were huge economic differences which were probably more important or more difficult to overcome than the social differences. The social differences were there but not enormously there, except that many of the Pakeha children as I did and my brother did, were sent away to school from the rural community. That's not all of the Pakeha children but of the people who were sent away to school they were all Pakeha, if I put it that way round.

So what were these so-called best race relations in the world based on? Probably lack of contact as much as anything. It wasn't until World War Two that Maori began to move into the cities. Up until then Maori were almost entirely rural, whereas Pakeha had a majority who were urban. So that's already more than half the Pakeha probably went for days without seeing a Maori person at all much less talking to them. And in the countryside, in the rural situation, there were well, for one thing, there was a stable kind of a how things are which was pretty accepted and unquestioned and there probably weren't such huge differences in a lot of ways between the lives day to day. Like until the Fifties there was very little electricity, people were still hand milking herds of cows you know. People all had wood stoves and outdoor toilets and hotted their water with woodburners and wondered if the water supply was going to last out. So you didn't have things on another level to call into question how the world was. Then by the Sixties you're beginning to get access for the rural community to the lifestyle and possibilities of the modern world. You are beginning to get more, well everyone's got electricity by the Sixties pretty much. Almost everybody's got television by the late Sixties and the radio and the television and the newspapers carry advertisement and carry attitudes and an ethos so people know what's out there. Even if they haven't got one they know that there are automatic cake mixers if you know what I mean. So the aspiration differential begins to kick in I think. People like my mother of course went on for years doing the washing in a copper with a mangle because the money was going to send us to school. And I'd have to say all that economic stuff was unperceived, at least by me it was unperceived and I don't think I was exceptional in that. People accepted that that was the way things were. Nobody seemed to ask any questions. People didn't seem to take much interest in the Forties and Fifties in reports and statistics and so on. They weren't news in the newspapers very much. So although people faithfully read the newspapers, there wasn't anything in the way of social commentary much in the papers. They were all writing from a kind of employer's point of view. And I guess that meant that there was no questioning of the social order. Nothing ever got explained. So the sources of information such as they were, were very non-analytic and the education system was not training people to be analytic either. Probably, though the best parts of it do now, an awful lot of our present education system is basically counter-analytic I think.

But one of the things that happened in my last year of school was that Jack Hunn as the Head of the Maori Affairs Department, commissioned an enquiry into Maori, Maori success or failure in all the institutions. The Hunn Report comes 15 years after the end of World War Two so it is a kind of a report of fifteen years, on fifteen years of urbanisation of Maori and it for the first time, in a long time, or certainly in my lifetime evaluated what we would now describe as social indicators – education, employment, income, prisons, occupation, all those things and it showed very very

clearly that Maori scored low on good outcomes and high on undesirable outcomes. So the Sixties became a time when people began to talk about 'the Maori problem'. Now that's interesting you see.

So the Sixties were marked by responding to all that data in the Hunn Report. But it's interesting, as that data became public and we couldn't ignore it anymore the easiest way to account for it was to blame the victims in some way. And the main way of accounting for the disparities in the statistics was to say "Maori people aren't trying hard enough". So the solution was that Maori people should try harder and that Pakeha people of goodwill should be helpful and supportive and help them. Which meant that homework centres for afterschool were set up for Maori children and a lot of middle class Pakeha people helped in the homework centres. Well I think that that's the scene I came into really, the response of trying harder and being more helpful and there were a lot of Pakeha people of goodwill who did things that were helpful on one level but I think ultimately were counter-productive. For example people went to marae, which they had done for a long time – especially women. And the women didn't do a lot of damage because they associated with the other women, the Maori women, who they may well have met in Country Women's Institutes and sort of those kinds of things. And they mainly gravitated to the kitchen and peeled more carrots and so on. So it wasn't really at all disruptive. But Pakeha men tended to occupy some power positions. If you look at the late Fifties and early Sixties a lot of marae committees had a male Pakeha secretary who also was the Treasurer because Pakeha men understood the Pakeha money system. One of the things long term that this did was delay Maori competence with those sort of financial things because it not only confirmed they wouldn't actually be any good at it but they didn't actually have to grapple with it you know. And those men, speaking from a sort of women's perspective, empowered themselves in those positions. They maybe didn't fling their weight about in the Maori context but they allowed themselves to be recognised by other Pakeha as experts. So they got extra kudos for knowing about Maori stuff and at some stage I'll talk more about that because by the time we began to talk more about racism younger Maori in particular were seeing that as problematic. I'd have to say by the end of the Sixties, after a whole decade of the Maori people really trying hard and Pakeha of goodwill being tremendously helpful, the statistics had got rather worse.

