

Mitzi Nairn: Thoughts on social justice

XENOPHOBIA

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One of the things I want to explore is the idea of xenophobia, I don't think it's just because it's one of the few words I know with starts with an 'x', it really weaves itself around our colonial history and interacts with racism because I think you might well say that Britain is one of the most xenophobic nations that's ever existed. Xenophobia is being afraid of, and hostile towards, anybody who they can identify as other than themselves. That's what xenophobia is and the British carried it to a fine art. I mean actually people from parts of England probably still are, but they certainly used to be, hostile towards people from other parts of England. You know, Yorkshire people would be hostile to people in London and people in London were hostile to everybody else and so forth. So the attitudes towards the first colonies of Britain, which are Scotland and Ireland and Wales, particularly Ireland because it put up the biggest struggle I suppose - fear and hostility right there among the English. The British generally had this tradition of extreme xenophobia like Nancy Mitford's father Lord Redesdale was famous for saying, I suppose famous for saying within his family, "Wogs begin at Calais." That's sort of carrying it a bit over the top but that is the general pattern of xenophobia, everybody else is suspect, everybody else is strange and peculiar and probably dangerous, and you might catch something from them. It's kind of the opposite of having diversity as a positive value I guess.

That British fear and hostility of everybody else, particularly the English fear and hostility, was transferred totally to New Zealand as part of our colonial patterns and in funny ways we almost all of us hold it sometimes and some of us hold it a lot. I know a lot of younger generations are more open to meeting new people and having new experiences and travelling the world and seeing India and doing all that stuff but when they come home from their OE they do tend to rather settle down in Morrinsville or wherever and not stick out like sore thumbs really. Which indicates to me that there is still quite a lot of acceptance that otherness is perplexing and to be treated with a bit of wariness at the very least. It's had a huge impact, xenophobia, that English fear of everybody else, on our development, our national development.

One of the earliest groups that was not from Britain were the Croatians who were invited and recruited I think probably by Julius Vogel, which doesn't sound like a very English name, and when they arrived as a non-British migrant group they ended up in awful subjugation. They did all the gum digging in Northland, we know that, and that was a very hard and unhealthy life of extreme poverty. They remained marginal for around 100 years, not quite 100 years but going on for it. It wasn't till say the 1960s that any numbers of them attended university for example and they were in marginal, in a way, occupations. They spent many decades growing fruit and vegetables and grapes and setting up family wineries and things like that so they were quite distanced as a community and I think they still are in many ways. Partly because they end up having kind of visible names ending 'ic' or 'ich'. They have names like Markovich and Vodanovich and Yakich and so on. So they are still visible, particularly the male lines and maybe you know that's a matter of pride and identity for the people holding those names but it still can make them suspected by

people who think of themselves as real tomato sauce eating, Vegemite chewing, true New Zealanders. Did you notice that there is another advertisement with Indian people showing how to be real Kiwis. Last time it was “You’ll never be a Kiwi till you love our Watties sauce.” Now it is something complicated about Marmite or Vegemite that’s going on and it’s very much, ‘this is how Indian people become real New Zealanders’. It’s a symptom of something and I’m not happy about it.

For every new, different, non-British community there is a pattern of pressure and exclusion. I suppose classically from the earliest times would be the Chinese who were brought in or allowed in to work in the goldfields and treated abominably. Only men were allowed, no families and if you actually look at the town council by-laws in the South Island against the Chinese they are so appalling it’s no wonder we’ve hidden them and forgotten about them. They are truly racist and dreadful. For instance ‘No Chinese person may be within the town boundaries after sunset’. If you go, even in a superficial tourist way, go round the old diggings you can see that they lived under rock overhangs, they weren’t even caves and they certainly weren’t huts because they weren’t allowed to have housing really. They were considered immoral people who, what’s the word, who consorted with prostitutes. Well they had no family remember they legally couldn’t have family in New Zealand. They could return to China and marry but they couldn’t bring their wife and their children back to New Zealand. They were living desperate, desperate, difficult existences. It’s true that some married Maori who were much more open than Pakeha New Zealanders to any incoming groups but in terms of the social Pakeha attitudes of the time probably marrying a Maori woman was about the same as consorting with a prostitute actually so it didn’t really count.

They weren’t brought to the goldfields to do a sort of ‘Oh it’s lying on the surface really and we just need more hands to pick it up and pan it out of the rivers’ they were actually bought out to work on the tailings, to rework the tailings. To work through the dust and the heaps of left over stuff all over again for the tiny, tiny amounts of gold that were still left. They were extraordinarily industrious and hardworking but I don’t think many of them went back to China even slightly rich men. It really was a very impoverished existence. As the goldfields really closed down and there was nothing to be extracted from the last of the dust they began to move into necessary but unpopular occupations, like laundries and cheap restaurants and market gardening were probably the main areas that they worked in and so they still remained marginal probably through till at least the 1950s which was when some of the by-laws and laws were overturned and family reunification began. That’s not very long ago really. I mean I went to secondary school in the middle of the 1950s, it’s my lifetime for sure.

