

This article was first published in the *Otago Daily Times* on 31 July 2009

Maori Leaders Should Lead the Way on Welfare Reform

Last week the Business Roundtable released the fifth working paper in a series that explores Maori development and ways of building on past achievements.

The paper, entitled *Maori and Welfare*, is authored by Lindsay Mitchell, a Wellington-based welfare commentator and researcher.

The paper tracks the prevalence of social problems among Maori as a proportion of the population from the earliest recorded statistics through to the present. It finds that Maori were not always over-represented in dole queues, prisons and the courts, high rates of gambling and alcohol addiction, teenage births and single parenthood, child abuse, youth suicide, substance abuse and smoking.

Furthermore, while Maori have generally become more prosperous, are better educated and live longer, it appears that the socio-economic and skills gap within Maoridom is greater now than that between Maori and non-Maori.

Maori and Welfare goes on to explore the role welfare policies have played in creating and perpetuating this gap, and why the associated social dysfunction and crime are more prevalent among Maori.

It looks at the impacts of early discrimination and separatism; disruption of whanau links, loss of mana and the vulnerability of Maori to the corrupting power of welfare handouts; intergenerational welfare; past and current notions of paternalism and communalism as opposed to individual responsibility; and the roles all these have played in creating social problems among Maori today.

Lindsay Mitchell suggests the evidence indicates that welfare policies, however well-intentioned, have hurt Maori more than other New

Zealanders, and will continue to do so. In particular, the practice of paying for single parenting, substituting the state for whanau, has perverse effects on people who will continue to feature heavily in statistics that describe the worst aspects of life today.

In making suggestions for addressing these problems, the report notes the outcomes, both positive and negative, of welfare reforms in the United States, a country with much in common with New Zealand in terms of population make-up, characteristics and culture.

It then looks at possible mechanisms for Maori solutions to the problems, noting that of paramount importance is a consensus that individuals are first and foremost responsible for themselves and their children. The priority must be to stop the inflow of young people, in particular young girls with babies, into the benefit system that then traps them.

Options for achieving this include measures to discourage single parenthood, such as ensuring benefits are strictly temporary, and in the case of incapacity benefits, a rigorous tightening of eligibility. Payments to claimants with a self-induced incapacity, for example through drug or alcohol addiction, should also be time-limited, include a requirement to accept substance abuse treatment, and be paid to a representative payee.

The report suggests that Work and Income New Zealand could be regionalised or tribalised, with operators including private firms or voluntary organisations incentivised to reduce beneficiary numbers. The regionalisation model could include urban Maori authorities.

The Business Roundtable has no formal position on the report's recommendations. At the launch its chairman Rob McLeod (Ngati Porou) said:

"The report takes full account of the fact that Maori have at times been treated unfairly, patronised, exploited and marginalised. It builds, however, on the reality that we live in times of reconciliation and reparation. It makes it clear that the only approach that will further Maori aspirations will be for Maori and Pakeha to make welfare reform as important as pursuing

Treaty settlements. As the report spells out, the gains for Maori society as a whole would be far greater in the long run.”

Reactions to the report were interesting. Ngai Tahu leader Tahu Potiki wrote a thoughtful and supportive article in *The Press* (24 July).

“I would have expected a much more vociferous backlash from the Left and from Maori but it hasn’t been that bad”, he said.

“The lack of noise suggests that the report may have struck a chord.”

This was also the impression from commentary on blog sites and radio programmes, with broadcasters Willie Jackson and John Tamihere, as well as Paul Holmes and Larry Williams, expressing similar views to those in the report.

Unfortunately, the politicians largely ran for cover, describing the report as “draconian” or “lacking credibility.”

This is not good enough. Most of us support the idea of a state safety net for those in genuine need – the original purpose of the welfare system.

Equally, most people would accept that open-ended welfare has had destructive consequences.

Welfare dependency is not just a Maori issue. It is no use talking about raising living standards to those of higher income countries while turning a blind eye to the need for welfare reform.

Maori leaders could help chart the way forward. There is no need to be fatalistic about current welfare pathologies.

Where are the leaders such as Sir Apirana Ngata, Sir Maui Pomare and Sir Peter Buck when we need them?

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