But it was still all very frustrating and I remember one of, you know how there are times when a little light goes on in your head sort of "bing", and one of those was at a meeting of the Race Relations Council, and a young Maori woman, it might have been Hana Jackson (Te Hemera), or it might have been Ama Rauhihi somebody like that said "I'm sick to death of hearing that there is a Maori problem. I don't have a problem with being Maori. I don't have a Maori problem. If I've got a problem it's a Pakeha problem". And the light went on in my head and I thought, 'Oh, we've been thinking about this the wrong way round'. That was really a point at which my thinking began to quest for a different way of naming reality that enabled things to be included that had previously been left out. So in the late Sixties and early Seventies the Civil Rights movement in the United States vocabularies began to come to us. And one of the most helpful words was racism, white racism. Because up until then the word racism was used entirely for European anti-Jewish attitudes, particularly the Germanic, Hitler kind of stuff. But the structural aspects of white racism

accounted for nearly all those unpleasant patterns that the Hunn Report was showing in a way that just blaming the victims didn't. Apart from anything else what knowledge I had showed that Maori tried heck of a hard but they were usually under-resourced for doing the things they were expected to do - like turn out clean children in clean clothes with no electricity and no real equipment. So the term racism and particularly institutional racism, or structural racism became enormously important to me. It was a joy to have some words for the discussion. It was really exciting.

What were the words that I got? Of course some of it was concepts as well. The idea that there were structural power reasons for the outcomes we were now living with and seeing, that had been put in place historically. The idea of victim blaming for instance, suddenly accounted for a lot of what was going on. Beginning to understand that bigotry and prejudice are kind of in there in the woodwork and they support a racist society and a racist society supports or provides for prejudice and bigotry. Those tend to be personal and you have to have an unequal distribution of power and resources in order for it to become structural. Some of the structures are who are the gatekeepers and who are in key positions but some of it is around what the rules of the different organisations are. Then some of it is not down to the people but down to the process and people of very low hostility and prejudice can still be unable to make change because the rules of how they have to operate in their organisation make it quite impossible. For example, if the rules of their organisation say they must employ the person with the highest qualification then no matter who they'd like to employ they don't actually have a choice if those people don't get access to high qualifications or even basic qualifications.

I don't really want to end up going into too much detail about what we mean by racism and so on but people do tend to confuse prejudice and bigotry with racism. The other day somebody, I think it was in a news bulletin, oh I know, they were saying so many people had complained to the Race Relations Conciliator because Hone Harawira had been racist. Now actually Hone Harawira can be fairly prejudiced, sort of probably towards the bigotry end of prejudice sometimes, but I'm damned if even as one MP he actually wields much power really. He's got a strong personality, he's a convincing arguer but in terms of what resources he actually has a clinching control over it's just not there. And so hostility and prejudice can go both ways between groups and between people but the 'isms' tend to require that clinching power - power and control over ideas and resources and the rules. At least that's how I understand it. You've got to have that power in there.

Now because the colonial process has a huge component integrated into it of racial superiority ideas it's not surprising that by the 1860s we had assimilation policies. And it's not really surprising that after 100 years of assimilation policies a lot of Maori either have assimilated or been, what's the word, uprooted or disoriented from their traditional own culture and values. Further, there are a lot of young, younger Maori in my time who have gone down the cracks if you like. Like in the Sixties it was really, really clear that there were policies that had been in place for 15, 20 years, certainly since the urbanisation of Maori began. There was a policy, well, maybe not a stated policy, but a pattern of taking Maori children away from their parents because if they got

