

‘Social Revolution on a Small Scale’: Official Maori Committees of the 1950s

Professor Richard S Hill

Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies

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Introduction

This paper addresses the theme of my recent book, *State Authority, Indigenous Autonomy*, which covered Crown-Maori relations in the first half of the 20th century. The book sees the primary driver of collective Maori aspirations as the quest for rangatiratanga, or autonomy. This is interpreted as the Maori quest to run their own affairs, through their own institutions, be they tribal, subtribal, pantribal or non-tribal. The book sees the primary Crown goal as complete assimilation of Maori to western ways of seeing and doing things.

It examines how various Maori collective entities strongly asserted rangatiratanga, in ways that changed to suit the times. It focuses on the ways the Crown attempted to deal with such manifestations – especially by attempting to appropriate their organisational forms and energies. State endorsement and support for Maori institutions, however, was designed to be temporary in nature, pending full assimilation. In fact, the Crown intended that officialised Maori institutions, in assisting Maori adjustment to westernisation, would help it *pursue* its assimilationist policies. In contrast, the Maori agenda included utilising Crown-endorsed mechanisms for the pursuit of rangatiratanga. In a series of complex negotiations, both parties attempted to maximise their benefits.

Some critics have agreed that this model fits the period covered in the book, but that it cannot be sustained for the postwar period – the decades when mass migration to the cities disrupted socio-tribal structures. Certainly, the state saw the massive urban migration of the third quarter of the twentieth century as a means of achieving its elusive goal of assimilation:

¹ The empirical evidence which underpins the arguments presented in this paper (originally titled: ‘Official Maori Committees of the 1950s: Expressions of Autonomy?’) is based essentially on Maori Affairs archives held at Archives New Zealand, supplemented by newspaper research; I thank Sonja Mitchell for her assiduous research contribution. An expanded and footnoted account of the 1950s committees will appear in a forthcoming book. Meanwhile, I welcome feedback on this paper.

Crown policy was geared to speeding up the demographic and hegemonic processes. I am now writing a book, however, that argues that my model *does* apply to the immediate postwar decades – certainly until the Crown officially abandoned assimilation as a policy in the 1970s/80s, and in some ways after that too. In other words, Maori continued to seek rangatiratanga, the Crown to seek to appropriate the organisational forms of that quest for its own purposes. This paper examines just one aspect of post-war Crown-Maori relations.

The Institutions

In 1945 the Labour government passed the Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act, seeking to utilise the remarkable energies released by the Maori war effort – but to control, steer, tame and utilise those energies. The Act gave official endorsement and assistance to Tribal Committees and Tribal Executives, but in a way which made them an integral part of the Department of Maori Affairs. Unlike their predecessor committees in the Maori War Effort Organisation, they were part of the Department – its Maori Welfare Organisation, which included paid officials.

By the time National came to power in late 1949, official committees, generally established on flaxroots Maori initiative, networked the whole country: 381 Tribal Committees and 65 Tribal Executives. By 1952, the numbers had increased by 59 and 10 respectively, partly because of their establishment in large towns and cities. National saw that the Welfare Organisation would be *especially* useful for smoothing Maori adjustment to urban life.

Even more so than Labour, it intended the committee system to be a temporary expedient, pending rapid assimilation. Yet in the event, a collectivist Maori outlook, and Maori culture and traditions, survived urban migration. This was often assisted by pan-tribal or non-tribal organisations in the cities, particularly by the very institutions provided by the Crown. The Welfare Organisation system, in fact, became a key means of Maori resistance to the state agenda of full assimilation. In effect, then, Maori reappropriated the state's appropriation of Maori flaxroots organisational forms and energies.

That such forthright assertion of rangatiratanga occurred even in the period of greatest challenge to socio-tribal structures (the urban migration), provides a necessary backdrop to understanding the dramatic resurgence of Maori as key politico-cultural players from the early 1970s. In turn, the state's experience of ongoing interaction with Maoridom from the 1940s-

70s, helped shape its strategies to cope with the Maori Renaissance. These strategies are still with us.

The Crown

As the Secretary for Maori Affairs noted, the Maori War effort revealed the value of Maori collective organisation in any ‘cause which fires [the Maori] imagination’. For the Crown, the official committee system was designed to ‘enlist’ this imagination in the cause of acculturation and adaptation to pakeha ways. Tribal committees would be ‘a stepping stone to adjustment in the new culture’. They would be given ‘the task of promoting social and economic progress’ in a capitalist economy and an individualistic ethos.

