



knowledge  
wave2003  
the leadership forum

# Professor James Belich

19 February 2003

*Presentation to Knowledge Wave 2003 - the Leadership Forum  
February 2003*

"Presentation also available on Forum website - [www.knowledgewave.org.nz](http://www.knowledgewave.org.nz)"

## "THE KIWI CURSE AND ITS LIFTING",

ADDRESS TO THE KNOWLEDGE WAVE LEADERSHIP FORUM

BY JAMES BELICH, UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND, 19 FEBRUARY 2003

Let me begin by congratulating the previous speakers. As a historian, I can confirm Justice Kirby's statement that New Zealand was initially ruled from Sydney - 1840 to 1841. It was during this brief period, of course, that the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. Justice Kirby has therefore demonstrated that Maori Treaty claims are actually the responsibility of the New South Wales treasury. So this conference has already saved New Zealand one billion dollars. Who says talkfests are useless?

Seriously, I am impressed by Justice Kirby's argument for a de facto marriage between Australia and New Zealand, if not a formal one. The theme of my paper is that we should both grow up before we get married.

\* \* \*

New Zealand history is not long, but it is fast. In less than one thousand years, on present evidence, a few Polynesian pioneers flowered into the remarkable kaleidoscope of tribes known as the Maori people. Europeans have been here in numbers barely 150 years, yet in that short time have roller-coasted through no less than three distinct era. The first era, 1840s-1890s, was one of explosive colonisation, when a few thousand Pakeha pioneers burgeoned into a whole people in a single lifetime. Pakeha in this period may have had the ethics of a stoat as far as nature and natives were concerned, but they were also immensely dynamic and optimistic, even tolerant in some respects. The pubs were open all hours, and the proportion of non-British immigrants, including Chinese, was much greater in 1881 than it was fifty years later. There was no such thing as Australia; the Ditch was a bridge not a barrier; and New Zealand shared an interacting Tasman world with its six sister colonies.

The second era, 1900-1960s, was one of "recolonisation" when New Zealand, against the grain of our expectations, actually tightened its links with Britain. New Zealand became the town-supply district of London. A hundred great refrigerated meatships acted as the inter-island ferries of a single New Zealand-British entity. Optimism, dynamism, and diversity diminished, but so did poverty, inequality, and insecurity. New Zealand and Australia turned away from each other, and towards Britain. Between the 1920s and the 1960s, less than 5% of New Zealand's exports went to Australia.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the third era began. The recolonial system crumpled under three hammer blows: globalisation, deregulation, and decolonisation. Modern globalisation cut in from the 1960s, beginning with television and the passenger jet. The deregulation or restructuring of the recolonial mega-state began in 1984. In between, in 1973, mother England ran off and joined a Franco-German commune known as the EEC, bringing about an involuntary decolonisation.

Deregulation and globalisation feature large in recent New Zealand commentary, and so they should. But the third dog, decolonisation, does not bark as loud. It cannot be fully recognised because the system it replaced, recolonisation, is not fully recognised. New Zealanders are a little embarrassed about recolonisation, a privileged but protracted adolescence. We don't always like to publicly display our own baby photos, especially if taken at age 30. Yet recolonisation was a rich and complex system. It made New Zealand a virtual Scotland, which is arguably a pretty good thing to have been. It left great legacies to our present and future - some good, some bad, some both.

The good news includes a capacity for cultural over-production, for punching above our weight in such fields as art and war, sport and science. Such statements can smack of empty nationalist boasting, but this one is not without evidence. In sport, it has been estimated that, between 1948 and 2000, New Zealand won 7.3 Olympic golds per million people compared to Australia's 4.6.<sup>i</sup> In literature, New Zealand writers in the century after 1880 produced about 1,500 books of popular fiction, sold mainly in Europe and North

America. They included children's fiction, detective novels, and Mills and Boon bodice-rippers, and have been dismissed from the official canon on grounds of both vulgarity and non-New Zealandness. Yet a certain quality was there, as was a certain New Zealandness. *Lawless Warrior Princess* and *Jackson of the Rings* arguably perpetuate this cross-brow, trans-national, yet New Zealand creative tradition.

