

Waitara bill not home just yet

To most New Zealanders, Waitara is just another Kiwi town made slightly more famous because it was the site of the first Land Wars battle in 1860. What they may not know is the battle never quite ended.

Down the hill from Te Kōhia, where it happened, is a contentious town space in Waitara's heart. The fight over it has continued for 150 years or so, although cannon and mere were long ago replaced by words - written, spoken and occasionally wept.

An end is in sight. Ownership of the Pekapeka Block is due to be settled in about a month's time in Parliament by the final reading of the New Plymouth District Council (Waitara Lands) Bill, well out of cannon range, but in essence right there in the town.

Except those settling it were nowhere to be seen when about 75 Waitara residents met in the town's senior citizens hall last weekend to talk to Labour list MP Kiri Allan, who apparently agreed to come and hear why they think this grand solution won't work.

Not for them, anyway. Some say it will see them on the street, because in their retirement years they can't afford to pay amounts exceeding \$100,000 to freehold the land they built their houses on. However, Allan never got to listen. Instead, a Labour Party emissary appeared to say she couldn't make it.

The bill has reached its much-sculpted form after hard work by local iwi Te Ātiawa. It will be a relief for the reluctant current owners of the land, New Plymouth District Council. The same for local elected MP Jonathan Young, who has been edging it through the treacherous shallows of the House. And for the Minister for Treaty Settlements, Andrew Little, as well as for a couple of directly affected hapū within Te Ātiawa, who didn't like the initial deal.

It seems paradoxical that the only unhappy parties left are those actually living on the land.

However, there's been a change in the public face of that opposing force. When I last wrote about the leaseholders' plight after they'd lost a court hearing, the aggrieved who spoke out were mostly Pākehā people who built on "free" leasehold land in droves many decades ago, when Waitara Borough Council needed to provide for an expanding population.

The council - which was given "ownership" of the land after an earlier "owner", Waitara Harbours Board, shut down - tentatively developed streets and services for a first subdivision, advising potential buyers that only the government-owned State Advances Corporation would give them loans to build.

Those early homemakers were told (never in writing, though, it seems) that as the new council blocks opened and their leasehold payments funded more street development, they would be able to freehold their properties within a couple of years. But that hurdle proved elusive. It got further away as successive governments acknowledged the treatment of Maori before, during and after the Land Wars. The hurdle is now as high as a skyscraper.

It appears the leaseholders are about to be sacrificed to the cause of finally settling the debt to Te Ātiawa, who were offered the land at a high price but wisely chose to stay clear of what bureaucrats and politicians have created.

What seems to have changed is that last weekend's meeting wasn't organised by the same group that lobbied in the past. The leaders now are well-known Te Ātiawa men Grant Knuckey, Bill Simpson and Trevor Dodunski. Half those attending were Māori.

To an outsider like me, that looks like an important shift in the game. What was once a clear case of Māori seeking redress for colonial wrongs has become more a bunch of ordinary Kiwis asking for a fair go.

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The issues remain complex. For example, profiteers may be poised to take advantage once Waitara's land conundrum is sorted. Councils are wary of playing favourites or setting precedents that come back to bite them.

Still, there must be a way to offer the disadvantaged in this unusual case a reasonable financial target to freehold, one that recognises their contributions to past development of Waitara. And most, if not all, of their current leasehold "rent" payments could henceforth be devoted to that end for as long as it takes.

Let's not make yet another final settlement law that doesn't do the job. I urge Jonathan Young to take a last look at the work he has so far done admirably well.