VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON
COUNCIL CHAMBER

IDENTITY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

DOUGLAS MYERS
MEMBER
NEW ZEALAND BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

WELLINGTON
28 NOVEMBER 2000

IDENTITY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Introduction

New Zealand's national identity, its cultural heritage and its society are topical issues. According to government spokespeople, they raise problems that need to be addressed. In this lecture I want to examine ideas that are being advanced, see where they might take us, and offer some alternative thoughts.

We were reminded of the importance of these issues last month by the former Russian prime minister Dr Yegor Gaidar in the lectures he gave in Auckland and Wellington as a guest of the New Zealand Business Roundtable. He spoke about Russia's traumatic transition from a heavily controlled socialist economy to a market economy. The vast web of central controls suddenly collapsed, but the traditions and institutions necessary for the working of a market economy and a civil society were lacking. Individuals and organisations suddenly had to make decisions on many matters formerly made by the state, but without the necessary cultural capital.

In New Zealand, and I suspect in Western democracies generally, we take many of our institutions for granted. In fact we often take them so much for granted that we are in danger of throwing them away. We have a well established rule of law. In commerce we have widely accepted, unwritten ethical codes without which business could not operate, or only at much greater expense. Only a tiny percentage of disputes have to be resolved by the courts. We have considerable freedom to pursue our own interests – commercial, religious, sporting and cultural – with whom, wherever and whenever we like.

But I also think that over the last 20 years or so, New Zealand has been going through a transition not unlike the one that Russia is experiencing. We only have to reflect for a moment on the enormous range of government interventions that affected both our private lives and our commercial life just a decade or so ago. Because we did have legal and other institutional traditions we have been able to effect the transition more smoothly. However, even in our case the transition to a freer civil society is far from complete, and some recent legislation, the Human Rights Act 1993 for example, may have taken us backwards in certain respects. There are substantial areas of our society – school education is an obvious example – in which there has been very little transition at all. In schooling, the state and the educational establishment rule supreme, and parents have little ability to choose what is best for their children.

Our commercial traditions are inextricably linked with the rest of the social fabric. For a start, commercial success makes much else possible – and, conversely, the absence of commercial success greatly limits what else can be enjoyed. More than that, a sound economy is essential to our ability to help those who, for whatever reason, cannot look after their own needs.

A successful commercial sector is not always a prerequisite to the sort of cultural activities we describe as 'high' or 'popular' – the Bolshoi ballet and Georgian dance survived in the Soviet Union despite a crumbling economy. Nor, of course, do high material living standards necessarily lead to high culture – that often depends on the chance emergence of genius. But a wealthy society allows patronage of the arts and enables many people to make a living from the practice of their art. High disposable incomes create demand for CDs, books, admission tickets and such like that allow mass access to cultural activities so they are no longer the preserve of the privileged, as they used to be.

With these thoughts in mind, I want to turn to some recent statements by prominent New Zealanders about identity, culture and society.

Our Attorney-General and Minister in Charge of Treaty Negotiations, Margaret Wilson, in her maiden speech in February this year, said:

> I am one who believes the time has come to bring our constitutional arrangements into line with our growing sense of identity as a people who owe much to many cultures, but who are forging an unique culture that can stand proudly alone. … Maybe the time has come for us to commit to each other as one nation representing many people and cultures without relying on the forms and symbols of a country that is associated with a colonial past, that some of us struggle to move beyond. … I feel a sense of obligation to carry on my ancestors' dream of creating a new society founded on the principles of equality, independence, social, economic and cultural justice.

Another minister, Trevor Mallard, has been expressing similar thoughts. For example:

> [One of the government's] key goals [is] to strengthen National Identity and uphold the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. We must celebrate our identity in the world as people who support and defend freedom and fairness, who enjoy arts, music, movement and sport, and who value our cultural heritage.[1]

What is noteworthy in these statements is the use of the collective pronouns "us", "our" and "we". They assume that we all act together in some way in forming a single identity and a common culture and society. That "to commit to each other" suggests some sort of national project – perhaps a cultural version of 'think big'. This could only be determined, ultimately, by a political elite. Such collectivist notions worry me. How could we "commit to each other" in any realistic sense? There are, after all, some 3.8 million of us. I am reminded of the stories, no doubt apocryphal, of film stars giving parties for their thousand 'closest friends'.

