

The unmentioned minority

THOUGHTS

Just who is driving the "one people" debate, asks Danny Keenan.

Have Māori sullied the racial aspirations of ordinary New Zealanders by acquiring privileges and rights to which they are not entitled? And are they, therefore, threatening our longstanding colonial aspiration, that we really are all "one people"? The current debate about special treatment on the basis of race makes me wonder which sector of New Zealand society has taken up the "call to arms".

It all reminds me a little of the infamous Contract with America launched by Newt Gingrich in 1994.

Gingrich was a veteran congressman who waged an aggressive campaign to wrest control of Government from President Bill Clinton.

He delivered a sharp and urgent message to middle America – the country was being lost to liberals, trade unions and racial minorities. I was working in the United States at the time.

Who can forget the televised adulation which accompanied Gingrich's sweep to power, and which launched him on to a titanic struggle to unseat President Clinton (he failed).

Gingrich's election rhetoric had sounded like a call to arms, and it was, and a very successful one at that. But to whom was it addressed?

According to American commentators like Michael Moore, Gingrich aimed his message at a newly discerned group that was feeling increasingly disenfranchised and fearful: white male Americans.

White men in the US were rapidly becoming a "racial minority". By 1994, they constituted about 35 percent of the country. White women and coloured people were threatening to dominate the arts, sport, entertainment, even politics. Young Americans were perceived to be switching on to the lure of a diverse and vibrant ethnic pop culture.

Although white males controlled about 80 percent of the wealth and power, that was no consoling thought. They perceived themselves to be losing influence and authority.

Worse, white males were increasingly fearful of being swamped by minorities. Their personal aspirations did not accord with the rapidly changing gender and ethnic face of the US; and that face was getting younger.

The privileges and rights to which they believed they were entitled were under threat, said Moore.

So they turned out in their thousands to support Gingrich, delivering him a historic landslide. (He would later be undone by Clinton's soccer moms.)

Ten years on, and one wonders if we are not seeing the Gingrich effect resonating in this country.

Isn't it conservative Pakeha males who feel the most threatened by (or indignant about) Māori receiving any perceived special treatment or rights?

Pakeha males constitute a distinct "racial minority".

Within our ethnically diverse community, they number about 35 percent of the population.

And, as ethnic populations go, their situation seems to be worsening because Pakeha numbers overall are in decline.

The numbers of Pakeha men winning high honours in the arts, literature, film, music and scholarships have been in decline for years, especially when faced with opposition from women.

And those areas of national prowess much valued by Pakeha men, especially rugby, have long been handed over to Māori or Polynesian men like Tana Umaga.

The Colin Meads icon that once personified male and rugby prowess has long gone.

But if Pakeha men feel their decline, there is some consolation. As with the US, they still control as much as 90 percent of our wealth and power. In this regard, they possess an almost total dominance.

To many, such a dominance of the levers of power seems perfectly normal. It does not really matter that

the nation's boardrooms, agencies, local councils and even Parliament are dominated by Pakeha men.

If it were Māori who possessed 90 percent of the wealth and power, what would be the reaction?

Well, Māori once did, but we have seen the result of this already. Wars were started against the tribes in the 1860s, and land confiscations followed.

This was done despite the aspiration, agreed to 20 years earlier, that we were all one people with all the same privileges and rights. As Māori were soon to discover, such rights were easily extinguished through the likes of the 1862 Native Lands Act.

If it were Māori who had such dominance over the levers of power, what would be the reaction?

We have seen the result of this already. Despite the Treaty of Waitangi assurances, Māori were denied access to power for 27 years after the signing of the treaty. This was the same treaty that made us all "one people".

When New Zealand won self-government in 1852, Māori were again denied the vote. The vote went to Pakeha males. Fifteen years later, in 1867, Māori were finally granted four special seats. But they were effectively left powerless to stop the erosion of their land and rights. No one was saying that we were "all one country" in 1867.

And, with Dr Brash pointing to the increasingly favoured status of Māori, at the expense of others, we might ask – what happens when Pakeha begin to fear the dominance of Māori? We have seen this before.

Historian Alan Ward has argued that the wars of the 19th century were caused by Pakeha fear of Māori – a situation common to many colonial societies. Small enclaves of white settlers lived in constant fear of much larger concentrations of native peoples. A "war of the races" (as it was called here) was the result.

And, as James Belich has argued, the wars were fought to assert Pakeha dominance and sovereignty over Māori.

Is it fair to point the finger at white males? Does such a group even exist, with common interests to defend? Americans like Michael Moore are in no doubt, though we might here shy away from such an identification.

Yet it is the group that consistently escapes the notice of politicians. Instead, attention is diverted to other "problem" minority groups – immigrants, beneficiaries, women and Māori.

As others have said, the politicians stirring up the issue (predominantly Pakeha males) are articulating widely-held sentiments, and that's why the debate is playing so well. And reasoned argument is a good thing. But I have to question whether this particular debate deals with reality or with matters of perception, where reason has little play.



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