

Mitzi Nairn: Thoughts on social justice

BEING ALLIES

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I think when we're talking about being allies to Maori groups and working towards some of the same objectives I guess I'm more interested in the coalitions, the group to group processes than what individuals do. I don't really have the same perception of individuals unless they are in key positions in otherwise hostile organisations, so you might say 'So and so is a good ally.' On the whole I'm thinking more about groups working together. The group where I first got my experience about working with Maori groups was during the early years of the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination – ACORD. ACORD, was in formation in 1972 and was up and running by the end of that year or certainly by 1973. ACORD was a Pakeha group, it was working as Pakeha with Pakeha – that's what it was formed for. It was a group that was committed to anti-racism work as a primary first priority, so that if you joined ACORD you agreed that all your other interests and concerns would take second place and you would really only do top ups on them, say things like anti-apartheid work or the peace movement or work with CORSO or feminist work, any of those kind of development struggles. You would sort of maintain your work on them but you wouldn't actually prioritise them in the way you agreed to prioritise ACORD.

In our structure we had a panel of Maori and Pacific consultants who never exactly all agreed with each other but that was important because we always said that while we consulted widely we made our own decisions. That was one of the things we picked up very early that Maori groups didn't want to have to tell dependent Pakeha people what to do. They were dying to have autonomous groups that could be argued with but would basically have their own positions, or that's how I perceive it now. That meant that when we got into various actions sometimes we were in coalitions. The way I think coalitions work is they are around a particular objective and to be in coalition with another group you only have to agree about the objective and about the process or processes that you will use together. You don't have to agree on motivation, you don't have to agree on theory, you don't always have to agree on all the boundaries. For example groups that went into HART, Halt All Racist Tours, recognised that there were other groups in HART who would do much more radical actions or much less radical actions than themselves and that they wouldn't necessarily be comfortable with each other's actions all the time. You don't have to wear everything that everybody else in the coalition does and sometimes you will get a certain amount of public reaction if you are in a group with somebody who does things that the public don't approve of - you'll be seen as at least condoning those things. But that's okay. You probably are condoning a lot of stuff really, or not knowing about them till afterwards which is just as good.

The first coalition that ACORD was really in was the work as the South Auckland Police Taskforce was set up. The South Auckland Police Taskforce was a very watershed kind of event. It marked the beginning of team policing, so called, it marked long batons being issued for the first time and it also operated according to extremely, I would say, controversial strategies which turned out to

be pretty disastrous. The Police Taskforce operated in a fairly provocative way and I can talk about that later on if you like. There were three main groups opposing or investigating or exposing the Police Taskforce in this coalition. There was Nga Tamatoa – the young Maori warriors' group, there was the Polynesian Panther Party who were to some extent modelled on the Black Panthers of the United States Civil Rights movement, and there was ACORD. There were various other individuals who worked in the coalition of course but basically those were the groups. The coalition did a number of things. One was to monitor the police activities and describe them. One was to challenge and one was to try and spread awareness generally of what actually was going down because the Police Taskforce was partly a response to media hoohah about how dangerous, in effect how dangerous Maori and Pacific people were. So there were little old ladies in Epsom who were too scared to go to bed at night in case they were murdered in their beds. However the Taskforce was then deployed in South Auckland, so I'm not quite sure why little old ladies in Epsom began to feel safer. You can see how the media interpretation actually shaped some of that public opinion or public feeling. The people in the coalition brought different skills and different capacities to the coalition. Although some ACORD people did go out on police monitoring and some ACORD people did some of the courts monitoring, quite a lot of what we did was to use our contacts and skills to get the coalition newsletter or newspaper published for instance. Because we had much better access to that sort of thing and so doing the publications was one of the ACORD kind of tasks. And that to me also is how a coalition works, that different groups bring their skills and capacities. It's absolutely no use for instance for a middle class Pakeha woman like me going and doing interviews with sulky looking kind of semi-gang members from South Auckland. I mean there's just no meeting of minds or faces or anything. Why should they trust me and why should I know how to enter into a useful dialogue in that situation.