It is also not clear to me what relevance the Treaty has in this context beyond its enduring legacy of having made us all citizens of one nation – "all one people", in the words attributed to Hobson – and equal before the law. We might also wonder to what extent New Zealand's cultural heritage and national identity, as affirmed by Mr Mallard, rely precisely on the "forms and symbols" that Ms Wilson would have us discard as redundant and holding us back from achieving our "growing sense of identity".

But at least Ms Wilson and Mr Mallard are raising important issues.

National identity

Let's start with the issue of national identity. Clearly the government has some role in establishing and maintaining the symbols and structure of nationhood. Yet I must admit to being suspicious of any government that wishes to impose *a* 'national identity'. What, in any case, does 'identity' mean in this context?

The New Zealand-born political philosopher Kenneth Minogue has pointed out that each of us has a separate identity consisting of recognisable characteristics that are consistent over time.[2] If it were not so we would be like the ants or the bees, and inter-

---

[1] Trevor Mallard (2000), "Complying with the new Government's priorities and plans for improving public sector performance and accountability", speech to the Public Sector Performance Conference, Wellington, 3 May.

[2] Kenneth Minogue (1996), "European Identity", paper for School Curriculum and Assessment Conference on Curriculum, Culture and Society", London, February.

personal dealings would be impossible. Those who lack such stable characteristics often end up being institutionalised.

What is this separate individual identity? My answer, like Minogue's, would be that people's identity is tied up very much with what and with whom they identify and feel comfortable. In New Zealand we associate with various groups with whom we have an affinity. I think Maori culture is a genuine national taonga. When I am overseas I usually – but not always – find a particular rapport with other New Zealanders I come across. New Zealanders have the privilege of enjoying the great Western cultural traditions, especially those of Britain. Being French speaking, I feel particularly at ease in France. But I also feel increasingly comfortable in China – I have visited China many times in recent years and have begun to understand a little of its people and cultures. As a history graduate, I have maintained a lifelong interest in history – Russian history is a special interest.

However, the things with which individuals identify are much wider than this. In an open society our education, reading and viewing take us far and wide in time, space and imagination. In history we seek to understand kings and commoners, landlords and peasants, conquerors and native peoples. In novels, films and plays we have no difficulty identifying with a world of wizards and witches, of a land inhabited by hobbits and other strange creatures, of gods and goddesses, of extra-terrestrials, of animals that talk, of dragons and dragon-slayers, and of Georgian ladies and gentlemen seeking suitable husbands for their daughters.

Identity, understood in this way, emphasises not our ethnicity or background but what each of us admires, identifies with, and condemns. The fact of British ancestry doesn't mean we cannot admire the courage and self-sacrifice of the Maori battalion in the second World War; likewise Maori can, like the rest of us, identify with Magna Carta, Shakespeare and Churchill's wartime appeals. An Iraqi refugee to New Zealand may identify with the All Blacks, a Vietnamese refugee with parliamentary democracy or Team New Zealand. We are all horrified at what took place in the Nazi concentration camps, in the gulags and on the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda.

Ultimately identity is personal, and that is one reason why I am suspicious of attempts to impose some sort of national identity selected and shaped by political elites. In the hands of government, education, if seen in this light, can become a tool for the indoctrination of the young and a vehicle for social engineering. The notion of an educational elite deciding whether New Zealand's national identity should be based on rugged individualism, politically correct uniformity, or whatever, is ridiculous and unacceptable. Surely the purpose of education in an open society should not be to impart a particular national identity. Rather it should give children the resources of intellect and imagination that emancipate them from the narrow parochialism of their immediate society and environment and open up possibilities and vistas of which they would otherwise have no comprehension. Education at its best universalises and inducts us into a world of human beings, not into being Maori or European, male or female, New Zealander or Pacific Islander.

If identity is ultimately personal, is there any sense in which it can be said that New Zealanders as a whole have a national identity? At the recent constitutional conference, the historian Bill Oliver remarked that New Zealanders had been searching for a national identity for a hundred years, and because they were still searching perhaps it didn't exist. But I think we can speak of national identity in a limited sense. Kenneth Minogue has referred to the civil dimension of identity. My identity as a New Zealander is not dependent on my feelings for fellow New Zealanders, which vary considerably, or on sharing a single culture. It is based on common citizenship, on common laws and institutions and upon shared experiences and landscapes. In this modest but important sense we are indeed all partners in upholding a civil society that allows each of us considerable freedom, and our participation in it has nothing at all to do with ethnic origin. As Nelson Mandela has put it in the context of his own country, there are no black South Africans or white South Africans, only South Africans.