The hostility and the racism was tremendously entrenched. It didn’t necessarily mean that people had to approve of it because they didn’t know about it really. It was just one of those ‘Oh the Chinese keep themselves to themselves and they are very strong family people.’ And that’s interesting that Pakeha myth that Chinese are very strong family people, having prevented Chinese families basically from existing. I daresay that when families were reunited they were visibly close and valuing that life which they had missed for so long, I don’t know what was

happening in our heads, but it is puzzling. There must have been lots of factors helping to maintain and develop that kind of ignorance and support the development of those myths. It's like a disease really isn't it?

I remember that there were still all those social myths around the 'yellow peril' that they were sitting there waiting to sweep down like a tide over our green and pleasant land. Those clichés that 'sweep like a tide' and 'green and pleasant land' were often connected in what people said. The green and pleasant land is a very British thing because it comes out of Blake's poem Jerusalem, which incidentally was the anthem of the Country Women's Institute in England. Whenever they met they used to bellow it out. I mean it's a super song, huge fun to sing. But when, the thing that really interested me which I have from my mother is that in New Zealand they sing it, well maybe they've grown out of it now, but certainly in quite recent times they were still singing about building Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land - in New Zealand. I mean heck I know it's a good song and fun to sing but it is a bit bizarre.

So the yellow peril was going to sweep through and do all these things when we'd had nearly a hundred years of Chinese people coming in a very humble way on modest terms and working like stink, enormously hard and being very law abiding and quite unlike these hostile, terrible, dangerous people in the myth. So what was going on in our heads that made us disconnect the reality we could actually observe and this set of beliefs? Cos they weren't jokes, I mean there was a jokey element sometimes, there was something in under all that and I say it was xenophobia and racism.

If you begin to examine our relationships with Pacific peoples you can see the same thing as was happening for the Chinese, that they were visible and identifiable. Well what happened I think was that both Australia and New Zealand competed because they wanted to be Britain in the Pacific. From about say the 1940s we, well we've got a very poor record in the Pacific really. Being Britain in the Pacific meant in various ways getting a toe-hold or a power-hold in various islands groups by relationships like protectorates and there's about four different sorts of political relationships with different groups in the Pacific. There was a sort of a feeling that they would be economic fiefdoms I think. This didn't actually work very well because once you no longer want a big lot of copra and you find out that it is enormously expensive to run shipping lines to bring bananas, you find really there isn't a lot of economic stuff. Except Nauru of course and its bird poo.

There was an official white-Australia policy but New Zealand had a kind of de facto one but it wasn't so honest I suppose in a way. Both countries were interested most I think in the influence and importance of being big frogs in a small puddle. That's what they were keen on. New Zealand began to set these small permanent migration quotas for some places. There were some places like Rarotonga that they couldn't do that for because the relationship was different and if you were from Rarotonga you had a right to be in New Zealand, I forget what that relationship was called. But certainly for Samoa and Tonga, and maybe for Fiji I'm not sure, there were these quotas. Right up until about 1960s those quotas were never filled because no Pacific person in

their right mind would want to go and live in New Zealand when they could live in the Pacific, at home. So they tended to come and visit, work for a while, send money home and then go back home taking their earnings with them.

That was quite satisfactory through till about the 1960s, except there were two things that began to happen. One was that the island economies became dependent on the 'send home' money and because their likeliest workforce was away their own economies stagnated more because there weren't the people there that would have maybe demanded change or done some developing. The second thing was that the New Zealand labour movement became stronger in that post-war period. It began to make sure that the provisions of social security were acted on, although the employers were tending to move more away from social responsibility towards exploitation of the workers and so the trade unions had to become stronger in support of all those policies like the 40 hour week and paid overtime, and minimum wage and safety conditions. They didn't have separate government departments for everything back in those days, they were things that had to be struggled for and monitored by representatives of the workers themselves. So the employers began to look around for easier employees I think. Maori were not satisfactory because as collective minded people in the working classes or in employment, labour employment, they tended to support the collective decisions of the unions so they were a dead loss to the employers. But these Pacific Islanders with temporary work permits or visitors' permits could be encouraged to stay on and keep on working over their go home time. Then they were in the wrong. They were in a position of being in the wrong and they had to keep their heads down. So immediately you're seeing a more malleable bit of the workforce.

So the employers began recruiting in the Pacific and they began 'facilitating' the process so that they would perhaps pay for or subsidise fares to New Zealand and then hold the passports. It was very common for the employers to hold the workers' passports, which gave a kind of control, there's a symbolic power about that. I mean I wouldn't let somebody else have my passport. I don't even let Ray have my passport. You've got a group of people who were temporary, who were not by and large unionised, were not coming from a tradition of growing up with a kind of discussion of unions in their young working lives. So they were sort of down the cracks of workers' rights and relations. They didn't have any traditional analysis of class relations or you know things like the means of production or stuff like that. So they ended up being used against the old existing workforce. The employers played them off which was a good divide and rule tactic. So it developed hostilities, particularly between Maori and Pacific people which probably lasted into the Eighties at least and there's still probably the vestiges of them still around because 'who are the employers lackeys?' you know. 'Who are betraying the unions? Who are not even joining the unions?' - even though in those days you were supposed to join the unions, there was a legal provision for it. So all those hostilities were being generated and nurtured which helped to divide the workforce.

