

How much have we changed in 5 years?

In an odd way, I wish I was still on leave and not venturing to write what follows.

I'm reminded of a sudden swerve in my journalism life in 1980 when I was shifted from the *Auckland Star* to *NZ Woman's Weekly* for a brief stint as news editor.

I got to learn from one of NZ's great editors, Jean Wishart, but also by chance I dodged having to report the 1981 Springbok rugby tour. Jean steered her magazine clear.

Before I moved temporarily across from the *Star*, I was the paper's editorial manager, a grand title with mundane responsibilities, such as handling the great tide of letters-to-the-editor.

In those 'Bok tour-turbulent times, most were like last week's *Taranaki Daily News* letters page, full of outrage about a topic I now have no excuse to avoid - race relations, and particularly NPDC's impending Māori ward.

Whatever I write will offend someone, perhaps many. There's a strong prospect of a repeat of September 2014, when an identical NPDC move (although the majority council vote was a much tighter 7-6) led to a citizen-enforced poll in 2015...and acrimony, threats, the political demise of a mayor.

Some people labelled North Taranaki particularly racist, given 83 percent of those who voted were opposed to a Māori ward, a higher proportion than in similar polls elsewhere (although others still averaged in the 70 percent range).

But nobody could be certain because only 21,000 people voted; more than half those eligible (31,000) didn't bother.

When imposed on NZ's indigenous people by military might, the British version of local government worked for Pākehā but sidelined grievances that could never be resolved by the succession of government commissions of inquiry that began after the 1860s Land Wars and were repeated for decades.

The Māori ward is a frustrating symbol of all that, beset with participation rules that are as alienating as the poll-forcing clause. As the ward rules stand, North Taranaki Māori will be guaranteed a solitary seat at the NPDC table.

If all NPDC's Māori of-age citizens were allowed to vote in the ward - rather than just those on the Māori roll - they would be electing at least two, as already happens in each of the existing territorial wards, North (Waitara) and South-West (Inglewood to Okato).

Do the "rural" ward councillors dominate the council? Hardly, but they have occasionally been a supportive bloc for Mayor Neil Holdom. Nevertheless, a majority of eight is usually needed to win a vote on anything.

Does adding a single Māori ward councillor affect that? Maybe. There are at least three existing councillors with strong Māori links (that I know of), so adding a fourth - as well as crucial votes by existing and new Pākehā councillors with a strong social conscious - and the possibility of a redefined power structure emerges.

Nothing new about that. For much of the half century I've spent reporting local government, voting has sometimes been dominated by shopkeepers and retirees, who fiercely protected their own interests and kept progress steady (alert: faint praise).

Remember how rapidly we advanced when a social worker got hold of the tiller for a while in the 90s.

These days, young Māori are among our most enlightened thinkers. This new generation knows what it's about, as do Pākehā counterparts. That's why it should be no surprise the council voted 12-2 to stop mucking around and introduce a ward.

Councillor Amanda Clinton-Ghodes may be comparing the vote counts when she says we're not the same people we were five years ago.

But it might not be as simple as that. Of the six current councillors who were around in 2014, four haven't changed their stances (Richard Handley was absent from the meeting then).

Gordon Brown and Marie Pearce supported the ward both times, while Murray Chong and Richard Jordan have opposed it. Only Waitara's Colin Johnston has switched his vote, from no to yes. Handley was present this time and voted in favour.

Murray Chong's push to spend up to \$100,000 on a poll seems to be the only way to see if Clinton-Ghodes is right, and even then we're unlikely to hear from a majority.

The Mayor's abstention last week is interesting. His strategy to push the question out to public consultation before anything is decided was derailed. He wants more than that, though - no wards at all.

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