Such an approach accepts that national identity is not a common project to be planned and coordinated from the centre. Its outcome is largely spontaneous and unpredictable. It is founded on a civil association of people with multiple goals, not a corporate association with a single goal. It changes as individuals pursue their own interests within the constraints of a shared legal and institutional framework. It is quite at odds with the present emphases on biculturalism and multiculturalism which are not statements about the racial composition of New Zealand but rather government programmes that stress differences for political purposes.

Biculturalism and the Treaty of Waitangi

Biculturalism and the related issue of the Treaty of Waitangi are matters on which the government, or at least some of its members, wish to change popular attitudes. This is an ambition that, like any other form of social engineering, is fraught with dangers.

I would guess that the great majority of New Zealanders agree on the need to remedy established injustices to identifiable property owners, individuals and families. But the rub is who should pay. Taking from the innocent to compensate the victim is not what is usually meant by restitution. The great majority of Maori are descended from those who committed the alleged wrongs as well as from the alleged victims. In such circumstances it would seem that some utopian vision of cosmic justice, to borrow Thomas Sowell's phrase, is driving the process.[3]

Many also have doubts about the justice of making what are sometimes repeat 'full and final' settlements for wrongs suffered generations ago, of claims to new resources such as the airwaves, and of distributions to tribal entities that have decreasing relevance to the everyday lives of the descendents of those wronged. We are in real danger of setting up unrealistic expectations and generating never-ending demands while largely benefiting only the small proportion of Maori and others who are directly involved in what has unfortunately earned the label of the 'grievance industry'.

The present and previous governments' programmes are much more than the settlement of past grievances. The establishment view seems to be that the Treaty established not one people under one sovereign but a partnership between the Crown and Maori. Obviously giving effect to such a view poses real dangers of divisiveness. As the former minister for Treaty negotiations has observed, while the Treaty is *like* a partnership in some respects, it cannot be a partnership since the Crown alone runs the country and represents all New Zealanders, including Maori.[4]

The current bicultural notion transforms the alleged 'partnership' between the Crown and Maori into one between Maori and Pakeha – two distinguishable peoples who form two collectivities in partnership, though the identity of the partners and the nature of their joint enterprise is unclear. Again this poses dangers of divisiveness. Since the end of the Cooke era, the courts have been backing off the interpretation of the Treaty as a partnership, but this has not been widely recognised outside specialist legal circles, and attempts to give effect to this concept may yet do great mischief.

---

[3] Thomas Sowell, *The Quest for Cosmic Justice*, Sir Ronald Trotter Lecture, New Zealand Business Roundtable, 1996.

The idea of partnership, and of the Treaty having principles affecting wide areas of life, has taken deep root in certain circles, especially the education sector. The new school curriculum is explicit: students of social studies, for example, "*will* understand" the nature of biculturalism and the partnership between Maori and Pakeha" (emphasis added). The Tertiary Education Advisory Commission has recently proposed that the tertiary education system should be "reflecting and nurturing a distinctive identity, including greater understanding of the Treaty of Waitangi".[5] This is not, of course, an educational function at all – it is political and ideological. The Commission includes several academics, and this *trahison des clercs* shows how far certain elites are prepared to go in trying to subvert education for ideological purposes.

Thus the Treaty, which was to confer equal citizenship on the inhabitants of these islands, is now being used to divide New Zealanders into two separate factions – but yet also mysteriously to unite them in some unidentified common endeavour. It is, as it were, to 'maintain the racial gap' and close it at the same time.

Ms Wilson is reported to want "to develop our attitudes" on Treaty issues.[6] Certainly the government can seek to influence public opinion in all sorts of ways. However, Ms Wilson's commendable concern to counter any "them and us attitude" between Maori and non-Maori sits uncomfortably with

---

[4] Douglas Graham (1997), *Trick or Treaty?*, Institute of Policy Studies, The Printing Press, Wellington.

[5] Tertiary Education Advisory Commission (2000), *Shaping a Shared Vision – Initial Report*, July.

[6] Margaret Wilson as reported in an interview with Anthony Hubbard, *Sunday Star-Times*, 17 September 2000.

biculturalism – a notion that assumes and stresses difference. And does the idea of two cultures really make sense today? Amongst Maori there are varying levels of commitment to traditional tribal organisations and culture, and there are few characteristics that make Maori distinct from the rest of the population. After several generations of inter-marriage and living and working in close proximity, this is entirely to be expected and is one of the strengths of the New Zealand version of the American melting pot. Amongst non-Maori there is a much greater range of languages and cultures including those of Europe, Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands as well as the British Isles. Many New Zealanders have mixed ancestry.