Moving gracefully from popular culture to aerial bombing, the British Air Force after 1939 was New Zealand-led to a remarkable degree. 72 New Zealanders commanded RAF squadrons, 16 commanded whole wings, and at least a dozen became air marshals. 300 Kiwis still held RAF commissions in 1948, and as late as the 1960s about half the top dozen or so RAF commands, including the very top (Chief of Air Staff), were held by New Zealanders. Leaping elegantly to opera singing and nuclear physics, over fifty New Zealanders became international operatic professionals, while Ernest Rutherford was followed by a cluster of New Zealand contributors to the Allied atomic programmes in World War Two. New Zealanders also clustered at the top of world cartooning, reconstructive surgery and scholarly publishing - like the RAF, Oxford University Press in the 1960s was run by what was called a "New Zealand mafia".

These are not obvious occupations for an isolated country of one or two million people with a pasture-based economy, whose European settlement was only 68 years old when Rutherford won the Nobel Prize for splitting the atom.

I would attribute New Zealand's surprising levels of achievement in these and other fields to the recolonial system. Early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century New Zealand was in some ways small, isolated, and parochial, yet in others a close and privileged province of a world centre. Its cultural capital was London; its leading universities Oxford and Cambridge. This is a benign legacy, worth understanding and building on, though we may have to provide our own leading universities in the future. But there is also bad news in recolonisation's bequest: a nasty little Kiwi curse that accompanies the blessings of our history.

By the "Kiwi curse" I mean our collective mean streak, our propensity to spasms of narrow-mindedness, vitriol, intolerance, and polarised debate. Manifestations include the tall poppy syndrome, negative egalitarianism, and voluntary totalitarianism. Mike Moore noted some examples, such as the "show-off" mathematician. At one level, these can be mild flaws, even charming foibles: the curse is almost a blessing. The tall poppy syndrome is sometimes transcended, as with Edmund Hilary, and I quite like it anyway: even the best should not *get too big for their boots*. Another classic Kiwi curse colloquialism, *too clever by half*, seems equally innocent. But is it? As a bewildered continental European friend put it to me recently, how can people be *too* clever?

Kiwi totalitarianism ranges from giving people on overnight ferries a cup of tea at dawn, whether they liked it or not, to giving children no credit at all in parts of the new NCEA qualification because of one trivial error. Standards become pettifoggery, temperance becomes prohibition, state intervention becomes Muldoonism, and deregulation becomes Ruthanasia. Negative egalitarianism ranges from giving extra parking tickets to the mayor to the terrible World War One insistence that because some families' sons were killed, other families' sons should be killed too. The Kiwi curse has both light and dark sides.

One current example of both malign and benign legacies, the Kiwi curse and the Kiwi blessing, is the America's Cup, which as some of you may know is a yacht race now being held in the harbour of this city. New Zealand expertise dominates *both* finalists, surely a remarkable fact for a small county. Yet the Kiwis on the non-New Zealand side, professional sportsmen, are berated by some as despicable traitors.

Regional rivalries can seem similarly ambiguous. Is there life beyond the Bombay Hills? Yes, Jim, but not as we know it. But is the anti-Auckland syndrome entirely healthy? What if New Zealand's future needs a world-class city, a home-grown, Kiwi-sized London, and what if it can only be Auckland? What if the Big Four Cities becoming the Big One is a hard fact of history, and southern reluctance to face it is a case of the Kiwi

curse? Anyway, it probably won't matter because Auckland's future is hobbled by its artificial division into four separate cities - another case of the Kiwi curse?

There is also a disturbing set of deficiencies, even immaturities, in what might be called public culture. National institutions often display a siege mentality towards criticism. If you criticise Te Papa or the All Blacks it follows that you are a) wholly wrong; b) a traitor; and c) driven by sour grapes because you were not allowed to join. And you certainly will not be allowed to join in the future.