At first, back in the 1960s it was really hard to locate like-minded Maori. So it was a huge relief when Nga Tamatoa was founded because they were an upfront straight speaking protest-oriented group. They were visible and they were willing to tell it like it is. Now this was not true of any other Maori groups that I can think of who had a public profile at all, like the District Maori Council for instance. For that matter, there weren't very many Maori groups with a public profile to Pakeha. And so, well it can't be that Maori weren't aware of the load of shit they were both individually and as groups and as a people on the receiving end of. So what was happening? Well one of the things is that after 120 years of assimilation policies some Maori had actually become assimilated. More I would say knew how to behave as if they were assimilated. Some Maori had been so disrupted from their roots, they'd been translocated to the cities, in many cases they'd been taken away from their families many into government welfare approved welfare homes. Or they'd been sent to the mainly church schools set up for Maori which are quite an ambivalent phenomenon in almost every colonial and missionary situation. Those church schools did do some good stuff. I mean you'll hear Te Aute as kind of a beacon. Partly about adaptation to change, partly I guess as retaining some Maori cultural patterns and values. But there are a lot of fish hooks in that situation, there are questions over it because it is actually again in some ways working towards assimilation. It may be retentive in some ways of the culture but in others ways it is about adaptation and not necessarily adaptation on Maori terms. I mean if you think about say Japanese. Japanese use more electronic equipment and what do you call those things,

computers and things, than almost anybody else in the world but the fact that they are up with modern technology doesn't make them any less Japanese. You don't actually have to lose your culture, although your culture does change as you take on modern technology or whatever but there is a lot of discourse in Pakeha settler circles about the price tag of modern is to lose your own culture. You'll hear this in workshops when people say "Oh well, do they want to go back to grass skirts?" The fact that they didn't ever wear grass skirts is neither here nor there but you've got that perception that if you want to have radios and penicillin you actually have to become more assimilated to English or European or whatever patterns which is just not true, as I say if you look at Japan.

You get or we got, and it's characteristic of colonisation, you get a separation from culture, a disruption from culture, you get pressure to assimilate and you also get the need to survive. I remember a kuia in Dunedin saying to me, "You know we Maori have had to learn how to invisibilise ourselves to survive." That would have been in about 1983 or 84 I think. Now invisibilise is a terrible word isn't it? And of course one of the joys of the last 15 years or so has been seeing those southern Maori revisibilise themselves. But I think it's very easy to underestimate how dangerous it has been for Maori to identify themselves as Maori. Just looking Maori can get you in bother without ever having to say a word or do anything. So those survival strategies. If you went in to work with or say do a workshop in an organisation maybe a government department, maybe an NGO, if there were any Maori staff and sometimes there were one or two then their main strategy was to invisibilise themselves if I can use that term. There's no way they could afford to be the ones who were going to leap up and say "Great to see you. Right on there, you've put that in a nutshell". And if you think about being in a work situation and being in the wrong just by who you are, the last thing you are going to do is draw attention to yourself because it's really going to work day after day, day in day out, if nobody ever sits with you at morning tea or lunch and nobody remembers how you like your coffee and somehow your room is the one with a chair in that's got a missing little sucker on one leg so it jiggles backwards and forwards when you sit in it and you spend a lot of time folding up bits of paper and putting them under the leg. You know those are very long work days, they are miserable times if you are in effect ostracised by your work mates. You have to learn to blend in. You learn to keep a low profile. You learn to laugh at the jokes against your own people, or well you may just keep quiet but you're certainly not going to leap up and say "That's disgusting. That's not true, I don't agree with you here". Because I think we underestimate the misery of being in a hostile workplace. It's difficult enough being in a culturally different and alien workplace. That's quite enough adaptations to be making.

Another thing about living under pressures of assimilation and racism for a century or more is that almost all oppressed peoples begin to believe at least some of the critique of themselves. They internalise racism. They come to believe that the things that are said about their inadequacies or their primitiveness or whatever are true. And they expect less of themselves. So if some Pakeha shows up at the marae and is willing to become the treasurer, I think I talked about this before, you say "Yes, yes, how grateful we are to have someone who understands how these finances work. We could never have worked that out." And they come to believe, it's not about politeness

it's about their confidence in their own culture having been undermined and sometimes destroyed. So all of that is woven into why in the Sixties and Seventies it was really hard to find many Maori to work with.

That's one of the reasons that Nga Tamatoa were a breath of life because they were straight speaking. They didn't care about being employed or keeping their jobs or those sorts of things on the whole. I think some of them were students, some were unemployed already, some of them had sort of anonymous jobs where they wouldn't be noticed much like telephone tolls exchange or labouring jobs where their immediate boss might be Maori. You could get a direct critique from them you didn't have to deal with the natural politeness of Maori, or the strategic politeness, the survival politeness.