In creating two 'partners' and in the concept of biculturalism – so-called Maori and Pakeha – the elites seem also to be creating a class of 'non-people' who are neither. The Ministry of Education, one of the keenest, unelected proponents of biculturalism, defines a Pakeha as "A New Zealand-born person of European descent who chooses to be called Pakeha to describe their ethnicity". Those who are not of European descent, or who were not born here, or who otherwise qualify but don't wish to be called 'Pakeha', are not within either 'partner'. This seemingly disenfranchised group would, I judge, be a very significant percentage, perhaps even the majority, of the population. In any case the term 'Pakeha' has become a politically imposed concept, and many do not wish to be categorised in this manner. Many of us identify ourselves as New Zealanders, full stop.

The pursuit of this bicultural vision is likely to be highly detrimental to attempts to attract suitable migrants to New Zealand and to retain them here. It will not help bring able young New Zealanders back from work experience and further education abroad. In a highly mobile world competing for talented people, the prospect of some sort of second class citizenship, just like high tax rates, will be a powerful disincentive.

In any case we should be cautious about deliberate attempts to change attitudes. Not even the Soviet Union, after several generations of 'attitude adjustment', including putting the 'attitudinally maladjusted' in prisons and mental hospitals, was able to stop people thinking for themselves. Indeed the opposite may have happened. The Soviet Union tried to submerge the individual in the collective but succeeded only in eliminating many effective sources of care for others and undermining individual responsibility for providing such assistance. On sensitive and complex issues, not least those of a constitutional nature, the government should basically limit itself to the role of providing reliable and balanced information and allow people time to reflect and come to their own conclusions.

The 'partnership' concept and the undefined principles arising from the Treaty are being applied to, or proposed for, an increasing range of public policy areas such as state educational institutions, health providers, radio stations, social service delivery, local government, health, 'good faith' bargaining, and international trade agreements. The Treaty is developing a life of its own. Far from disappearing once the claims process is completed, the amorphous ideas summed up in the words "the principles of the Treaty" seem set to become a dominant influence upon this country's future development.

It is usual to put major constitutional changes to the people through popular vote. This particular change is being undertaken piecemeal by legislative and administrative action, with important issues being left to judicial decision. Respect for the Treaty as an important part of New Zealand's history is in danger of being undermined by placing on its preamble and three short articles a burden of guiding contemporary society which it cannot possibly support. We need to remind ourselves that while the Treaty is of considerable historical significance, other historical instruments and traditions are of much greater importance to our democratic way of life and constitutional arrangements. Magna Carta, our parliamentary institutions and our common law traditions are obvious examples. We would also do well to remember that in nineteenth century New Zealand the bible, not the Treaty, was for many, Maori and non-Maori alike, the main source of authority.

Kenneth Minogue also had something to say about constitutional changes to meet short-term exigencies:

> … no sane people would contemplate reconstituting itself unless it had undergone a crisis … there is little point to [constitutions] unless they are satisfactory if not for eternity, at least for generations ahead.[7]

New Zealand would not do well in this 'sanity' test. Governments have been rearranging our institutions in all sorts of ways – human rights, the electoral system, race relations, the whole Treaty business, and much else. There seems to be a fear among some 'progressive' politicians of being seen as 'anachronistic'. So the right of appeal to the Privy Council is under challenge, and some are urging that we become a republic. I doubt if many of the rest of us are too worried about such 'anachronisms' or even being considered anachronistic. The majority are more likely to be guided by sentimental attachments and loyalties, which *are* important in human affairs, by the need to make a living, and by whether or not current arrangements actually work and promote a cohesive and fulfilling society.

What is more disturbing is the view that constitutional changes, such as those concerning rights, race relations and privacy, will somehow make us better people. "Human beings", Kenneth Minogue dryly remarked, "are much given to seeking salvation, and constitutionalism is one current version of salvation seeking". It has, of course, a certain allure for those who think big, difficult or moral issues should be the business of political elites. In this we are in danger of letting politicians assume ultimate responsibility for everything. In Tzarist Russia this led to a situation in which, according to one historian, the "Russian people tended to accept responsibility for nothing, blaming their own sins and the country's failings exclusively on the empire's rulers".[8] New Zealand risks heading in the same direction.

---

[7] Kenneth Minogue (1993), *The Constitutional Mania*, Centre for Policy Studies, London.