There are problems with our collective capacity for quality control and for the impartial assessment of our peers. We are reluctant to celebrate achievement, but when we do manage it, we sometimes celebrate the mediocre - we are still dominated by the Kiwi Curse in over-reacting to it. It is not so much *celebration* that achievement needs for it to flower, but honest recognition and accurate assessment. Cultural maturity requires that, in all sorts of professions, we be prepared in certain circumstances to don a judge's cap, take up the ref's whistle, and fairly assess even our worst enemies. I am not suggesting that we do this always, or even often - we can still be querulous back-biting bastards most of the time, thank God. The circumstances requiring the judge's cap are few, temporary, and well-defined - job panels for example - and we should be able to manage it now and then. But do we?

More worrying still, perhaps, is a tendency to polarised debate, to extreme and pre-determined positions, in public discourse. So-called "debate" sometimes consists of the reflexive exchange of fixed and partial views, not so much discourse as mono-course, slogan ping-pong. On immigration, you let in everyone or no-one; you are a PC nutter or a racist. On treaty issues, you have those who want Maori to have no reparation at all, and those who want to give them everything - the Ngai Tahu Claim Phase Two: The North Island. On genetic engineering and nuclear issues, you are either an eco-facist or a Mutant of Chernobyl.

We need to draw a distinction between dead debate, in which the participants commit themselves to an immovable position before hand, refuse to see the other point of view, and merely compete for public support; and live debate, in which participants commit themselves to listening, to the possibility that new information, fresh angles, or novel connections may change their views. Dead debate, masquerading as healthy public discourse, is part of the Kiwi Curse.

Much of what I have called the "Kiwi Curse", perhaps, is characteristic of any small and close-knit society. But recolonisation made New Zealand act as if it was even smaller and more close knit than it was. If you are so damned good, asked the Kiwi Curse in recolonial New Zealand, why aren't you in London?

There are echoes of an unwritten assumption that London will provide the ultimate quality control, and that the local assessment systems can afford to indulge petty prejudices and rivalries. But in science and art, business and scholarship, if not yet in law, there is no longer a Privy Council.

The Kiwi Curse needs to be kept in context. It is not dominant, but is a mean streak in an otherwise wonderful society. Cultural quirks, even cultural curses, can add character and distinctiveness. I myself quite like the light side of the Kiwi Curse, and turning us into a bland bunch of nice guys is the last thing I want to do - you can count me out of that club, for a start. But the dark side of the Kiwi Curse can be damaging; and it could be that we should consider trying to lift it. Doing so may require us to symbolically transcend, or at least recognise, the residual immaturities left us by recolonisation. It may require that we invent the 21<sup>st</sup> birthday that we forgot to have.

\* \* \*

The *New Zealand Gazette* of 12 September 1907 contained the following sentence, signed John Joseph Ward, Prime Minister.

"It is hereby notified that His Majesty the King [Edward VII]... has been graciously pleased to change the style and designation of the Colony of New Zealand to 'The Dominion of New Zealand'; such change to take effect on and from Thursday, the 26<sup>th</sup> day of September, 1907."

In four and half years the centenary of New Zealand's promotion from Colony to Dominion will take place. Might this be an appropriate moment for a New Zealand republic?

Might *now* be an appropriate moment to begin live debate on the issue? Does republicanism's defeat in the Australian referendum of 1999, which was arguably a bit of a set up in any case, automatically mean its defeat in New Zealand? Justice Kirby noted that republicanism needs fresh wind in its sails - well wind is one thing New Zealand does have more of than Australia.

I concede that shifting from Colony to Dominion in 1907, and from Dominion to "Realm" in 1947, was not necessarily hugely important in a tangible or material sense. I concede that this would also be true of a shift to a Republic. But there could be a symbolic significance. It could be a focus for a joint attack on the darker side of the Kiwi curse. The connection between a republic and the lifting of the curse becomes clearer when we consider some likely arguments *against* the New Zealand republic.

There is the usual *ad hominem* selection; Belich is not Maori enough; Belich is not Pakeha enough. He has a chip on his shoulder because he has only won six book awards. His Dalmatian descent makes him genetically anti-British. All this is perfectly true of course, but there are some less reputable counter-arguments.

1) Becoming a republic would damage our relationship with Britain. Look at the US republic's notorious hostility to Britain and its disregard of the Royal Family, as well as its refusal to work with Britain in world affairs.

