Mitzi Nairn on Being Allies

Mitzi Nairn was the Director of the Combined Churches of Aotearoa New Zealand's Programme on Racism, and has been actively involved in anti-racism initiatives since the 1960s. She describes herself as a traditionally built Pākehā woman with a background in community education, especially addressing the Treaty of Waitangi. She lives in Tāmaki-makau-rau with her partner of nearly 50 years, Raymond, and spends most of her time cooking, gardening, writing and 'wondering about stuff.'

The following interview between Mitzi Nairn and Jen Margaret was undertaken in 2010 as part of a series 'Thoughts on social justice.'[1]

When we're talking about being allies to Māori groups and working towards some of the same objectives I guess I'm more interested in the coalitions—the group to group processes—than what individuals do. I don't really have the same perception of individuals unless they are in key positions in otherwise hostile organisations, so you might say, 'So and so is a good ally.' On the whole I'm thinking more about groups working together.

The group where I first got my experience about working with Māori groups was the Auckland Committee on Racism and Discrimination, ACORD, during its early years. ACORD was in formation in 1972 and up and running by the end of that year, or certainly by 1973. ACORD was a Pākehā group working as Pākehā with Pākehā. That's what it was formed for. It was a group that was committed to anti-racism work as a primary first priority, so that if you joined ACORD you agreed that all your other interests and concerns would take second place—you would really only do top ups on them, like anti-apartheid work or the peace movement or work with CORSO[2] or feminist work, any of those kind of development struggles. You would sort of maintain your work on them but you wouldn't actually prioritise them in the way you agreed to prioritise ACORD.

In our structure we had a panel of Māori and Pacific consultants who never exactly all agreed with each other, but that was important because we always said that while we consulted widely we made our own decisions. That was one of the things we picked up very early, that Māori groups didn't want to have to tell dependent Pākehā people what to do. They were dying to have autonomous groups that could be argued with but would basically have their own positions … or that's how I perceive it now. That meant that when we got into various actions we were sometimes in coalitions.

The way I think coalitions work is that they are around a particular objective. To be in coalition with another group you only have to agree about the objective and about the process or processes that you will use together. You don't have to agree on motivation, you don't have to agree on theory, you don't always have to agree on all the boundaries. For example, groups that went into Halt All Racist Tours (HART),[3] recognised that there were other groups involved that would do much more radical actions or much less radical actions than themselves—they wouldn't necessarily be comfortable with each other's actions all the time. You don't have to wear everything that everybody else in

the coalition does and sometimes you will get a certain amount of public reaction if you are in a group with somebody who does things that the public don't approve of. You'll be seen as at least condoning those things. But that's okay. You probably are condoning a lot of stuff really, or not knowing about it till afterwards, which is just as good.

The first coalition that ACORD was really in was a response to the establishment of the South Auckland Police Taskforce. The South Auckland Police Taskforce was a very watershed kind of event. It marked the beginning of team policing, so called; it marked long batons being issued for the first time; and it also operated according to extremely controversial strategies which turned out to be pretty disastrous. There were three main groups opposing, investigating or exposing the Police Taskforce in this coalition. There was Ngā Tamatoa, the young Māori warriors' group; there was the Polynesian Panther Party which was to some extent modelled on the Black Panthers of the United States Civil Rights movement; and there was ACORD. There were various other individuals who worked in the coalition of course, but basically those were the groups. The coalition did a number of things. One was to monitor the police activities and describe them. One was to challenge and one was to try and spread awareness generally of what actually was going down because the Police Taskforce was partly a response to media hoohah about, in effect, how dangerous Māori and Pacific people were.

The people in the coalition brought different skills and different capacities to it. Although some ACORD people did go out on police monitoring and some did some of the courts' monitoring, quite a lot of what we did was to use our contacts and skills, for instance, to get the coalition newsletter or newspaper published because we had much better access to that sort of thing. So doing the publications was one of the ACORD kind of tasks. And to me that also is how a coalition works—different groups bringing their skills and capacities. It's absolutely no use a middle class Pākehā woman like me going and doing interviews with semi-gang members from South Auckland. I mean there's just no meeting of minds or faces or anything. Why should they trust me and why should I know how to enter into a useful dialogue in that situation?

What did it mean to work as allies?

Well, one thing was—and I know this happened for Ngā Tamatoa and to

some extent for Polynesian Panthers—around the university and so on, idealistic Pākehā students sort of saw that things were wrong, and maybe also saw that Māori situations could be very warm and enjoyable. So they not only joined Māori Club, which was probably okay, but began to be hangers on to groups like Ngā Tamatoa. This was really quite embarrassing and tiring and tedious. So one of the first things that seemed to be asked of us from groups like Ngā Tamatoa was, 'Could you get these people out of our hair? Could you get them to work together with each other rather than hanging around us?' and later they would have stronger things to say, particularly around doing joint work in education and workshops and things saying, 'We actually have our own work to do with our own people and we can't do it in the presence of Pākehā lookers on. So don't get all hurt feelings and sniffy because you are in the way'. Those were hard words for some Pākehā people to hear and accept. I suspect it's has taken quite a few people a number of years to get over their resentment at what they experienced as rejection. 'Here I am all sensitive and wanting to help and I'm told to piss off.' I suppose it's not a good look but it was absolutely necessary. Some of the early ACORD members came from having been those hangers on. Not huge numbers but some—others stuck to Māori Club rather than the action groups I think.