What did it mean to work as allies?

Well one thing was, and I know this happened for Nga Tamatoa and to some extent for Polynesian Panthers, around the university and so on idealistic Pakeha students sort of saw that things were wrong, and maybe also saw that Maori situations could be very warm and enjoyable. So they not only joined Maori Club which was probably okay but began to hang around, be hangers on to groups like Nga Tamatoa. This was really quite embarrassing and tiring and tedious. So one of the first things that seemed to be asked of us from groups like Nga Tamatoa was 'Could you get these people out of our hair? Could you get them to work together with each other rather than hanging around us' and later they would have stronger things to say, particularly around doing joint work in education and workshops and things, 'We've actually have our own work to do with our own people and we can't do it in the presence of Pakeha lookers on. So don't get all hurt feelings and sniffy because you are in the way'. Those were hard words for some Pakeha people to hear and accept. I suspect it's has taken quite a few people a number of years to get over their resentment at what they experienced as rejection. 'Here I am all sensitive and wanting to help and I'm told to piss off.' I suppose it's not a good look but it was absolutely necessary. Some of the early ACORD members came from having been those hangers on. Not huge numbers but some, others stuck to Maori Club rather than the action groups I think.

So anyway one of the first messages if you like, in my experience of Maori colleagues was convince, deal with, challenge your own. Challenge other Pakeha, convince them, bring them up to speed, show them, open their eyes, get them out of our hair. That's partly where the education wing and the workshops and so on begin. They're sort of two things. One is a sort of generic education for Pakeha in general but another part that came more from ACORD's analysis of institutions and organisations was to try and deal with the institutional racism aspects that were at their absolute institutional hearts, their core values, that were so essentially damaging to Maori because they were racist. So you weren't just educating Pakeha in general, I think you were trying to educate social workers or nurses or people who actually did the nitty gritty of delivering racism to try and get that institutional change.

So we began to do workshops and we began to write articles and papers and things explaining racism and picking out, pointing out how it operates at the hospital or in the police force or in the

courts or wherever. I guess that's a form of education. We were also challenged, by Maori particularly, and we were challenging ourselves 'educate yourselves'. That was one of the reasons we had to make ACORD a closed group, because of what we were learning and trying to process. It was really hard stuff and trying to come to a better knowledge of ourselves and our own culture and the practices and policies of our institutions. Hard work and a lot to do. I guess it is hard for the fish to see the water, we often say that don't we? I always think racism is a bit like, well when we were kids you used to get an Annual every Christmas and one of the things that was always in it was pictures where you turned the page to see the jungle animals or something. You know if you turned it around a bit you could see an elephant and turn it the other way 'oh there's a monkey' and turn it upside down you could see maybe a hippopotamus and so on or it might be clowns and the trapeze and circus ponies or something - there were a lot of different things built into those pictures. But eventually the more you see the more you see and after a while you don't even have to turn the page around anymore. You go 'Oh yeah, there's a monkey upside down over there, and that's a lion and there's a camel' and racism is very like that. Once you've learnt to see you see more and more. This probably means of course that you go through a period of extreme depression but it is actually quite consistent. And I think it was easier in a way to do that in the 1970s because since then the faces of the organisations have changed quite a lot. Nowadays you probably potter in and say "Oh golly a tapa cloth or goodness me, a pou whenua" and it's really only if you're in contact for a while and have the history or the background of analytic perception so that you think 'It's still delivering shit'. And you may well see 1100 more Maori faces than you would ever have seen back in the Seventies but those Maori are working within a kawangatanga framework not a rangatiratanga framework. There's nothing wrong with them doing that as individuals because they have a perfect Treaty right to be there but the institution can actually hide behind those Maori faces as if it had more Maori input than it actually has. You don't often find that up on the 14th floor there's many Maori faces unless they are in an advisory capacity, you don't find them far up the power structures in most organisations. But it can be initially quite difficult to assess how much real change is going on. You can't just zip in and count the brown faces and look at the policy, there's more to it than that. But the neat thing today is that there are so many Maori groups who are doing their own stuff in terms of analysis and research and service delivery as well in areas like health. And if they want Pakeha allies they will say so and they will seek out or respond to Pakeha who they discern are on their side and have something to contribute.