The problem for the state was that Maori aspirations went far beyond adaptation to the west; they particularly focussed on the pursuit of rangatiratanga. The Crown accommodated this by gearing the system to a secondary (and hopefully temporary) imperative: helping Maori ‘retain the more desirable facets of their own culture and traditions’. It appreciated, in short, that there was a quid pro quo for any enthusiastic embracing of westernisation – namely, the preserving and enhancing of significant elements of Maori culture, at least in the meantime. A newspaper reflected official policy in 1952: while the Maori would ‘understandably look to some of his own institutions ... they should not be those which debar assimilation to a higher culture’.

Indeed, the official committees were intended to help *guide* the assimilationist journey. In 1953 they were told their work involved ‘fitting the Maori fully and usefully into the community’. Assimilation processes would produce a ‘National Blend [designed to] weld all in one nation’. This blend would mostly comprise European culture, and western ways of thinking and behaving. The strategy was to stamp out manifestations of the communal-based ‘separatism’ that was seen to characterise Maori psychological and organisational perspectives. By means of a short-term official committee structure, Maori were invited to be parties to their own medium- to long-term assimilation.

State support for some Maori cultural and organisational activities was seen as a price worth paying – especially if it ameliorated that ‘disruption in the social structure of Maori life’ which urban migration caused. Initially, there were few social controls to replace the ‘ordered ways of a disciplined institutional life’ which had characterised marae-based life in the countryside. There were many reports of ‘incessant beer drinking, foul language, and

generally bad behaviour'. These created a white racist backlash that itself posed problems of order.

In particular, as Manu Bennett noted at the time, once in the cities the 'equilibrium [of Maori youth] becomes upset'. In assisting the newly alienated to adjust, the committees undoubtedly promoted state aims; both short term ones such as promoting law and order, and longterm ones – especially assimilation to what were seen as pakeha 'social virtues'. These virtues included adapting to the rhythms of the new postwar industries. The 'Maori girl' new to the town 'must learn the industrial meaning of time', intoned the *New Zealand Listener* in 1950. Establishing committees and executives in cities and big towns undoubtedly assisted adjustment to such European ways and therefore met state requirements.

Traditional Maori leaders in the countryside and newly emergent leaders in the towns both saw the need for such adjustment, and sought to maximise the official system's usefulness in this regard. But under its auspices they also sought to control the pace, degree and trajectory of adjustment processes. At the same time they aimed to revive, preserve and enhance aspects of Maori culture as a counterbalance. One commentator noted: 'consciously or unconsciously every Maori is engaged in a personal debate whether to assert or abandon some particular attitude or habit, whether to adopt or reject some new one ...'. The official committees acted as mediators between, on the one hand, Maori making such decisions on a daily basis, and the state and pakeha culture on the other. By 1959, it was estimated that a full ten percent of Maori were involved in an official committee and/or the Maori Women's Welfare League, which worked with the Maori Welfare Organisation. Through family, tribal and friendship networks, the officially endorsed Maori mechanisms had a very significant impact.

There were benefits for all parties in such mediation. Maori gained resources to perpetuate, revive or re-establish traditional customs and collective ways of doing things. Rural meeting houses and urban community halls, for example, could be renovated or built with the help of subsidies. Maori thereby gained foci for communal social and cultural activities. The Crown gained forms of social control and modes of adjustment which benefited its order and assimilation agendas. While some officials believed that the committees 'seem only to function when a subsidy project is in view', this did not matter if the results suited Crown aims.

Maori

How autonomous were the official committees? In 1948 Prime Minister Peter Fraser declared the Maori Welfare Organisation to be a 'largely independent and self-reliant' branch of the Department of Maori Affairs, with 'local expression, direction and control'. There would be, indeed, 'a measure of local government'. But this could only be, he noted, 'up to a point'. There were to be many such caveats.

The committees were in fact to be under heavy state guidance. Model bylaws were presented to the tribal executives on specified matters such as public health, and tribal executive bylaws needed to be officially endorsed to have any legal weight. The Secretary for Maori Affairs declared bluntly in 1956 that both committees and Maori Women's Welfare League branches were under the direction of his Department. Officials attended committee meetings *ex officio* 'for the purpose of guiding and leading as far as possible the activities of the Executives and Tribal Committees'.

This large degree of official intervention in the workings of the committees was downplayed in official propaganda aimed at Maori. In the mid 1950s the Department of Maori Affairs was boasting that the system represented 'the true nature of Maori self-government'. Maori had, it claimed, even been permitted to take on a more comprehensive set of tasks than those 'imposed upon European local government'.