I do not deny the need from time to time for constitutional change. But I am concerned that it should, in the absence of crises, be unhurried, address some clearly perceived need, be undertaken for the right reasons and after careful thought, and with every expectation that it will endure. To do otherwise is to risk losing what is valuable for some elusive and ephemeral gain.

Multiculturalism

Ms Wilson also said in her maiden speech that New Zealand is one nation, though representing many peoples and cultures, and one in which a single culture is being forged. How should we put all this together? Are there not some contradictions, or at least tensions, here? How, for example, can we or the government promote cultural autonomy, biculturalism and multiculturalism while also insisting we are properly developing a single culture?

In fact the cultural milieu of New Zealand results from the spontaneous decisions of countless individuals and groups. It is constantly changing, and, to the extent it is sensible to talk at all about a single national culture, it is an outcome of people coming together naturally on the basis of shared values that relate to future expectations as much as to past experiences.

---

[8] Dominic Lieven (1993), *Nicholas ll Emperor of all the Russias*, Random House, New York.

Nor has traditional Western education ever been monocultural. For centuries school children, from a very early age, have been introduced to the languages and ways of thought of peoples far distant geographically and in time. No tension has been felt in being both a New Zealander and a student of, for example, the languages and cultures of the Greek and Roman empires or of those of modern Europe or Indonesia.

Thus the 'whakapapa' of a Western European is an intellectual one: inquiring and inquisitive.[9] It is open to new ideas and influences. It has drawn on sources from many cultures, races and languages over some three millennia. In traditional tribal societies, culture was essentially closed, authoritarian, hierarchical, and static – but suitable for the world as they understood it to be. This raises a problem for those who see biculturalism as a constructive partnership of Western and *traditional* Maori tribal culture because the two would seem to be incompatible. Maori have long since left a closed tribal structure and are playing their part in modern society. Like members of other ethnic groups, many Maori retain their cultural interests and activities as communal – not public – matters. But it is the biculturalists who want to view Maori culture as static and closed; they must address the difficulties inherent in this view.

Today multiculturalism seeks to treat all cultures equally. At the same time some cultures are to be more equal than others. The entire debate is corrupted by the Orwellian double think that is a characteristic of modern political correctness. The contributions of the West tend to be trivialised or ignored and those of indigenous peoples magnified. Being a member of the majority culture is increasingly portrayed as a matter for guilt. If we identify as Maori then we are victims of oppression and have grievance on our side. This selective and opportunistic morality is fundamentally unhealthy. Moreover, in this process we downgrade the importance of the core traditions and institutions that unite us, including those which Ms Wilson would have us discard as redundant. Politicised multiculturalism emphasises the things that make us different, the things that divide.

---

[9] I am endebted to J E Traue's *Ancestors of the Mind – A Pakeha Whakapapa* (Gondwanaland Press, Wellington, 1990) for this observation.

As the British columnist Melanie Phillips has said, it is perfectly possible to identify with two cultures: a common civic culture and a private ethnic one.[10] As a British Jew she can speak with some authority. This is what in fact we find in New Zealand. We have a civic 'culture' in the form of constitutional and legal institutions of essentially British origin (though with European, classical and Judeo-Christian antecedents) that apply to all. But all our ethnic, religious and other cultures, indigenous and immigrant, operate within this broad, common civic 'culture' which, I suggest, is essential if we are all to live together in anything approaching harmony. This common framework sets limits on what each individual and group within it can do without creating disharmony. Without it, there is, as Melanie Phillips also noted, "no reason for minorities to compromise their sometimes mutually incompatible demands. We would end up with the politics of protest, single issue lobbies, acts of violence and tribalism. It is not in the interests of either the majority or the minorities to weaken it".

It seems to me we are heading in exactly the opposite direction. We are weakening our broad civic 'culture' through ill-considered constitutional adventures that reinforce distinctions and focus on divisions that have over the years weakened and largely vanished. This is a recipe for a nervous breakdown. It is inviting strife by raising expectations that cannot be fulfilled.

---

[10] Phillips, M (1996), 'Unholy Pursuit of a Common Culture', *The Observer Review*, 11 February.

What sort of society?

In terms of cultural relations the current official guiding motifs are division, difference and distinction. If we turn to the nature of New Zealand society the guiding motifs are, ironically, collaboration, collectivism and cooperation. The culprits for all that is wrong with our society tend, these days, to be seen as individualism and competition.

