Finding the Common Good in Multiculturalism

Clay Nelson © 28 October 2018

For someone of my generation change has been our reality. When I was born there were five billion fewer people on the planet. That alone would be enough to overwhelm, but it is hardly the beginning of what we have had to understand, process and absorb of a reality that literally changes daily. Take the idea of multiculturalism. I did not grow up hearing the word. It didn't reach my consciousness until the mid-'70s, maybe because that growing world population wasn't in predominantly white countries. As a result, I have been on the back foot in fully understanding its implications and appreciating what it has to offer. In spite of growing up in what my American history books called the great melting pot, in my first twelve years of education in four US western states, I went to school with only one black person. All my teachers were white. I can remember being slightly acquainted with only two black adults. Sure, I knew about the civil rights movement in the south, but that was far away and could only be seen through the black and white eye of our TV. My only brush with multiculturalism was perusing National Geographic but I suspect my pre-pubescent self was more interested in looking at the soft pornographic pictures than learning about other cultures.

In many respects my experience was not unlike how multiculturalism came into our consciousness in Aotearoa New Zealand. The history of who is a New Zealander tracks our becoming a multicultural country.

Since we are a country of immigrants there is no genetic measure of a race that determines who is a New Zealander. It is determined when we declare ourselves to be a New Zealander. The first to be called New Zealanders were the Māori by European visitors. When Europeans came to stay they referred to themselves as colonists or settlers. They did not want to be called New Zealanders, they were English.

From 1830 on Europeans began calling the people of the land Māori. This allowed room to change the meaning of who is a New Zealander. By the late 1850s the faces of New Zealanders were white, not brown.

While the European settlers now had a name, they still considered themselves and considered their Anglo-Saxon heritage superior to others. While some Chinese came to work the gold fields in 1865 and Dalmatians came to dig gum. The settlers were committed to maintaining New Zealand as an Anglo-Saxon society. Legislation was passed in the 1880s and '90s and again in the 1920s to keep non-white immigrants out of the country.

While the country was by definition bicultural, British culture dominated that of the Māori. Speaking te reo was forbidden in schools. Only English history was taught. The flag that was saluted was the Union Jack. "God save the King or Queen" was the national anthem. I suspect there are some here this morning who remember standing for that anthem in the theatre before the movie was shown. To be a New Zealander meant being British first, albeit a better Briton than those in Mother England.

In 1840 at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi William Hobson declared the two cultures one people, but Māori never bought into the idea. For what Hobson meant was amalgamation where Māori culture was replaced by British civilisation. This idea persisted until after the second World War. In 1901 the women's suffrage leader Kate Sheppard said, 'Māori and Pakeha have become one people, under one Sovereign and one Parliament, glorying alike in the one title of "New Zealander"'. At the time this was considered a progressive view. There were others who exalted what they considered Anglo-Saxon traits of Māori and argued that they should be considered honorary whites. But not all felt that way. As late as the 1950s some movie theatres segregated Māori from its white patrons. Yes, while there were two cultures in New Zealand and the te reo version of the Treaty of Waitangi laid a framework for it being bicultural, it would not be until the late 1960s that it would take the first steps of becoming so. By the mid-20th century it appeared the one people idea had become reality. Māori were participating in the major rituals of New Zealand life. They voted, had their own members of Parliament, played rugby, fought in wars, and intermarried with other New Zealanders.

However, because most Māori lived in the countryside, their distinctive traditions were kept on the marae, out of sight of most Europeans. After the Second World War, and increasingly during the 1950s and 1960s, there was a major migration of Māori into the city. In response efforts were intensified to turn Māori into British New Zealanders. In schools and workplaces Māori were discouraged from speaking their own language, and housing policy encouraged "pepper potting" — dispersing the Māori population to prevent residential concentrations. The Hunn Report (1960) recommended that New Zealand move beyond "assimilation" to "integration", whereby New Zealanders would become one people through mixing the two cultures. In practice, because Māori were a minority, this tended to mean the swallowing of the smaller fish by the bigger.

From the late 1960s on, some Māori began challenging this policy more vocally. Urban movements led by groups such as Ngā Tamatoa emphasised the need to strengthen Māori language, culture and political power. In 1975 there was a protest march from one end of the North Island to the other expressing unrest at the loss of Māori land. In the same year the Waitangi Tribunal was established to deal with infringements of the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi.