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in trouble with the courts or the police or whatever, the thing that was wrong with them was that they were too Maori. So they would tend to be put into welfare institutions. I think that welfare is the biggest contradiction in terms you could come up with for some of those situations. And by the mid Sixties you weren't just dealing with street kids, you were dealing with the children of street kids and in some cases the children of the children of street kids and they were not at home and not in foster care where they would get nurtured in values of any sort. So you get that huge disruption of Maori life in that period that the Hunn Report covered and subsequently. Now that comes down to, not only to culture, but it gives you a large chunk of the Maori population who are totally alienated from everything – they're alienated from the schools, they're on the run from the welfare and their options for survival are extraordinarily poor. It's really, really hard to survive on the streets, it's just not a good place to be.

So we saw all those things and right away it was easy to see the institutional structures as racist because you could see they were all absolutely chock a block with Pakeha doing things according to Pakeha rules and culture *to* Maori. They were doing it to Pakeha too but there was a slightly better cultural match, although there usually wasn't a good class match. So you got, you got a society where the values are totally incomprehensible to a lot of people either because they're down the cracks and haven't really understood about, don't know what their values are, or because their values are firmly different. I'll try to give an example. The cooperation value is higher in the Maori world than in the Pakeha world. Pakeha value cooperation up to a point but it usually means I value you cooperating with me and I don't actually need to cooperate with you. If you can see how it's a subordinate value to competition usually and there's sort of a euphemism in the workplace called 'team-work' which is too impossible to unpack but it's more about chain of command than it's about true cooperation I think, say in Maori understanding. If you read Beagleholes' historical accounts of learning in Maori society, one of the things they describe when literacy was first introduced was how, as soon as anyone acquired literacy they taught it to everybody else. And so old and young were learning together and young could teach old if they happened to be the ones who got the literacy resource. And it was very very clear that that was a cooperative learning process just as there were cooperative building processes for making houses, or canoes or going fishing or whatever. Now actually in most of our school systems cooperating and cheating are pretty well merged. Copying from somebody or telling somebody something is not valued in a classroom by and large or it certainly wasn't in my day. So if you came out of a cooperating culture into a learning situation and you expected to cooperate in that situation you were in bother from the beginning. And if you learnt just shut your mouth and sit there, you weren't in a very good learning space either. So that's sort of an example of different values and how that has bad outcomes for the non-dominant cultural group, especially if they're not making any of the rules.

I want to come back to the Pakeha problem, because actually the more I think about it it's actually Pakeha problems, with a plural. And one of them, or a couple of them, would be prejudice or bigotry so you don't expect there to be any good there to look at or learn from. There's ignorance which is closely tied in. There's also amnesia, forgetfulness, so it's hard to know quite whether we don't know all that history because we've forgotten it or because we've been deliberately not

teaching it to anybody. But we ended up very ignorant of our own history and very ignorant of what resource transfer happened in the early parts of colonisation and what resource kind of transfer by suction happened in the later period and what resource transfer by violence happened, or resource destruction. For example, strapping Maori children who spoke their own language in the playground was actually destroying a resource, a cultural resource which wasn't valued by Pakeha but it was valued by Maori and I as a Pakeha now see it as having been of huge value. But if you look at say the invasion of Parihaka which was so that 'land could be brought into productive ownership'. That army that invaded Parihaka burnt and destroyed something like 40,000 acres of wheat. What exactly is constructive about that and how could we carefully not know that? And then when the first government map, atlas, came out about three or four years later, Parihaka was not on the map. Now that doesn't sound to me like carelessness that sounds like a spot of deliberateness, you know. So the Pakeha problem of amnesia, mixture of forgetfulness and contrived ignorance and so on – that's a heck of a part of our problem and why we are problematic and have been problematic.

But there are also the actual structures of racism that were put in place by Pakeha dominance and power, often in the parliamentary world and the requirement that everybody keep our laws and how that relates to the Treaty / te Tiriti, that assumes everybody will live by laws but that they will be laws that will be understood and congenial to them and will be culturally based in some way. Now we find that really hard to think about because we never put any energy into thinking about it, or any think resources.