Recall that in her maiden speech from which I quoted earlier, Ms Wilson said that she wants to set about "creating a new society founded on the principles of equality, independence, social, economic and cultural justice". A key policy derived, presumably, from the 'equality' principle is that of closing economic and social gaps with a particular focus on Maori and Pacific Island people who are disproportionately represented among the lowest income groups. But achieving equality involves more than bringing the bottom groups up: it also involves bringing the top groups down. Hence the increase in the top tax rate, for example. This key policy platform is, in fact, simply another exercise in redistribution. If the focus is to be on particular ethnic groups it will not be inclusive; it will ignore the poor of other ethnic groups and be divisive.

A more constructive and effective focus would, in my view, be not on 'closing gaps' but on 'lifting all boats'. This would involve alleviating poverty and promoting prosperity for all, while recognising that abilities, aspirations and levels of effort will differ, and thus gaps will always exist. Why should we be overly concerned about gaps if all have the opportunity to get ahead? This would require us to address issues of unemployment and economic growth through effective economic and social policies, including flexible labour markets. As it is, in these and other areas, school education for example, the government is introducing policies that will make the gaps more resistant to closure.

Tied up with this programme is the government's pursuit of the 'Third Way', which Mr Mallard has described as:

> … an alternative between an interventionist welfare state and a 'market' rules survival of the fittest regime. The Third Way guides innovation and economic development while still looking after the basic needs of all citizens and providing opportunity, regardless of their personal background or circumstances.[11]

In this description the Third Way appears to act like Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' – an impersonal force guiding human affairs so that, unbeknown to individuals, socially desirable outcomes are achieved. But the Third Way is not impersonal – some visible hand has to control the process. Whereas in Smith's model the individual pursuit of self-interest generally serves the wider interest, Mr Mallard leaves it unclear what mechanism is to ensure that politicians serve national, rather than sectional, interests. In practice, of course, it is the government that will interpret and implement the wider interest, no doubt for political purposes and against the inclinations of individuals if necessary.

The Third Way is thus code for 'big government', and its agenda is deliberately so vague as to minimise the constraints on the government using its power and resources for sectional reasons. To adapt Humpty Dumpty's memorable words, the Third Way "will mean just what the government chooses it to mean – neither more nor less". The Third Way has a superficial appeal which appears to justify government involvement in all sorts of human affairs, but it leaves unaddressed the old problem of who is to control the controllers.

The present government has renationalised accident insurance and halted the privatisation process. However, it seems that its 'Third Way' ambitions are not to be achieved primarily by a return to state ownership but through the redistribution of power and resources. The constitutional changes involving the Treaty seem aimed at a redistribution to Maori from the rest of the population, leading to the problems I have discussed. We are also seeing an increasing emphasis on the redistribution of resources through the tax and benefit system – particularly to better-off superannuitants and tertiary students, not primarily to the poor – and a redistribution of industrial power to unions through the Employment Relations Act. There are obvious problems here that are beyond my present purpose, but I would note that the pursuit of greater equality by redistribution has thus far proved to be as fruitless as its pursuit by common ownership.

One obstacle to the pursuit of equality is the assumption that poverty is invariably the result of social factors such as oppression of one sort of another. In the modern rhetoric of guilt and victimhood, old-fashioned class divisions have largely given way to new divisions based on culture. Yet some minority groups have done well educationally and economically, in spite of oppression: Indians in East Africa, Jews and Chinese in many parts of the world. All too often material poverty is the result of personal decisions and a poverty of culture. In this context I don't mean the outward symbols of culture such as language, music, festivals, dances and foods but the inner motivations and moral fibre. And here we often find that cultural relativism slides into a moral relativism in which all values have to be respected – the new school curriculum framework says so explicitly. The effects are reflected in the statistics for one-parent 'families' and crime, and in our tendency to "define deviancy down", to use Senator Moynihan's catchy alliteration. Some of those who, in previous generations, would have been seen as criminals or deviants are now more likely to be considered victims of some form of oppression or trauma.

---

[11] Trevor Mallard (2000), speech notes for Launch of the Price Waterhouse Cooper Public Sector Leadership Best Practice Survey Report, 14 June.

The new values undermine the incentives for the behaviour and attitudes that traditionally have enabled people to succeed. These include thrift, the deferral of gratification, perseverance, courage in adversity, hard work, acceptance of personal responsibility, and so on. As social commentator Irving Kristol puts it, "It's hard to rise above poverty if society keeps deriding the human qualities that allow you to escape from it".[12] It's also hard to encourage benevolence and generosity towards others when the state is seen as the first call for mutual assistance.

