

Waitangi Day

Page 5 – Waitangi Day 1970s

(MCH, 2014r)

The 1970s brought major changes for Waitangi Day. The day finally became a public holiday. Increasingly, it also became the focus of growing Māori protest about the status of the Treaty of Waitangi and issues of race.

Growing protest

Māori politics took on a more radical edge in the 1970s. Some Māori thought of taking an appeal to the United Nations in 1971, the year for the elimination of racial discrimination. New groups such as Ngā Tamatoa (Young Warriors) challenged quieter modes of action; in 1972 the group staged a walkout from the ceremonies at Waitangi. The gap to be bridged in mutual understanding can be gauged by the governor-general's ill-chosen comments that year: 'I just do not believe that racism and discrimination exists in this country,' said Sir Arthur Porritt, who considered that Māori-Pākehā relationships were being dealt with adequately through intermarriage.

Continuing protest owed much to the activities of new urban-based groups and organisations, mainly centred in Auckland and influenced by the university's Māori Studies Department. Older Māori organisations also challenged the government through submissions that were critical of its failure to give effect to Treaty rights.

Events outside New Zealand were influential. Strategies were learned from the struggles of indigenous groups elsewhere, notably in Canada and the United States. Other factors stiffened resolve: the post-colonial independence of new nations, the Black Power movement in the United States and the United Nations work on human rights.

A change of name and a national holiday

The call to make 6 February a nationwide public holiday continued. The Labour government made the most of Waitangi Day 1973, with Prime Minister Norman Kirk announcing that from 1974 it would be a national holiday known as New Zealand Day.

A few weeks later, the New Zealand Day Bill was introduced by Henry May, the Minister of Internal Affairs, whose department would administer the legislation. Minister of Māori Affairs Matiu Rata, who had introduced a private member's bill for this in 1971, indicated the government's intentions. The day, he said, was to be neither 'a symbolic nor religious occasion' but a day for each New Zealander to enjoy as they saw fit, and the forerunner of an effort to achieve a 'full sense of nationhood'. It would always be observed on 6 February and would not be Mondayised.

Rata was also working towards making legislative provision for the Waitangi Tribunal in the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975. He saw that it would be useful to separate the struggle over Treaty claims from the issue of a national day. The two acts were intended to be complementary. A New Zealand Day, still on 6 February and with a wide appeal, might build public support for Māori Treaty rights, especially if communities became more informed about the Treaty's part in New Zealand history.

For Prime Minister Norman Kirk, the change of name did not imply a diminishing of the Treaty's place or the Māori role in the nation's history. The change was simply an acceptance that New Zealand was ready to move towards a broader concept of nationhood. For some years overseas diplomatic posts had marked the day, and it seemed timely, in view of the country's role on the international stage, that the national day be known as New Zealand Day. Somehow, too, it seemed to him to make the country unique; other nations marked their national day on the anniversary of a violent event, such as a revolution, the end of a war or a successful coup, but 6 February 1840 was the beginning of a peaceful agreement between two peoples.

The bill was supported by the National opposition, in part because it was likely to shift the focus away from Treaty problems. A paid holiday along with a name change was a popular move, but there was no groundswell for a day to mark national identity.

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Timeline 1
1970
P 164

~~Page 144~~
149

13

13

3rd



New Zealand Day 1974

Kirk wanted the first New Zealand Day (which involved a royal visit) to acknowledge the country's multicultural identity. A two-and-a-half-hour extravaganza was organised, watched by 20,000 people at Waitangi and screened on television.

The show, *Aotearoa*, depicted the country's journey towards nationhood and the part played by people of many cultures. The arrival of Kupe (played by Howard Morrison) was followed by English, Irish and Scots (to the tune 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'), Dalmatians, Danes, Dutch and other European races, Pacific Islanders and Indians. Some of the country's successes and troubles were captured in adaptations of well-known melodies, which added a touch of either humour or poor taste.

Public reception was mixed. 'Imaginative pageantry or tasteless vulgarity?' asked the *New Zealand Herald*. 'Had [viewers] seen a superb, imaginative translation of orthodox history to a modern (and musical) idiom? Or was it an embarrassing, superficial, even excruciating attempt to mix cabaret (or music hall) with ceremony?' Certainly there had been something for everyone: Maori groups, the Royal Navy, a sort of white-robed Greek chorus, choreographed dancers, fireworks, national dancing and singing, mime and pantomime. One especially memorable piece was a giant moa that laid an enormous egg on the spot where the Treaty was signed.

Important symbolic touches were not overlooked: the New Zealand flag replaced the Union Jack at the top of the Waitangi flagpole, a replica of the 1834 flag was flown, and the great canoe, Ngātokimatawhaorua, was relaunched. Kirk's spontaneous gesture when he took a small Māori boy by the hand as he moved to the speakers' rostrum somehow became a symbol of New Zealand's hope for the future. Almost overlooked in all the fuss were the protest incidents; a bomb was laid, and fires were lit.

Back to Waitangi Day

New Zealand Day 1975 passed quietly at Waitangi, perhaps because of Norman Kirk's recent death. Elsewhere there was little of the celebration of the national day by local communities that Labour had hoped for. Government funding was not made available and, beyond the odd ministerial letter of exhortation, local bodies were left to their own devices.

The concept of a national day needed time to take root. It was not to be given this by the National government that took office at the end of 1975. **The Waitangi Day Act 1976 reinstated the name Waitangi Day. The government argued that a number of representations had emphasised that the name recognised the significance of the Treaty and its spirit. Prime Minister Robert Muldoon, who had not liked the name change, perhaps saw this as a way to make some mark on the Waitangi front. Matiu Rata was probably right to see the move as part of an attempt to avoid creating a Waitangi Tribunal under the Treaty of Waitangi Act passed at the end of Labour's term.**

Whatever the reason, the change of name had brought no great advantage. The concept of fostering a sense of nationhood through a New Zealand Day was lost in a little-debated political manoeuvre. Also lost was Rata's concept of a complementary relationship between a New Zealand Day (with a diminished focus on Treaty issues) and an appropriate forum where Treaty issues could be effectively addressed.

The name change repositioned the public holiday as a Māori-Pākehā event – no matter what the content of commemorations – and underscored the likelihood that Waitangi would continue to be the focus for protests. From 1975, the organisation of annual events reverted, in the main, to northern groups, and the day was very much a northern affair, despite the national holiday.

Given the direction of government policy on Māori issues, renewed protest was predictable, and this was not limited to Waitangi Day. During National's term of office (1975-84), protest was expressed in stands taken at Bastion Point and Raglan over land disputes. The Waitangi Tribunal had finally convened briefly in 1977, only to go into recess for some time.

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