

Debate stifled over Maori engagement

May 28

The meeting begins with a low murmur of voices as people, councillors, managers, a few members of the public, arrange themselves around and beyond the precisely set circle of desks.

There is a perceptible air of anticipation. This is the first full meeting of the New Plymouth District Council since IT happened, since their leader, the mayor, ignited the equivalent of a bomb vest in the public arena of television.

He will not stand again because of the failure of his vision for Maori engagement with the council. So how will he behave now, at this his first meeting since the incendiary fallout from his announcement?

The murmur stops as Mayor Andrew Judd sweeps into the room and takes his place. From the distance of the press bench, it's impossible to study his face. Some of the overhead lighting is switched off, presumably to save power, which seems apt for a cost-conscious council.

Does he look haggard with worry? Perhaps. I don't meet him often enough to be able to tell.

The meeting begins with a benign account from someone who seems eternally grateful for a recent trip to the sister city in Japan. Ideal. Nothing taxing here. We relax.

But not for long. The next deputation is by Maori. Puketapu kaumatua Grant Knuckey and Te Atiawa kaumatua Harry Nicholas (New Zealand's first Maori district commissioner of police, in Waikato, now retired) step up to the deputation desk.

Mayor Judd wants to know who they represent. Knuckey deflects the question: He is a constituent. Nicholas says "iwi".

The two men inquire about the council's intentions on Maori engagement, now that Judd's strategy for Maori ward representation has been so roundly defeated. They point out that by not having any formal means of consultation the council is not meeting its legal obligations.

Nicholas reads out a list of varying examples of how other councils around the country manage this seemingly vexed conundrum. The implication is that if they can manage it, why can't New Plymouth.

Knuckey is keen to know before the next local body elections in October what the council will do about this. Otherwise there is the prospect of another three years of nothing.

How are the councillors reacting to this polite, restrained and dignified rebuke? The only Maori councillor, Howie Tamati, is reading something. His colleagues sit stock-still, unmoving, silent, possibly unmoved.

But how could we tell?

When the deputation finishes with a tribute to Judd for at least trying to resolve the impasse, there is no provision for questions or debate. The pair is thanked, and they return to their seats.

Nicholas stays for a while, then as the meeting continues he later walks across the chamber to approach councillor Murray Chong, tapping his shoulder so the pair can confer quietly. Judd stays the meeting and asks them to stop. Nicholas looks up, surprised.

Judd repeats his mild remonstrance, and as Nicholas walks towards the door indicates he won't take it any further, because, oh well, they had finished talking, anyway. What might he have done? Had Nicholas forcibly removed?

The moment passes. The meeting hears another half dozen deputations, all of whom are allowed to be questioned by councillors. Richard Handley, who has already thrown his hat into the next mayoral contest, asks quite a few, signifying that the campaign has begun.

After a couple of hours, when the meeting pauses before going into secret to discuss things we're not allowed to hear about, I ask the mayor why no questions were allowed of the Maori deputation.

It was his decision to proceed in that way, he says. But why? He repeats that it was his decision. So you didn't want a fight? He smiles. End of interview.

So the obvious question: has Mayor Judd decided his media performances - an initial announcement and some follow-ups - are enough to settle the matter? That allowing his council to debate the issue, or at least question those who question the deadlock, at the first formal council opportunity is now a step too far?

Maybe. But knowing how councils work from having observed them closely for half a century, I'm betting it was, to use that old cliché, a put-up job. Agreement was reached in what used to be called smoke-filled rooms by councillors outraged at the charges of racism they believe the mayor has brought down on their heads from around the country.

No more, they've said, and Judd has conceded, for now.

Good luck with that one, NPDC.