2) What about the effect on British tourism and New Zealand OE? It is only the monarchy that persuades droves of Britons and New Zealanders to visit each other's countries.

3) Better wait till Australia tries it first.

4) What about Maori? Maori signed the Treaty of Waitangi with the British crown, and they trust Britain more than they do Pakeha. A bunch of aged English law lords, replete with their deep knowledge of taha Maori, will be much better referees of treaty issues than New Zealand's best judges.

5) New Zealand lawyers do not trust New Zealand judges either, therefore the Privy Council is essential. As Mike Moore noted, New Zealand only has the population of Tudor England or Revolutionary America. It is therefore obviously too small to judge itself. It is much more sensible to send a dozen QCs to London than to bring a couple of judges from London - or Ottawa - to NZ

6) If we became a republic, one of our fellow New Zealanders would have to become President. Having New Zealanders - since 1967 - as Governors-General is bad enough, but President?

Why, since this conference is full of actual and potential leaders, it could even be one of the complacent bastards sitting beside you now.

It is too much! In keeping with my appeal for live debate, I have unconvinced myself. Let's forget the Republic.

\* \* \*

Such reasoning is shot through with the Kiwi curse. But respectable arguments against a republic are tangled up in some of it. Some Maori do indeed see the British monarchy as some kind of insurance against Pakeha oppression. It is not. A long, sad line of Maori petitioners, from King Tawhiao onwards, have gone to London in the hope of redress from the Crown or the Imperial government. They never received it, but were uniformly redirected back to the colonial government in Wellington. The Maori notion that the British crown was benign is arguably a myth. It was London troops and London money that broke the back of Maori independence in the Waikato War of 1863-4. Wellington money and men, lucky for them, only had to do the mopping up. The solution to the history of Pakeha oppression is not the monarchy but the Pakeha recognition of that history. The two peoples can no longer look to London as a referee, but must learn to trust each other. Mutual distrust, *within* the Maori and Pakeha peoples, as well as between them, is at the bottom of both the Kiwi Curse and some of the cases against the republic.

Another set of respectable arguments against republicanism centre on the importance to New Zealand of tradition and of the British connection. Tradition enriches a society; only philistines and spoil-sports destroy them for the sake of it. The British monarchy is a New Zealand tradition, true, but so also is a kind of republicanism. An eminent historian argued, as long ago as 1962, that in practice New Zealand had developed its own quasi-republican constitutional system. As early as 1880, Governors in New Zealand had far less power and influence than Kings or Queens in Britain. New Zealand's Upper House became a cipher in the 1890s, long before its final euthanasia in 1950. The historian concerned was not some ravaging radical but D.K. Fieldhouse, Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History at the University of Cambridge. "Quasi-republican", as a description of the New Zealand constitution, is his term, not mine.<sup>ii</sup> The trouble with traditions as a guide to the future is that they usually point more than one way.

As for the British connection, whose value I am happy to acknowledge, I myself suspect that becoming a republic would strengthen it, not weaken it. Removing the constitutional detritus of colonialism, the decaying umbilical cord, will better allow us to recognise, celebrate, criticise and study the centrality of the British heritage to the New Zealand nation- *and* the implications of New Zealand's experience for understandings of Britain.

I am not committing myself to the advocacy of republicanism over the next four and a half years. The essence of the exercise is that I and others be willing to change our minds, and I may well do so.

What I suggest is a debate about New Zealand's constitutional and cultural future, as well as its economic and social one. This debate needs to be live and lively, not dead, polemical, polarised, and predetermined. If it is live, whatever its outcome, it may help in the lifting of the dark side of the Kiwi Curse. Republic or not, we need to take a step up in self-assessment and public discourse. We can keep "too clever by half", the tall poppy syndrome, and even the monarchy, as long as they are usually outranked by the fair go.

**END**

---

<sup>i</sup> By economist Brian Gaynor, *New Zealand Herald*, 30 Sept 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> D.K. Fieldhouse, "Autochthonous elements in the evolution of dominion status: the case of New Zealand", *Journal of Commonwealth Political Studies*, 1 (1962) 85-111