We structure things so they don't work well for Maori and for years and years and years it was quite impossible to even get that recognised. And even now Maori do better in their own alternative systems whether it's kohanga reo, or kura kaupapa, or whether it's wananga at the university level, there's still huge achievements there that are really, really appropriate. But the structures are still quite racist in terms of the recognition of those pathways to knowledge and they're really structurally embedded and our attitudes are sort of in line with those embedded structures. So we do occasionally think well that sounds a bit silly but we don't really pursue it with any energy. I suppose we're a bit short of leadership really.

So when we first started trying to introduce racism as a concept it was easy as I said earlier because you just had to count things to show that there was no match. You could look at the policies and practices, you could look at, just count the faces, look at the faces on the board. Well on the fingers of one hand you could count all the Maori and have left over space for the women. So it wasn't particularly difficult to show the gross mismatch and in the rules you could often find an entrenchment of how things are out of whack – 'The Rules', 'The Handbook' and best practice and so on. It's really interesting, where you began to get change was places like, midwives began to understand the need to offer the afterbirth back to the mother or to the parents. One of the reasons that was, it was relatively easy to argue, it didn't cost anything to do it, which meant it was easy to implement, it cost a little bit, well it needed education but it only sort of needed one off education and it only needed a slight policy change to best practice.

The hospitals and the health department, they didn't like to keep racial records. They were embarrassed to ask Maori people if they were Maori or not, because being Maori in their eyes often would be a thing that nobody would want to admit to, you know that sort of stuff. They wouldn't keep proper records, they still have very flawed record keeping. They didn't want to single out Maori but also it wouldn't be fair to offer something only to Maori. Therefore it became necessary for midwives to offer the afterbirth back to all mothers and all families which was sort of a bit wider than what was needed. The idea of positive discrimination to correct injustice wasn't accepted at all. I doubt it was even heard of. And equality was kind of expressed by uniformity and a one size fits all sort of approach. You did the same stuff to everybody or for everybody. That kind of unity, equality stuff we hadn't begun to tease out the difference between equality and equity for instance. You can see at that time, though in things like midwifery, some of those cultural discussions beginning.

Some of those discussions were instigated around workshops, anti-racism and Treaty workshops, some of them were pressures from, it was pretty widely known in Maori society that a problem with giving birth in a hospital was that you lost the whenua - the Maori Nurses Association and the Midwives Association did a lot of work on that. And I guess some of the information was there from say Dr Eru Pomare's statistics around Maori health. It was one of the solvable ones without requiring huge amounts of resource to spread the argument. It was also in a women-controlled world to a large extent and women were already on a roll about change in some ways. I don't mean every woman was on a roll about change but there was change in the air and openness to the idea that a structure could be structurally unfair. There were moves to take back the birthing process I guess which probably supported that particular change.

I think one of the reasons that health moved quite soon, or was one of the more responsive areas was partly because as I say there were a lot of women in that profession, in the professions around health and on the whole at that stage in the Seventies - Eighties, most people who went into health provision, or at least hands on health provision, had a strong desire for their patients to get better. So if you could show that a thing definitely meant some patients stayed sicker or didn't turn up for their follow-ups or whatever, there were good arguments for change. And on the whole when there's a change in understanding of a good thing or a bad thing, there's an immediate change in practice. For instance after they stopped putting butter on burns and learnt to put burns in cold water nurses didn't sit around saying "Oh I do miss the lovely sizzly smell of butter on burns", you know they just said "Butter! - wouldn't put that near a burn". If a process was going to produce a better result on the whole there wasn't a lot of kicking and screaming about making a change. And the statistics once they really were looked at did show that there were a large number of potential patients who were not getting a good outcome.

Now the racism in the healthcare services has been addressed quite a lot but the other aspect of racism and health is that living on the receiving end of racism is an enormously stressful situation to be in and that of course affects health - it brings on things like depression, it brings on things like earlier onset of all sorts of conditions. There's a huge study been done in the States with African Americans, that shows that when you control for wealth and social position and all those

