

# Getting elected is just the first step

May 14

So. We have more than our fair share of village idiots here in New Plymouth, says the enemy of multiple cat ownership, Gareth Morgan.

He was presumably referring in his blog to those few idiots who abused Judd directly over his stance on Maori representation, but the implication is that many people in supposedly backward provinces like ours harbour deep-seated racism that denies Maori legal rights under Treaty of Waitangi legislation.

Let's for a moment put aside the emotive power of what Morgan is saying - and the point he makes that New Plymouth District Council is breaking the law by having no committee liaising with Maori - and examine the issue from the perspective of democratic conventions.

The familiar refrain of those who take an interest in local body politics goes much along the lines intoned by broadcaster Mike Hosking: if you want a say you need to get yourself elected.

As many a new councillor has found, however, that in itself doesn't guarantee power. Unlike Parliament, where MPs usually toe the party line, voting at the council table can be a much more individual exercise.

I recall in Auckland in the 1980s a Maori neighbour was the first appointed to a guaranteed seat on the Auckland Regional Authority in that body's attempt to lift Maori presence at its table. He quit in disgust after one term because he felt he was a lone voice and could achieve nothing.

One of the features of most local councils in New Zealand is the apparent absence of party politics, although really they are there within some councils as the citizens and ratepayers lobby (maybe, but not necessarily, read "National") and as the sometimes more openly labelled "Labour" group.

New Plymouth councils have traditionally seemed less obviously delineated. The business community has usually held sway in a loosely organised way. Since the district council was formed in 1989, a rural town bloc has also been evident at times.

What that means for decision-making is rule by clique. Groupings of the like-minded form and re-form around major issues or leading personalities. Successful mayors have operated in accordance with their ability to hold alliances together when it really counted.

That cosy, workable arrangement is rarely upset, although it can be when an issue gathers sufficient public momentum to challenge convention. An example was newcomer Daisy Lean's triumph over incumbent Denny Sutherland in the sewage treatment plant saga, although even that relied on one councillor having a belated change of mind.

In fact, Judd achieved a similar thing with his Maori representation proposal, but he was defeated in the end by a poll (in Lean's case, a similar poll failed). That sharp reminder from the electorate to councillors that they were moving too fast may chill off similar initiatives for some time.

However, while the poll seemed overwhelmingly conclusive - 21,000 (83 percent) of the 25,338 who voted were against - it should be viewed in the context of overall voter apathy in local body elections: only 45 percent of potential voters cast a ballot.

What did the other 55 percent think? If the current controversy stirs sufficient interest, rage even, within the wider community we might see a change in October. Although that will require candidates to be upfront about their views prior to polling day rather than after it.

We may not have to wait until then to see a further challenge to the status quo.

Mayor Judd and councillor Howie Tamati (also not standing again) want a memorial to Maori who fell in the Taranaki Land Wars created on the site of the first battle, Te Kohia Pa, at Brixton. As it happens, the actual pa site is on privately owned land which may be for sale. The council could buy it.

While government-erected memorials exist at a few mostly obscure battle sites, there is no Maori equivalent to the Waitara Military Cemetery, which honours only British Army and local militia casualties in the wars.

Maori have an excellent case, it would seem, and have been sensitive in their choice of location, given they could have picked nearby Puketakauere, where Maori achieved a significant victory over the army.

In my view, the council recently blew a chance to demonstrate democratic even-handedness over the naming of streets in a new Waitara subdivision. How wisely will it react to Judd and Tamati if their proposal lands on the table? And what implications are there for the next election?