

## Yes to giving a fair go to Māori

As an experienced researcher and writer on our history, and once an expert on ethics and media law, I've reached a tipping point over the Māori ward question.

The wards are hardly perfect, confront fundamental British democratic principles, and won't resolve all Māori complaints about their treatment as New Zealand's indigenous people...but surely their time has come.

Nothing else the majority Pākehā population has offered Māori since before the Treaty of Waitangi has helped them gain places at the top of the local council table.

One or more Māori ward seats looks like the best deal for the moment, not just for Māori but for the growing constituency of young people with a social conscience. You know them - they're the same citizens rightfully worried about the environmental problems they're inheriting from people like me.

The Local Government Commission's 2017 report on Māori engagement in local government documented a mess, although it didn't use that word.

Its optimistic summary recorded an extraordinary range of approaches to council-Māori engagement, but no consistency or significant shifts towards clarity and uniformity over the previous decade.

Māori have limited means to engage if they want, but the key thing missing is real political presence. Their hobbled influence is confined just below the parapet that matters.

Who can blame them for feeling aggrieved, no matter how effective their lower level politicking.

And it is effective. Even though North Taranaki iwi were criticised (condemned by some) for insisting on meaningful negotiations over the Mt Messenger fix, in the end they got what looks like a fair deal.

That appears to have happened over the Waitara leasehold lands, too, although your view might be different if you're one of the leaseholders. Look how long that took to resolve, though. Many decades.

If you're not convinced, let me recount a story that emerged from our recent ancestry research for a Taranaki family that is a mix of Pākehā and Māori.

At the time of the 1860s Land Wars, their iwis' greatest concern was the Waikatos and their long history of invading North Taranaki, so they fought for the British Army, one achieving Pākehā acclaim for his feats as a scout.

However, that didn't count for anything - their land was confiscated along with everyone else's.

For many decades afterwards they claimed back a small 20-acre (8ha) reserve block. Three separate commissions of inquiry into the Land Wars and Māori treatment awarded its return, but that never happened.

Finally, in the late 1950s one of the family, a successful farmer, bought the land from the government for \$20,000. It was the only way the iwi could recover it.

I can't help wondering where the local council was when that little saga played out. Would it have acted if one of those sitting around the council chamber had been Māori?

Councils have an understandable tendency towards looking after their elected members' interests.

I spotted that way back in the late 1960s when I attended county council meetings and watched their officers present report after report of pollution going into every stream coming off Mt Taranaki.

The councillors mostly sat silently, their thoughts no doubt running to their own cow sheds and those of their neighbours, and to the co-operative dairy factories they part-owned and the milk wastes that daily emptied out of half-hidden pipes to turn the trout white and stinking.

Those days are long gone. Those "things" have been largely sorted, thanks to Basil Chamberlain's patient work at Taranaki Regional Council.

But aren't people more important than things? Aren't Māori people entitled to a real say in the affairs of local government, instead of having their input side-lined into committees that are a tantalising step away from the actual decision-making?

There are various ways of looking at this, of reconsidering our positions, of examining the significance of what might be if we cared to trust the judgement and deep knowledge of our Kiwi partners.

I've discussed the legal way forward here, but I'm equally interested in the moral side of this debate. Compared to the ethical considerations, the law is impersonal.

It might be satisfying to misuse a faulty law to get a win, but the ethical realm is much more complex and potentially rewarding. We each control our own ethics; the judgements we make are truly our own.

My moral compass is saying it's time. How about yours.