In 1981 the activist Donna Awatere published an argument for Māori sovereignty, and as Māori began to promote their own traditions and values, the term "biculturalism" appeared. For some, this meant that New Zealanders could exist in one nation but as two peoples. Māori could speak their own language, pursue their own traditions, have their own educational institutions such as kōhanga reo (preschool language nests), kura kaupapa Māori (schools using Māori language) and wānanga (universities), provide their own social services, and control their own businesses. The financial settlements which flowed from Waitangi Tribunal recommendations began to make this possible.

However, biculturalism was and still is resisted by some white New Zealanders, considering themselves to be the real New Zealanders. That has put them on the back foot where multiculturalism is concerned. Prepared or not for it, multiculturalism was our future. Immigration was making the country multicultural. Until the 1960s most immigrants to New Zealand were British and easily adjusted to New Zealand life. The considerable Dutch community who arrived in the 1950s were expected to adopt local customs. But in the 1970s there were two important changes.

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First, the end of assistance to British immigrants in 1975 challenged expectations that the British were the best potential New Zealanders. From then on, immigrants were officially to be chosen on non-ethnic grounds.

Second, there were significant migrations from other countries. There was an influx first from the Pacific Islands, and from the mid-1980s an increasing number from other places — predominantly Asia, but also, from the 1990s onwards, from Africa and the Middle East. In 1986, over 80% of New Zealanders identified as European, and this dropped to 72% in 1996. During that period, the proportion of people identifying with Māori, Pacific and Asian ethnicities increased. In 2013, 74% of New Zealanders identified with one or more European ethnic groups.

Many of these people, from a wide range of cultures, settled down, took up citizenship and brought up New Zealand-born children. This was a major challenge to the idea of who New Zealanders were. Initiated in Canada and picked up in the 1970s in Australia, the concept of multiculturalism quickly spread to New Zealand. It was proposed that people could be legitimate members of the New Zealand nation while retaining their own language, foods and traditions. At the first New Zealand Day ceremony at Waitangi in 1974 there were ostentatious efforts to put New Zealand's ethnic variety on display.

As the numbers of non-British people increased, their cultural differences became more evident. In South Auckland, Pacific Islanders congregated and evolved a distinctive New Zealand Pacific culture which was more than the sum of their different cultures. Large Asian communities who had originally been settled throughout the country came together in areas with their own schools and styles of housing.

Not everyone accepted these developments with equanimity. A new political group emerged, significantly called the New Zealand Party, which expressed unease at the challenge to older traditions of New Zealandness. Yet the issue was made more complex because by the early 2000s in some very traditional areas, particularly sport and music, Pacific Islanders were playing an important role. In another arena, Cambodian bakeries now make classic New Zealand meat pies, winning national awards.

According to Te Ara, the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand, at the beginning of the 21st century it was not easy to define the New Zealander, nor even to explain the origin of many New Zealand characteristics. The character of the country's people had been in part shaped by the physical environment — the outdoor climate, the proximity to beach and bush, the location in the South Pacific. No less important were the very different cultures brought to the country by waves of settlers — Māori who arrived some 700 years ago from the Pacific, the British and Irish who dominated the population for over a century from 1850, and more recent immigrants from Asia and the Pacific. All of these groups would have agreed that each were New Zealanders. All would have accepted that New Zealanders were no longer "Better Britons". But the cultural meaning of the New Zealander had become uncertain. This is reflected in the mocking of a recent New Zealand First proposal that new immigrants have to first pass a test on New Zealand values. One proposed satirical xquestion is True or False — New Zealand invented pavlova. *Answer*: True. If "false", deport immediately.

For some multiculturalism is perceived as a threat to the common good. Their argument is that different cultural values compete with each other creating winners and losers. But in

reality the common good seeks the well-being of all. That a Cambodian can practise Buddhism does not prevent a Muslim from praying to Allah five times a day or a Philippine from going to Mass. When I drink a glass of water it does mean no one else can drink that glass of water but as water is a common good available to all I have not taken anything from anyone.

My fear for New Zealand is that if we don't come to find a way to celebrate the diversity multiculturalism offers us it will be used to divide us, pitting us against one another as we are seeing in the US, Germany, Hungary, Britain, and France to name but a few. In a very short time we went from being one of the most homogeneous countries on the planet to being one of the most culturally diverse. That's a lot to take in, but if we focus on the idea that everyone has something valuable to contribute in the communities in which we live, we may avoid the negative outcomes of multiculturalism. Just because a lot of cultures now reside in New Zealand doesn't make us multicultural. Choosing to relate to one another does. Valuing each other's contribution does. That will result in an immense common good.