

## **THE RACE RACE – by Anahera Herbert-Graves, Chief Executive Officer of Te Runanga-a-Iwi o Ngāti Kahu**

As the provisional results of the Taitokerau by-election emerged on Saturday night, a question was posted to the yahoo newsfeed site from a chap calling himself Bruce. “As a relative newcomer to these fair islands can someone please explain why in a supposed first world civilised country there is a political party called Mana based on race??!!” The punctuation is his.

Bruce is confused because he doesn't know that, as a political party, Te Mana is not race-based. But his confusion is understandable because, while Te Mana is not race-based, the Māori seats are. However the racism that gave rise to them was and is entirely that of the Crown and its supporters who, in 1867, created the original four Māori seats in a parliament of 74 at a time when the majority of the population were clearly Māori.

The relevant Act was passed only after lengthy debate. Most conservative MPs considered Māori "unfit" to participate in government, and opposed Māori representation in Parliament, while some MPs from the other end of the spectrum (such as James FitzGerald, who had proposed allocating a third of Parliament to Māori) regarded the concessions given to Māori as insufficient. In the end the setting up of separate Māori electorates assuaged conservative opposition to the bill; they had previously feared that Māori would gain the right to vote in general electorates, thereby forcing all MPs (rather than just four Māori MPs) to take notice of Māori opinion.

Before this law came into effect, no direct prohibition on Māori voting existed, but other indirect prohibitions, like the property qualification, made it extremely difficult for Māori to exercise their theoretical electoral rights. In order to vote, one needed to possess a certain value of land. Māori owned heaps of land, but held it in common, not under individual title, and under the law that disqualified them from voting. Donald McLean explicitly intended his bill as a temporary measure to give specific representation to Māori until they adopted European customs of land ownership. In effect, the Māori seats were the Crown's way of dressing up as enlightened and benign, its racist marginalisation of Māori and their customs. The Māori electorates remain in place today, despite the property qualification for voting being removed in 1879.

Racism is illogical and it breeds irrational consequences. Currently Māori refuse to relinquish these race-based seats, not because we see them as the best option for our political representation in the future, but because they are the only option. However there is an opposite (hopefully stronger) force working against the racism behind them, which is currently manifesting in an emerging movement composed of a younger, poorer, hungrier and smarter demographic across all races.

If, as I expect, Hone takes the special votes and reclaims the Taitokerau seat, then that movement will have a place on the front bench of parliament as well as more resources with which to unite its constituency before the general election. Regardless of the final by-election result, Te Mana had to hit the ground still running the moment the polls closed because, as long as racism remains entrenched in the institutions and systems of government, the race has not ended.