other things in every category you find Black Americans have an earlier onset of all the stress related conditions, whether it is heart failure, or diabetes or high blood pressure or arthritis or stomach ulcers, those sorts of things there's a huge range of things that are influenced by stress and they all have an earlier onset – so that actually racism turns out to be an aging process, if I can call it that. It accelerates patterns of aging. And that is the other part of the differential between Maori and Pakeha life expectancy. It isn't until you've lived to be over 80 that the population expectancies begin to even up. Life expectancy if you make it to 80 is much closer for Maori and Pakeha than at any other age group. But that life expectancy stuff and the stress of racism is something that deliverers of the health care can't do much about, they can only deal with onset. Once it's onsetted, if that's a word, they can even out the treatments. Well they still haven't done that of course not properly there are still differentials in the kinds of treatment, who gets offered what treatments and all that sort of such. There's just been, it was in this week's paper I think, a study in Nelson/Marlborough, and one in Northland a couple of years back that show major disparities between what is offered and what is actually done both at the GP level and at hospital levels. So the argument that Maori people are again, blame the victims, are not going to health care services is simply not so. When they do go they receive an inferior service.

But even if they could even that out the stress would still be there, operating as an aging process and that means that you've got a cultural drain because you lose your repositories of culture often before you've got to an age when you want to tap it. You know it's usually when you're in your thirties or forties that you really start to want to ask your granny a whole lot of stuff. Well if your granny is going to die by 50, even if she had you young, I mean if she had your mum young and your mum had you young it's still likely that by the time you want to ask your granny something she will not be there anymore. Whereas with longer life expectancy, my niece and nephew could go on asking my mother things till she was nearly 101. She got a bit chortley towards the end but you know what I mean. So Maori storehouses of cultural knowledge are being undermined by that shorter life expectancy. It's just as distorting in a way as taking the children away from their families which also was a real cultural stuff up.

The other thing I suppose about racism is that it is based on a fallacy that races are substantially different whereas all humans are one species but there are population variations, which is really quite a different thing. So those prejudices are built around fallacy, but they are so entrenched. I don't know, we've worked on heaps of things and currently there are so many able people working on stuff and I admire and respect it but it just brings home to me more and more how enormously difficult it is for a powerful population to seek justice, particularly if they don't feel benefits of it for themselves. Some people think that the fact that Pakeha, any Pakeha do want to be better people is kind of fairly down the miraculous end of probability but it seems to me that overcoming racism is something that will happen partly by just going on working at bits of it and partly because you get those sort of, what are they called, paradigm shifts that happen overnight when you weren't looking, you know and I'm very hopeful about that. That a generation can shift on something. I mean one of the things I think looking back is where did the flower children and the revolutionaries come from in the States, those middle class white kids who were all set to go right through on the same flight path as all their parents' generation and their grandparents and

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aunts and uncles and everything suddenly began to question all that? Now I know that their system has now kind of engulfed all that change and eaten it up and so on 109. But where did that rebellion, that rebellious desire for justice come from all of a sudden? It must be a hopeful sign. The thing that is worrying I think is we underestimate the pull of injustice and we probably also underestimate the apathy of a lot of the population. But I still stay hopeful. Because I think if I could come to the point of wanting change anybody could.

Jen: Where do you think we're at now with institutional racism and structural racism in terms of its prevalence in our society?

I think it's still got a heck of a strong hold on us. I don't think you can kind of dismantle the whole of society in a very much shorter time than it took you to put it in place probably. And it's not as easy now to do the analysis in a way because those simple things like the lack of brown faces and the lack of women and so on have all been addressed to some extent in a lot of places they haven't all been but some have, so that there are Maori people in most government departments and organisations. There are Maori faces just as there are women in those, some of those jobs. But once you start to hone in and look at it closely you can see that they are a minority voice still. That they are not consistently being promoted at the same rate as conservative white males are, and I guess now we would do the analysis different or I would since the work we've done about te tino rangatiratanga and kawangatanga you can see that many of the Maori in those positions are basically brown faces in kawangatanga positions. So they don't actually represent as much change as they represent visible difference. Some of the grossest rules may have been overturned but there is a huge weight of kind of unquestioned conservatism. For instance, if you begin unpacking the language or listening to yourself you realise that there's a lot of really entrenched stuff that is below your radar. You suddenly hear yourself saying something and you think 'Oh golly gosh, where did that come from?' And then you realise this is the structural layer showing a glimpse on the surface.

