



by Danny Keenan

## Waitangi or Anzac – our national day?

In recent years, Anzac Day (April 25) has grown in popularity. Thousands of Kiwis of all ages attend services and line the streets during veterans' parades. Maori TV even provides all day live coverage.

Waitangi Day (February 6) by comparison seems too divisive; it is a day often marked by dissent and protest. Some now say that Anzac Day is a day that brings us together; Waitangi Day divides us. Many New Zealanders are now asking - is it time to change our national day?

Perhaps a brief look at the origins of both days will provide some answers.

Waitangi Day was first celebrated as New Zealand's national day in 1934.

Two years earlier, Governor Bledisloe had bought the Treaty grounds. In 1934, the Treaty grounds were gifted to the country with the staging of the first Treaty commemoration. Hundreds of Maori, including the Maori King, attended.

Before then, New Zealand's unofficial national day had been 29 January, the day in

1840 that our first Governor, William Hobson, had stepped ashore in Kororareka. Hobson's reason for coming here was to make New Zealand a British colony. This was achieved of course through the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi two weeks later, on February 6th 1840.

New Zealand's national day then, has always been tagged to our relationship with Britain as a colony within the British Empire, which effectively, we still are.

In 1940, the centenary of the Treaty signing was commemorated, again at Waitangi. Once again, hundreds of Maori attended. The centenary was organised by the Navy who built a flagpole marking the spot where the Treaty signing took place.

The original Waitangi Treaty document, or what remained of it after years of water and rodent damage, was also put on public display for the first time in Wellington.

In 1947, Waitangi Day finally became an annual event and has been celebrated on every February 6 since. From 1952, the Governor

General has taken part in the festivities, with the Prime Minister joining him from 1958. By this time, somewhat belatedly, Maori had actually started taking part in the ceremonies, presenting cultural performances and speeches.

Waitangi Day was first proposed as a public holiday in 1957 though governments were reluctant to introduce the relevant legislation.

In 1971 Matiu Rata (MP Northern Maori) introduced a private members bill asking that Waitangi Day be set aside as a holiday. This finally happened 1974 when Norman Kirk's Labour Government announced that Waitangi Day would become a national holiday. However, it was to be known as New Zealand Day.

In 1974, the New Zealand flag was flown for the first time at the top of the flagstaff at Waitangi. The 1835 flag of the United Tribes of Aotearoa was also flown.

In 1975 the day was renamed Waitangi Day because some did not want to attach such importance (as a 'New Zealand Day') to this

particular day. Some Maori however felt the new name – Waitangi Day – debased the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi.

Since then, Waitangi Day has been the focus of protest and controversy. Young Maori groups like Nga Tamatoa were the leaders of the early protests, focusing on Treaty injustices. Other Pakeha groups like the Waitangi Action Group also tried to disrupt proceedings. Major confrontations between police and protesters resulted in dozens of arrests.

Live TV carried these disturbances into the homes of ordinary New Zealanders. Many people felt that the media coverage simplified and distorted the important issues at stake. However, Nga Puhī elders, whose tupuna signed the original Treaty document, have criticised protestors, wishing Waitangi Day to be as peaceful as possible.

In 2000, PM Helen Clark refused to attend the Waitangi celebrations which were officially shifted to Wellington. However, by 2003, the celebration of our national day had returned to Waitangi.

For Maori, February 6 has always been a significant day. On that day in 1840, the Crown made solemn promises to Maori about political autonomy and the sanctity of resources. Waitangi Day gives us the chance each year to think about those promises and to consider what we still need to be doing. This is an essential nation-building exercise which demands the participation of the Crown, as well as Maori. This process, though at times divisive, is absolutely necessary. With such a focus on ourselves and our nation's future, Waitangi Day is a genuine 'national day.'

However, some people, mostly Pakeha, feel that Waitangi Day is too divisive to be considered a 'New Zealand Day'. Attention has therefore focused upon Anzac Day. As a day of

'genuine celebration and national unity', perhaps this is a better option, they argue.

What then is the background to Anzac Day?

Anzac Day is a day when we remember our war dead.

The first commemoration was held on 25 April 1916, one year after Anzac troops landed at Gallipoli to wage war against the Turks.

Over the next few months, before the troops were pulled out in 1916, 2721 New Zealanders were killed. The shock of such losses led to Anzac Day's creation. In 1916, a half-day holiday gave New Zealanders time to pause and mourn these losses.

Tragically though, the losses of our own wars had long been forgotten. Between 1843 and 1872, some 3000 deaths had occurred on our own soil during the Land Wars, over 75 percent of which had been Maori. Like the wars themselves, these deaths had long been buried beneath a 'national amnesia' that Waitangi Day seeks to address.

Tragically too, the losses suffered at Gallipoli would form but a fraction of the total New Zealand war dead from the First World War, which were 18,500.

Australia's losses were also huge; 8709 men died at Gallipoli. Gallipoli had been a military disaster.

In 1920 an Anzac Day Bill was passed, establishing Anzac Day as a national holiday from 1921. Businesses however were opposed to everything closing down for a day; many taverns especially, stayed open.

From its outset, Anzac Day celebrations had a definite military emphasis, and a focus that was warfare overseas. Parades of veterans quickly became the norm, with medals, reversed arms and gun carriages covered with wreaths of flowers.

In 1922, 2000 veterans marched up Queen

Street through throngs of people. Wellington also hosted a huge parade of veterans followed by a reception at Parliament. In Christchurch, 4000 people attended an Anzac communion service.

In 1939, the Anzac Day Dawn service was introduced, representing the early morning stand-to that soldiers experienced whilst in the field.

Since then, New Zealand has taken part in many overseas wars, especially the Second World War, Korea and Vietnam. Anzac Day now commemorates our dead from many overseas sites of conflict. However, emphasis these days is also directed at soldiers who returned.

Anzac Day services however are now held all over the English speaking world, and also in some non-English speaking countries like France which lost 10,000 men at Gallipoli. Before the Great War, few of those Anzacs sent to the Dardanelles would have heard of Gallipoli, much less known where Turkey was.

Nowadays, a highlight of dawn services and Anzac commemorations everywhere is the participation where possible of the Turkish people. Many young Kiwis too have made the journey to the Gallipoli battle site, visiting its memorials and graves.

Anzac Day is essentially a day dominated by expression of sorrow, as well as celebrations of glory. The Anzac ideal is that our wars were not fought in vain. Our young men and women 'answered the call to freedom', and had died in defence of a free world.

Anzac Day however overlooks the Maori deaths that occurred on our own soil. The issues that gave rise to the Land Wars, which are still with us, are not addressed on Anzac Day; they remain the focus of Waitangi Day which is rightfully New Zealand's national day. ↻