In my view the concern of recent governments for biculturalism, multiculturalism, national identity, a new society and so on is not only creating new problems but also missing the real challenges we face. These are moral and won't be addressed by constitutional adventures or the pursuit of various 'culturalisms'.

There are limits to what governments can do to influence human behaviour. They certainly can't legislate for morality or strong communities. But they can stop undermining both, and they can use their authority to endorse the efforts of others.

So much for criticism. What might be an alternative prescription to that currently offered by the government for the advancement of New Zealand?

First, I would give up, at least for the time being, constitutional adventures whether under the banner of strengthening national identity, enshrining the Treaty or removing the dreaded 'anachronisms' of our colonial heritage. Treaty references should be removed from legislation except to the extent they are necessary for meeting valid Treaty claims. They have no relevance to social policy and just perpetuate, reinforce or manufacture unhelpful differences. I would let the public have another say, by way of a referendum, on the constitutional adventure of MMP.

---

[12] Quoted by Ken Baker (1995), "Moral Community", a paper delivered to a conference of the Modest Members Society, Sydney, April 29-30. His paper prompted a number of the suggestions made here.

Having started on the Treaty claims process we should continue with it, but aim to end it as expeditiously as possible. We should be under no illusion about the determination required to do this. It is not in the interests of elites who benefit from the 'grievance industry' to bring about finality. That would cut short both any direct pecuniary benefits for them and also the incentives they can offer to members to stay within the tribal fold. We risk merely the illusion of finality and then all the usual arguments in any particular case for review and reopening: incomplete disclosure, fundamental mistake, newly discovered evidence, fraud, incompetence or whatever. Ironically, all these arguments are essentially Western – a fact that exposes the hypocrisy of the fashionable doctrine of cultural relativism.

Second, I would fundamentally rethink the 'closing the gaps' policy. This will almost certainly be unsuccessful because the causes haven't been identified and it will end up treating symptoms. In many cases such gaps as do exist result primarily from differences in personal and family expectations and motivations. Consider the educational and employment success of the children of South East Asian refugees arriving with their worldly possessions in a plastic bag and no English. In these politically correct times the last thing a government is going to do is identify such causes because they involve judgment and moral comparisons and criticism.

The gaps won't be closed by further welfare distributions. Treaty settlements may simply exacerbate existing perverse incentives and, by benefiting the already well-off, widen the gaps still further. In any case, the focus should be on poverty and other indications of disadvantage, not inequality as such. The ending of the scholarship scheme enabling children of low income families to attend private schools seems precisely the wrong thing to have done – surely it should have been greatly extended. Clearly ideological antipathy to private schools outweighed concern for the educationally disadvantaged. Similarly, tightening school zoning will just help lock disadvantaged children into poorly performing schools by reducing opportunities to move to better ones out-of-zone.

Positive discrimination seems likely only to provide excuses and support for continued failure. We would do well to learn from Californians who voted to abolish racial preferences in their schools and colleges, an initiative spearheaded by a courageous Afro-American against the opposition of the liberal elite, and banned bilingual education. Instead of increasing racial privileges as the state became more racially diverse – whites are now a minority – California re-emphasised its unitary civic culture. Minority representation dipped but then rebounded, and the test scores of minority students improved dramatically.[13]

Third, I would get serious about full employment. Unemployment encourages social and family breakdown, individual alienation and crime. There is no excuse for the unemployment of the able-bodied. It is a great evil for which successive governments are responsible. There were impressive reductions in unemployment in the early 1990s, but unfortunately further success in this area requires policies diametrically opposite to some of those being pursued, especially in the labour market.

---

[13] Andrew Sullivan (2000), "United Colours of America", *Sunday Time*s, London, October; Rowan Taylor (2000), "Getting Closer", *The Listener*, 25 November; David McLoughlin (2000), "Lessons we could all learn", *The Dominion*, 22 November.

Fourth, we must provide an environment in which the private sector can prosper and provide employment and economic growth. Without economic growth we will be back lobbying and squabbling for a larger share of the existing and possibly declining cake, not trying to enlarge its size for the benefit of all. This requires obvious policies such as low taxes, open borders, privatisation, a smaller government share of gross domestic product, a flexible labour market and respect for property rights and contracts. There is nothing at all unusual or mysterious here – the lessons of other countries and of our own recent past are there before us. The tragedy is that we are going backwards on several of these fronts and now face rising problems, including the permanent loss of too many of our brightest and most energetic young people overseas.