Maori had long been taking a quite different view of the state role in the Welfare Organisation. A large hui of assembled tribes in March 1950 at Raukawa Marae asked Apirana Ngata to be their spokesperson. He summed up the views of the gathering: Maori felt that the Department had a 'questionable attitude throughout its branches towards many matters affecting the Maori people'. A number of its officials were not in sympathy with the 1945 legislation, and took an 'inquisitorial attitude' towards the committees. The tribes, he stated, were 'most emphatic' that the Department of Maori Affairs should not administer the Act. Maori, in short, sought greater autonomy for the committees.

While they did not officially get this, in practice the committees often operated *as if* they were more or less completely autonomous. In 1955, for example, the Mangere/Onehunga tribal committee, an urban/rural mix, had 16 members, although the Act provided for only 11; the Department sighed that 'reducing the number was almost impossible'.

The committees, in fact, often placed most of their emphasis on promoting Maori community, rather than on the officially prescribed tasks of the 1945 Act and the model bylaws. In doing so, they often persuaded the state to help. In 1953 the local tribal committee persuaded the Onehunga Borough Council to provide an urban Community Centre at low rent, and up to 400 people used it. There were communal meals every Sunday, as many locals 'still do not have suitable homes where they can spend Sundays pleasantly'; there were sporting, cultural and social sub-committees comprising tribal committee members and non-members alike, a major way of rebuilding leadership capacity in urban situations. In all their activities they emphasised their Maoriness, not their official, assimilation-orientated functions.

In the 1950s many commentators noted that the committees and the Welfare Leagues were 'rendering magnificent service' in terms of the retention and revival of tradition, knowledge, arts and craft and communal decision-making; that through the official system Maori were preserving and promoting 'a culture and a philosophy of [their] own'. In 1950 the Pukekohe tribal committee combated local racism by securing a local Maori school. This became the 'rally point' for a revival of Maoridom in the community, 'fulfilling the purpose of a marae which this community, drawn from many different tribes, lacked'. The committee had created, commentators noted, a 'social revolution on a small scale'. Such small revolutions of empowerment and assertion occurred all around the country, aggregating into a powerful movement.

Committees also carried out social control duties among their own people. This too was often in their own rather than officially prescribed ways. While tribal committees could hear cases relating to breaches of bylaws and impose penalties, for example, most preferred informal sanctions. The Mangere/Onehunga tribal committee had inflicted no penalties by 1955, but had effectively regulated local behaviour. If a drinker in the community was deemed to 'need correction', the committee would arrange for pubs to ban him. The tribal committee chair, a migrant worker who had learnt leadership skills, conducted a lot of the business of the committee from the pub in which he worked. One man who had caused a fight apologised to the committee, and sent in a voluntary one pound fine.

Crown-Maori Co-Operation

The various parties benefited as much from such informal social control activities as from the tribal committees' formal activities. Often, in fact, informal initiatives would become incorporated into Crown policies. In many urban areas, tribal committees and Women's

Welfare Leagues branches formed youth clubs and social groups to ‘cushion the effect of migration from one way of life to another’. Before long, the formation of youth clubs and similar groupings had become ‘a stated function of [the Maori] Welfare [Organisation]’, and state assistance was available. The Whangarei Maori Youth Club movement was inaugurated in 1950 to divert the young from ‘licensed premises and other undesirable environments [and from] loitering around the Juke Box and Milk Bars in town’.

Things didn’t always go the way that committee leaders or the state wished. By the late 1950s, senior members of both were noting disapprovingly that the ‘age of “Rock-n-Roll” has infiltrated’ the Maori youth clubs. Some Maori parents argued that rock and roll and similar activities at youth clubs made it harder rather than easier ‘to exercise proper parental control over their children’. A Senior Maori Welfare Officer in Auckland believed that state assistance had helped create ‘a new breed of Maori race growing up in Auckland’. The ‘ugly’ activities of this new breed included adapting Maori songs to rock and roll beats, and wearing tight pants and gaudy clothing, ‘Somehow the influence of the [old rural] marae has to be replaced’ by something better than this, he lamented – a sentiment endorsed by many elders in town and country.

In essence, both urban and rural Maori wanted freedom of opportunity to fully participate, in their own chosen ways, in the pakeha world. Many were prepared to work with and within state-endorsed machinery to effect this – and to debate the appropriate balance between traditional Maori culture and both new and old pakeha culture. But overarchingly, they always stressed the significance of asserting a distinctive Maori identity in New Zealand society. As Bill Pearson put it, ‘they want to be Maoris among Maoris when they want to be’. The committees provided an important means of doing so.