The Department of Immigration turned a blind eye and ignored this for about a decade while the economy needed those workers. About 1971 there was an economic downturn and unemployment began to rise. If Pacific people who were overstaying were out of work they

couldn't apply for an unemployment benefit so they very soon had no money, so they couldn't afford to go home, even if that seemed their best option. So you had a kind of a displaced underclass, small but present. Then the government began to crack down with arrests and repatriating people and so on. It was all very heavy handed indeed. We've all heard about the Dawn Raids and so on, well they certainly were true and they were very stand over tactics. People would be woken at four in the morning and told then and there to grab a small suitcase of stuff and were taken straight to the airport, and held for sometimes more than a day, while they were put on flights to go home. Also the Immigration Department officials began to stop people who looked like overstayers in the streets. Guess who looked like overstayers? At this stage I think there were more Canadians and Americans overstaying their permits than Pacific Islanders. There were more British people and Europeans overstaying their permits than Pacific Islanders, however you will notice that in the streets they didn't look like overstayers in the same way that Pacific looking people did. But actually these slightly confused officials thought that Maori people also looked like potential overstayers because they looked like Pacific people, which I suppose in a way they are. When they were asked to show their passports and permits that was a little problematic because not all of them had passports. A lot of them had never travelled overseas. They were then in a difficult position of not being able to prove that they were allowed to be here. It was a shambles and it was very humiliating and infuriating for Maori. That helped a bit with the hostility between Maori and Pacific Islanders I think. It was nurtured for about 20 years one way and another.

One of the things that I want to say is if you talk to people of Dutch or Polish ancestry both of which were groups which immigrated in quite large numbers after World War Two. If you talk to them, most of them experienced tremendous hostility as long as they were identifiable – either by their accent and speech patterns or by things like having the wrong things in their school lunches. The difference was that, like it or not, potentially if not the immigrants themselves their children could blend in. So they had choices about how Polish they actually presented. There are people in the anti-racism movement, in the Treaty movement like Ingrid or Helen that you can talk to about all that. I suppose you can blend faster, particularly if you modify your name. One of the things about the Croatians is that on the whole they didn't modify their names. So they're still spottable. A lot of family names do seem a bit strange, on the other hand a lot of English names actually don't sound like English names. My mother's father's family were in England for two or three hundred years but her maiden name was Delevante. Well that doesn't sound like an English name exactly but he was actually extremely English and English identified. He'd sound like a bloody Pom if you heard him speak! So we've got that history of suspicion and hostility.

If you talk to people of Irish descent you'll find historical tensions and pains and hostilities and some of that is around religion. In the Catholic schools quite a lot of the agenda was learning how to blend in because you'll find that some of the nuns taught more old fashioned manners and behaviours than the equivalent English children were learning 0615 at the time. So there were patterns of super-conform were going on and quite a lot of myths and assumptions going in both directions I think. We have on the Pakeha side quite an embedded culture of suspicion, hostility, or just ignorance and non-understanding even among our own, the Pakeha group, without

anybody more identifiable or more visibly other. I think understanding that about ourselves and dealing with it in some ways is pretty important.

I think I may have talked before about the Maori value of diversity and our, we do have a value for diversity but it is subordinate to things like unity and conformity and individualism and various other things. I think I talked about hearing Judge Durie talking about diversity as a fundamental value, yes I did so I won't go on about that again¹.

Sometimes you can use a kinder word and you can talk about being Anglophiles or Anglocentric which is sort of meaning English centred and valuing things English. Well there's nothing wrong with people of English ancestry, or friendly onlookers, valuing English things and English cultural patterns, there are some jolly good and likeable things, valuable things in English cultural history. But it is actually operating at an unhealthy level because it is combined with this xenophobic history. When I was little there were still lots of grown ups who talked about England as home and they were at the stage of regretting that they couldn't afford to send their children to school in England and I think in the South Island there still were families sending their children to school in England. Definitely there's a pattern of valuing New Zealand universities less than English universities and the accolade is for a New Zealand university to prepare a student well enough that it can go and do post-graduate stuff in England. That's being centred on England in a way that is probably in some ways harmless and amusing but when you combine it with a racist colonial history and the power that that gives, it has a slightly sinister flavour to me.

Although it's not fashionable or it has been less fashionable to show it, although it's becoming allowable again, hostility is quite near the surface, particularly to Maori and things Maori. I would think more than a third of the population is definitely still hostile to Maori and their aspirations and Maori stuff. I don't think a lot of the other 70% is highly energetically positive about it all. I think there is a shift, partly generational, partly through education, in the number of people who understand what is at stake and what could be, I don't know what the word is, available or opened up. That number is increasing, particularly hopefully in younger groupings but even among those of us who are positive there are embedded things that we don't even know are there in our attitudes and assumptions. How we hear things, how we perceive things. Anyway that's what I think.

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¹ Discussed in 'Decolonisation'.