Fifth, I would not try to impose centralised, one-size-fits-all solutions. Individuals and organisations can decide whether and when collaboration or competition is right. Often it isn't a case of one or the other. In business, cooperation is often an essential part of being competitive. The same two firms might compete in some areas and cooperate in others. Even within the same firm we can find both types of activity. Business has to be highly flexible. Any notion that in the fluid business environment, not least in our 'knowledge economy', such behaviours can be determined by the government is simply absurd. It won't work. I suspect this is also the case in other types of organisation – tertiary institutions, for example. The same considerations apply to 'individualism' and 'communitarianism'. In some parts of our lives we act as individuals and in others we act with others. It is unhelpful to prescribe the one and proscribe the other. In all spheres we need both teamwork and the brilliant individualists who can provide what the majority lack.

Sixth, in social welfare we must pay much more attention to the notion of deserts – to the difference between the deserving and the undeserving. To show how far we have come from such a notion, let me quote David Thomson's account of the attitudes of early colonial governments in New Zealand:

> … they insisted that a legal right to assistance from one's fellow citizens would not be established, and that the values of charity would guide all welfare activity beyond the family. The abiding principles would be voluntary assistance rather than compulsory support, minimal formality rather than statutory structures, charitable donation rather than tax funding, individualised assistance rather than relief to whole groups or classes, and rigid discrimination between the worthy and deserving, and the unworthy and undeserving.[14]

Thomson goes on to tell us that in the 1870s there were "impressive debates on charitable aid" during which "[p]rinciples were explored with some sophistication, elegance and tolerance of alternative views". We need to engage in a similar debate and with the same sophistication and openness. This would be much harder today when the language of 'charity' and 'undeserving' is unacceptable to many and the notion of 'rights without obligation' so firmly entrenched. But such a debate would, in my view, be far more profitable, if conducted with courage, sensitivity and real leadership, than high-sounding fulminations about national identity and a new society that lack reference to individual morality and to the duties and obligations connected with rights.

Seventh, family policy should put the welfare of children first. This, I think, would be widely accepted, but quite how to give effect to it is not nearly so clear. The relevant statistics tell us that, in general, children do better, in all sorts of ways, if brought up by two parents in a stable relationship. There are no easy answers to the problem of family breakdown, but we cannot shy away from open debate on it if we are to address some of the serious social pathologies.

The last element in my alternative prescription is that we should remember the things about which New Zealand can be proud, including our social cohesiveness. Of course, our history includes times of conflict and injustice, but there is far more that keeps us together than divides us – our democratic and legal institutions, our common language, and our common citizenship under one law – notwithstanding our many ethnic origins. Our easy tolerance of cultural and religious diversity is in fact an enormous strength. My concern with so much talk today about national identity, biculturalism, the Treaty, and a 'new society' is that it can undermine those impressive strengths by creating or accentuating differences – in giving distinctions a significance that most people just do not acknowledge. At the same time it diverts attention from some deeper and far more difficult 'cultural' issues crying out for serious attention.

---

[14] David Thomson (1998), *A World Without Welfare: New Zealand's Colonial Experiment*, Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books, Auckland, p 28-29.

Conclusion

Malcolm Muggeridge wrote some 20 years after the end of the second world war about the relative shortness of the impact of Mussolini, Stalin and Hitler.[15] What had carried the day, according to Muggeridge, was not the legacy of these murderous tyrants but liberalism as the dominant ideology of our time. By 'liberalism' he had in mind a woolly moral permissiveness that looked benignly on evil and was prepared to countenance the destruction of the moral edifice on which civilisation had hitherto been based. Muggeridge went on to ask:

> Why ... should this alluring and amiable view of life seem to have led to its own negation – instead of brotherhood to a collectivity; [and] instead of freedom, brain-washed conformism … How did it come about that the pursuit of peace led to ever more ferocious wars, of happiness to ever larger and more crowded psychiatric wards, of knowledge to ever greater credulity and vacuity, of security to an ever intensifying sense of helplessness and loss of identity …

He ended his article by pointing out that this nightmare was not being imposed by ruthlessly efficient power-maniacs on the Fascist or Soviet model but was being born and nourished in some of the finest, most civilised and most humane minds of the time. Muggeridge concluded, "For our Dark Ages it is we ourselves who are turning out the lights, fondly supposing that we are turning them on". I suggest we could usefully reflect on Muggeridge's musings when faced with calls for a 'new society'.

---

[15] Malcolm Muggeridge (1966), "The Great Liberal Death-Wish", *New Statesman*, 11 March.