

Te reo Maori no cloak for secularism Mr Speaker

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For nearly 170 years our Parliament has opened each session with a Christian prayer. Last week the new Speaker of the House, Trevor Mallard, unilaterally ditched it. Gone were references to both the Queen and Jesus Christ. He says he is still open to feedback on the issue but decided to proceed with the change before consultation with his parliamentary colleagues had been completed. Consultation with normal New Zealanders was of course never on the cards. That would have risked having to hear from a very large number of New Zealanders who still esteem highly the Judeo-Christian roots of our country. Many of them are not necessarily Christians, but simply Kiwis who think our spiritual heritage should be treasured, not trashed. Not so for Mr Mallard.

What was even less impressive than his one-man decision to remove this historic spiritual marker in our constitutional landscape was his attempt to cloak his agenda in te reo Maori. Mallard read the new de-Christianised version of the prayer in Maori only, offering no English translation. Perhaps he was hoping to hide what he had done. More likely he considered that using Te Reo lent an appearance of acceptable “spirituality” to his efforts. After all, karakia are now an almost orthodox expression of official religion even among the liberal secular establishment.

The irony is that if he and his colleagues understood New Zealand history, they would have realised that marshalling Te Reo in the cause of further secularising our culture was neither appropriate, nor very clever. When they visit Ratana Pa early next year, Mallard and his

fellow Labour MPs should open their eyes and observe where they are. The Pa is not an ancestral iwi homeland. It is the centre of what was one of the most significant pan-Maori movements in our history. At the heart of that movement was a Christian church. Its founder T.W. Ratana exercised a powerful healing ministry in which he encouraged people to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

Of course Ratana's Christian faith was not new or unique among Maori. For over a hundred years prior, Christianity had a major influence among iwi all across New Zealand. After initially struggling to make much impact in the midst of the musket wars, Christianity went on to become widely accepted among the Maori population. By the 1830s regular Maori attendance at Anglican mission services was recorded at 30,000 and the Wesleyans also experienced major growth.¹ The printing press at Paihia could not keep up with the demand for Maori New Testaments and prayer books. As Michael King notes in his Penguin History of New Zealand, "Te Atua, the God of the Bible, was on the move".²

This spiritual awakening was not an expedient adaptation to European customs and culture as some modern historians would have us believe. The hunger for the Bible and its message was real. Far North chief, Nopera Panakareao, on hearing that the first batch of Maori New



Testaments had been printed in Paihia sent a messenger to Colenso with a one-pound gold sovereign and a letter requesting his copy. Colenso records it was the first gold sovereign he had ever seen in New Zealand.³ Another account tells of one Capt Symonds and party travelling in the central North Island. They requested permission from a Tuwharetoa chief to climb Mt Tongariro. It was denied, but

they were told to come back in the summer with New Testaments and it would be granted.⁴

On the Kapiti Coast, Octavius Hadfield wrote of hundreds coming to his evening services, crowding onto stands they had built outside the overflowing chapel. He recorded in his journal: "Some come about 10 miles on the Saturday for the services of the next day. It is remarkable to see gun-barrels used for bells, instruments of war turned into instruments for calling to peace."⁵

This clear historical context throws a very poor light on Mr Mallard's attempts to validate his de-Christianised Parliamentary prayer by cloaking it in the Maori language. Of all ethnic groups in New Zealand society, Maori have the most compelling and clear-cut rationale for retaining the links to our Christian heritage. Indeed perhaps the most pertinent response to Mallard's prayer-changing efforts can be seen in Maori reaction to an earlier attempt in our history to remove longstanding Christian tradition.

As tensions grew in the 1860s between Maori and the Crown, the suggestion was made within the Kingitanga movement that Sunday service prayers among Maori should remove reference to the Queen. John Gorst, the government's agent in the Waikato at the time notes that the Maori King was not at all impressed with the idea. Instead, even whilst under threat of attack from the Queen's forces, Matutaera continued to give a loud "Amen" at the end of the traditional prayer. The King's fellow chiefs at Ngaruawahia were equally unimpressed. "Pretty fellows indeed, to want to alter the Prayer-Book," they stated indignantly.⁶ And so prayer for the Queen remained. As for removing Jesus Christ from the prayer – that would have been unthinkable.

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References

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