

Hikoi date clash makes you wonder

If you ever wanted an example of irony, look no further than the timing of two events related to race relations in Taranaki last week.

While New Plymouth mayor Andrew Judd led hundreds out of the city on a peace hikoi protesting bicultural neglect, his fellow councillors sat through a day-long hearing at Waitara to digest visceral fallout from an event (one of many) that started the trouble in the first place.

Portrayed on TV news as too busy to be bothered with the march to Parihaka, the councillors were in fact taking the next step towards resolving a bicultural conundrum that has festered for 151 years - what to do about land seized from Māori in the 1860s.

Like the proverbial hot potato, title to 778 sections has been passed from one local government entity to another, while those living on them hold their breath awaiting a decision on what will happen to their homes.

If we were lucky, our parents warned us as we made our first perilous steps towards home ownership that leasehold land should be avoided at all costs. However, many who built on leased land at Waitara last century were promised an act of Parliament would soon allow them to freehold. Many of those same people are still waiting.

The first attempt at legislation in 1989 was parked as premature by the National government. As part of the latest effort to settle Te Ātiawa's Treaty claim, the government offered title to the land, which it valued at \$23 million. But the iwi would have had to shell out nearly twice that sum to the leaseholders if it wanted to be anything more than just another landlord. Unsurprisingly, it opted for the \$23 million.

That left the council still holding the leasehold titles, and a hearing was held last week to give Waitara people a chance to comment on what they think the council - and Taranaki Regional Council, which "owns" some of the land and which was conspicuously absent from the hearing - should do.

The day-long occasion was by turns wretched and aspirational. By turns, there was anger, desperation, hope, and appeals for charity, that in the eyes of those appealing for it was anything but charity.

Most of the 141 people or groups who submitted opinions (350 pages of them) were in favour of the freeholding proposal, and two thirds approved of the whole package. Many of the other third accepted the package's main principle, but hesitated over details. So there was room for optimism.

The anger came from leaseholders, Pākehā and Māori, who feel the average council valuation for freeholding, about \$90,000, is unreasonably high, ignores their efforts over the years to improve what was mainly swampy land, and is beyond the means of the many pensioners, who are likely to be turned away by banks.

They compare the council's new valuations with the \$30,000 average valuation applied in the Crown's original Treaty offer to Te Ātiawa. The explanation is while the iwi would have got title to the sections, it would not have been able to do anything with them without buying out the leaseholders, whereas individual leaseholders, if they freehold, will be able to do what they like.

Equal anguish came from the original land owners, the so-called Waitara Hapū, comprised of two subtribes of Te Ātiawa, Manukorihi and Otaraua Hapū. They don't want their iwi to take the money: they want the land back. As one Manukorihi kuia reminded everyone, the original declaration by kaumatua Te Rangitāke Wiremu Kīngi that the land must never be relinquished is as strong today as it was in 1860.

That split is being regarded by the council and the government's Office of Treaty Settlements as an internal matter for Māori to resolve. Usually, the office will deal only with iwi.

The councillors later held a workshop to consider the submissions, accepted some of the submitters' recommendations, and decided at a follow-up meeting this week that with further tweaking, the package will soon go to Parliament. Tweaks may include freezing valuations for a year, some sort of "administrative package" to help vulnerable leaseholders, and an expansion of the valuation process beyond the council's own, singular approach.

As Judd declared in an impassioned speech at the end of this week's meeting, real progress is finally being made with this complex and demanding issue. A lingering question remains: why didn't he reschedule last week's Waitara meeting so it didn't clash with the hiko?