Sir Apirana Ngata’s Speech at the Centennial of the Treaty of Waitangi, 1940

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Apirana Turupa Ngata leading a haka at the 1940 centennial celebrations, Waitangi. Ref: MNZ-2746-1/2-F. Alexander
Sir Apirana Ngata (Ngāti Porou) delivered a strong message to Pākehā New Zealand 75 years ago this Friday, when he spoke at the 1940 Treaty Centennial celebrations at Waitangi. The original recording of his speech, outlining Māori grievances and calling for greater Pākehā understanding, is held in the radio collection of Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision.

The 1940 centenary marked 100 years since the signing of the Treaty and despite taking place in the midst of World War II, it was celebrated by events around the country, including the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington.
Wellington, at night. Deste, Eileen, 1908-1986. Ref: 1/2-004305-

The official emphasis of the centennial was on celebrating a century
of European progress, and Māori contributions were sidelined, with
scant acknowledgement of breaches of the Treaty by the Crown in
the intervening years.

On February 6th 1940, an elaborate re-enactment of the Treaty
signing ceremony was staged at Waitangi, with the National
Commercial Broadcasting Service recording and broadcasting
much of the ceremony live to the nation.

Following the re-enactment, there was a further ceremony to mark
the opening of a new national wharenuī in the Treaty grounds.
Known as Te Whare Rūnanga, this building was carved in a variety
of styles, designed to reflect all iwi and be a truly national meeting
house.

Northern chief Tau Henare and Sir Apirana Ngata had led the
project to have the wharenuī built, with funding and support from
several different iwi.

The Broadcasting Service also covered the opening of the meeting
house, and recorded speeches made by the Governor-General Lord
Galway, Prime Minister Peter Fraser and leading Māori figures such
as MPs Haami Rātana and Eru Tirikatene – and Sir Apirana Ngata.

As organiser of the event, he begins his speech with some
housekeeping, asking those guests with blue luncheon tickets to go
to the meeting house and those with red tickets to go to the
marquee with Paddy Webb. (There is laughter at this as Webb was
a well-known left-wing politician.)

Sir Apirana then moves onto a more serious subject matter, leaving
the audience in no doubt that Māori were not necessarily in the
mood for celebrating, saying they had approached the Centennial
year with much misgiving and listing their grievances; lands lost,
powers of chiefs humbled, Māori culture scattered and broken.

He was a media-savvy leader and was no doubt well-aware that his
speech was being broadcast. He had worked with the Broadcasting
Service already, using his friendship with founding director of
Hērangi and the opening of Turongo House at Ngāruawāhia in 1938.

Later, he went on to record commentaries about the many significant haka and waiata recorded at these events, saying it was “to put on record Māori songs and chants before the generation who knows these things passes away.”

But on 6 February 1940, Sir Apirana was concerned more with the future of his people, as you can hear in his speech below:

Speech by Sir Apirana Ngata, from Re-enactment of the Treaty Ceremony at Waitangi (6 Feb 1940). Ngā Taonga Sound & Vision Radio Collection, all rights reserved. To enquire about re-use of this item please contact sound@ngataonga.org.nz

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