So anyway one of the first messages if you like, in my experience of Māori colleagues was, 'Convince, deal with, challenge your own. Challenge other Pākehā, convince them, bring them up to speed, show them, open their eyes, get them out of our hair.' That's partly where the education wing and the workshops and so on began. There are two things here, one being a sort of generic education for Pākehā in general and another—which came more from ACORD's analysis of institutions and organisations—was to try and deal with the institutional racism aspects that were at their absolute institutional hearts, their core values that were so essentially damaging to Māori because they were racist. So you weren't just educating Pākehā in general you were trying to educate social workers or nurses or people who actually did the nitty gritty of delivering racism to try and get that institutional change.

So we began to do workshops and we began to write articles and papers and things explaining racism; and picking out and pointing out how it operates at the hospital or in the police force or in the courts or wherever. We were also challenged—by Māori particularly—and we were challenging ourselves to 'educate yourselves.' That was one of the reasons we had to make ACORD a

closed group, because of what we were learning and trying to process. It was really hard stuff trying to come to a better knowledge of ourselves and our own culture and the practices and policies of our institutions. Hard work and a lot to do.

I wanted to talk a bit about how we moved from the racism focus to doing so much more work on te Tiriti. Ngā Tamatoa began in the late 1960s—and strongly in the early 1970s—by protesting at Waitangi around te Tiriti. Part of that was because Waitangi Day was suddenly made a national holiday and it was going to be called New Zealand Day. Then it was going to be called Waitangi Day and one of the political parties would name it one thing and the other party would get elected and call it the other thing. So it was typical politics. Ngā Tamatoa was initially challenging other Māori about, 'What are we doing celebrating a day of conquest in effect. A day when whether we meant to or not we seem to have signed away our identity and our birthright.' So the challenge then wasn't exactly initially to us Pākehā—it was a challenge about te Tiriti that put the Treaty onto your mind map, and even if it was in the vague unexplored areas it was still somewhere at the edge of the map. It came into Pākehā consciousness, or at least it came into mine. As those protests developed and Waitangi Day developed and it became a more nationally recognised day—because of the holiday—there were issues. For instance, in the churches it was around whether it was a celebration or a commemoration and whether the churches should be involved in the church services and thanksgiving parades on the day. The Treaty hassles went on through the early 1980s and Ngā Tamatoa and the Waitangi Action Committee did runs to Waitangi for Waitangi Day and then they did a march, a hīkoi. The first really big hīkoi was the one in 1984. That was the one that Tainui joined. After that the Māori elders and leaders called a hui at Ngāruawāhia to develop a common voice on te Tiriti. Among other things, one of the calls they gave was that Pākehā and Māori need to learn about the Treaty really properly. For different reasons it was a task for both Māori and Pākehā.

One of the things was that the slogan for a long time had been, 'The Treaty is a fraud. Stop the celebrations, the Treaty is a fraud.' I knew that that was quite a challenge to Pākehā, but I'd never really perceived what a huge shock went through Māoridom at these younger Māori calling into question the integrity and wisdom of ngā tūpuna, of their ancestors, their predecessors. Had the tūpuna been stupid, were they mugs, were they easily duped, were they betrayers of their

people? Were they that impressed by a pouch of tobacco and a blanket? It just called in question their integrity and their intelligence, and one of the things that the Ngāruawāhia gathering said was, 'The Treaty is not a fraud. The Treaty was a very far-sighted document from the Māori point of view. It set the way things were and the way things could be and the way things could and should develop. Māori were not stupid to sign it. If you read the text of te Tiriti it makes perfect sense to sign it.' From that hui, which every major tribal group and every major Māori political group was at, the challenge came, 'Learn about the Treaty,' and Pākehā dug in and did it. Just as Māori did. It was a very authoritative turning point if you like.

Waitangi Day protest, Wellington, 1987. Photo: Gil Hanly

The report from the hui came out as a bilingual document because, of course, one of the things that we've been wrestling with over this time has been the standing, the retention and the survival of the Māori language. One of the first things we did as a group in ACORD was to respond to a pānui to a gathering to set up the first Māori language week ever. I was talking just the other day to one of the Māori women who was in the organising group, and she said,

‘You know, I saw these Pākehā come in and I thought, uh oh, here’s a take over’ and she said, ‘I couldn’t believe it. You all just sat quietly and listened and took a few notes. And you never said anything and you never took over. At the end when it was breaking up you came up and said would it be alright to have some of the posters and leaflets.’ She said, ‘It shook me.’ So I think that illustrates the Māori expectation that Pākehā would assume the right to take over anything—even how to run Māori language week.

One of the things that Ingrid Huygen’s thesis[4] says is that a characteristic of the language that Pākehā who are Treaty change agents use shows a respect for Māori authority. I guess right from that Māori language week gathering, a respect for Māori ability and Māori authority has been really important to me. I think it’s really important in reconstructing or reasserting, or whatever it is we are doing, that Māori authority, that tino rangatiratanga. Because for te tino rangatiratanga to flourish it’s got to be asserted by Māori but it’s got to be respected by Māori and by Pākehā.

I guess the challenges to us as allies from Māori and from the Ngāruawāhia hui were know your own culture, know the Treaty, know who you are and don’t nick our culture. Pākehā culture is fine, just be aware of it. Don’t think it’s the way things are—and Māori stuff is peculiar and cultural and ethnic and somehow ‘other’—because there are Māori New Zealanders and Pākehā New Zealanders.

Notes

[1] Thoughts on Social Justice: Talks with Mitzi Nairn full interview series available here.

[2] A justice organisation with a focus on acting in solidarity with communities in Aotearoa, the Pacific and beyond.

[3] HART formed in 1969 to oppose sporting contact with South Africa.

[4] A doctoral thesis published in 2007 entitled ‘Processes of Pakeha change in response to the Treaty of Waitangi.’ Available at http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/2589

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