But empowerment through official committees was always necessarily within ongoingly specified or negotiated limits. When tribal committees began to hear cases that would normally belong in the ‘pakeha court’, and particularly when some began to inflict penalties for these, they were quickly prevented from doing so. When urban committees sought increased powers for themselves and their Maori Wardens, the state was reluctant to go too far; the assimilationist strategy implied moving away from overtly differential treatment of the races, not towards it.

Exactly how and how far to devolve authority to Maori was a continually debated dilemma for politicians and bureaucrats. In 1945 the government had refused regional and national

representation for the official committees, wary of the power this might give Maoridom. From late 1952, led by Waiariki area tribal executives, Maori leaders began to form their own District Councils of Tribal Executives, and requested that the Crown authorise a national Maori organisation comprised of District Council representatives. At first the Department of Maori Affairs, happy with the operation of the Women's Welfare League's regional and national levels, 'wholeheartedly' endorsed these developments. The Minister gave approval for district and national level organisation to occur in the Welfare Organisation in 1953. New District Councils were formed 'with an enthusiasm that brought new life' to the committee system.

But the District Councils at once brought a powerful combined strength to opposing the Government's assimilationist agenda. They protested at aspects of planned new legislation, and at the pointed exclusion of Maori representation from key public events. The Councils were especially critical of proposals for further land alienation which Minister of Maori Affairs Ernest Corbett had circulated for comment – itself an indication of the Crown's inability to fully understand the strength of rangatiratanga within its own committee structure. Some of the critical feedback came in letters signed by departmental officers acting as secretaries for the new District Councils. Corbett told departmental head Tipi Ropiha that 'the terminology in some of the correspondence is of such a nature as to be inappropriate as between a departmental officer and his Minister'. He envisaged that should such a problem 'develop further, it may be necessary to issue prohibitions'. Prohibitions indeed came quickly when Maori assertion continued. The planned national conference was postponed and then abandoned, and the District Councils waned.

Further pressure for higher level Maori representation was resisted. As Maori Affairs noted, a national body would inevitably attempt to get existing policy changed. When Labour entered office in 1957 it listened to its officials, not to its Maori voters. But such an attitude, from the government that Maori had voted for, only made both elders and younger leaders more determined to gain a regional and national voice. District Councils began to reform or revitalise, and in October 1959 a non-official national body (the Dominion Council of Tribal Executives) was established informally at Rotorua.

At the same time, other Maori organisations called for their people to abandon their longstanding loyalty to Ratana Labour MPs. In 1960 the Labour government submitted to such pressures, and began preparations for legalising both regional groupings and a national body. The Secretary told the Minister, that not to do so 'could quite conceivably result in the

people becoming antagonistic to the Department, and we could well find a militant private association that could retard our already difficult task in Maori Affairs’.

On such grounds the incoming National government would establish the New Zealand Maori Council in the early 1960s. This was to be ‘a two-way channel of communication with the Maori race’. It would serve as a vehicle for top-down policies, as well as a means of hearing Maori perspectives. The private national association noted that Maori leaders would watch the new development closely, ‘sensitive to the difference between a policy which works for them and one which aims at working with them’. And before too long, when the New Zealand Maori Council perceived that the government was not only *not* working *with* Maori, but actually working *against* rangatiratanga, it became from time to time a thorn in the side of the very state whose machinery it formed a part.

Conclusion

The official committees established under the 1945 Act were not designed as expressions of autonomy, but the state had to make autonomist concessions to ensure that they worked. Using those concessions as a beachhead, Maori not only operated the committees as adjustment mechanisms to the postwar world (their official purpose) but also as collective organisations embodying the longstanding Maori aspiration to exercise rangatiratanga.

In the cities, the so-called tribal committees were actually usually pan- or non-tribal committees. But they too carried out both the adjustment functions required by the Crown, and the pursuit in adverse conditions of Maori autonomist aspirations. Such quests for rangatiratanga were always constrained by their location under the state appropriationist and assimilationist umbrella, but both Maori and Crown parties sought to maximise their positions in a series of complex interactions and negotiations. Official committees could and did subvert official aims and policy in order to assert and enhance rangatiratanga. But in a state which emphasised indivisible sovereignty and ultimate assimilation, this could only be (in Peter Fraser’s words) ‘up to a point’.