I wanted to talk a bit about how we moved from the racism focus to doing so much more work on Te Tiriti. Now Nga Tamatoa began in the late Sixties and strongly in the early Seventies by protesting at Waitangi around Te Tiriti. Part of that was because Waitangi Day was suddenly made a national holiday and it was going to be called New Zealand Day and then it was going to be called Waitangi Day and one of the parties would name it one thing and the other party would get elected and call it the other thing, so it was typical politics. Nga Tamatoa's was initially challenging other Maori about 'What are we doing celebrating a day of conquest in effect. A day when whether we meant to or not we seem to have signed away our identity and our birthright'. So the challenge then wasn't exactly initially to us Pakeha, it was a challenge about te Tiriti that put the Treaty onto your mind map, even if it was in the vague unexplored areas it was still somewhere at

the edge of the map. It came into Pakeha consciousness, at least it came into mine. As those protests developed and Waitangi Day developed and it became a more nationally recognised day, because of the holiday, there were issues. For instance I know about the ones in the churches around whether it was a celebration or a commemoration and whether the churches should be involved in the church services and thanksgiving parades on the day, you know that sort of such. The Treaty hassles went on through the early Eighties and Nga Tamatoa and the Waitangi Action Committee did runs to Waitangi for Waitangi Day and then they did a march, a hikoi. The first really big hikoi was the one in 1983. That was the one that Tainui joined. After that the Maori elders and leaders called a hui at Ngaruawahia to develop a common voice on the Treaty or te Tiriti really. Among other things one of the calls they gave was that Pakeha and Maori need to learn about the Treaty really properly. For different reasons it was a task for both Maori and Pakeha.

See one of the things was that the slogan for a long time had been 'The Treaty is a fraud. Stop the celebrations the Treaty is a fraud'. And I knew that that was quite a challenge to Pakeha but I'd never really perceived what a huge shock went through Maoridom at these younger Maori calling in question the integrity and wisdom of nga tupuna, of their ancestors, their predecessors. Had the tupuna been stupid, were they mugs, were they easily duped, were they betrayers of their people? Were they that impressed by a pouch of tobacco and a blanket? It just called in question their integrity and their intelligence and one of the things that the Ngaruawahia gathering said was "The Treaty is not a fraud. The Treaty was a very far-sighted document from the Maori point of view. It set the way things were and the way things could be and the way things could and should develop. Maori were not stupid to sign it. If you read the text of Te Tiriti it makes perfect sense to sign it'. But from that hui which every major tribal group was at, every major Maori political group was at. For instance Hone Harawira chaired the youth section, he chaired the youth caucus at that meeting. Pretty well mostly everyone who was anyone in the Maori world was there. The challenge from that Maori hui came 'Learn about the Treaty' and Pakeha dug in and did it. Just as Maori. It was a very authoritative turning point if you like.

The report from the hui came out as a bilingual sort of a document with opposite pages in places and there are some things that are only in Maori. Because of course one of the things that we've been wrestling with over this time has been the standing and the retention and the survival of the Maori language. One of the first things we did as a group in ACORD was we received I think a panui or we certainly knew there was a gathering going on to set up the first Maori language week ever. So half a dozen of us from ACORD went along and I was talking just the other day to one of the Maori women who was in the organising group, and she said "You know, I saw these Pakeha come in and I thought uh oh here's a take over" and she said "I couldn't believe it. You all just sat quietly and listened and took a few notes. And you never said anything and you never took over. At the end when it was breaking up you came up and said would it be alright to have some of the posters and leaflets." She said "It shook me". So I think that illustrates the Maori expectation that Pakeha would assume the right to take over anything whatever even how to run Maori language week.

One of the things that Ingrid Huygen's thesis says, one of the things that she found out was that a characteristic of the language that Pakeha who are Treaty change agents use shows a respect for Maori authority and I guess right from, well that Maori language week gathering, a respect for Maori ability and Maori authority has been really important to me. I think it's really important in reconstructing or reasserting or whatever it is we are doing, that Maori authority, that tino rangatiratanga. Because for te tino rangatiratanga to flourish it's got to be asserted by Maori but it's got to be respected by Maori and by Pakeha.

I guess the challenges to us as allies from Maori and from the Ngaruawahia hui were know your own culture, know the Treaty, know who you are and don't nick our culture. Pakeha culture is fine, just be aware of it. Don't think it's the way things are and Maori stuff is peculiar and cultural and ethnic and somehow other. Because there are Maori New Zealanders and Pakeha New Zealanders.

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