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The pervasive myth of Māori privilege

5 The idea that Māori are a privileged people is deeply embedded in New Zealand culture. Many people believe that Māori receive benefits that other New Zealanders don't. There's also a persistent belief that Māori were the beneficiaries of British colonisation and not its victims.

10 Growing up in a normal small town in Aotearoa¹, I heard these things everywhere — that Māori get special treatment and have advantages that other New Zealanders don't. But it just didn't line up with my own experience. For me, being Māori meant spending lots of time with whānau² and at tangi³. I didn't see how that made me privileged.

15 In fact, the more I got to learn about my own history, the more it became clear that Māori weren't the privileged ones. I had a good history teacher when I was going through college. He was a New Zealander with Sikh whakapapa⁴, and he was one of the few brown faces on staff at the school I went to. He had photographs on his wall at home of his Sikh ancestors and he was very proud of that heritage.

20 This teacher asked me one day which iwi⁵ I belonged to. And I said: "I'm from here. From Ngāti Kuia and Rangitane. Also Ngāti Kuri in Kaikōura on my mum's side." He went out to his back room and came out with a box full of photocopied documents. He told me to take them away and have a read.

25 In that box, there was a document which was a census of "the landless natives of Marlborough". I recognised many of the names because they were my ancestors. Pretty much from that point, I was hooked on our history. Those documents exposed me to things that would become the basis of our iwi Treaty claims in the early 2000s. And "the landless natives of Marlborough" kind of summed up the paradox I faced. My people were without land but there was a pervasive notion in my community that Māori are a privileged people.

30 It's a paradox that persists today. While Māori have been indisputably dispossessed and marginalised, they are somehow seen to be privileged. When I did my master's thesis on the foreshore and seabed claim, it became evident that this belief is so deeply held that the supposed benefits Māori receive are seen as a direct attack on the foundations of the nation.

35 I was really interested in how the paradox came about, and why Māori privilege continues to be a dominant feature in our discussions about colonisation and race relations. I found that it's been a long time in the making. The idea of Māori privilege can be traced back through New Zealand's history. In fact, the kind of rhetoric that we hear today can be taken almost verbatim from the 1840s and planted here in the present.

40 If you first go back to the 1700s when James Cook turns up in the Pacific, you'll see that he doesn't arrive here not knowing anything. Instead, he's got particular ideas about the people that he's going to find, and

¹ Maori name for New Zealand

² Whānau is the Māori language word for the basic extended family group

³ a ceremonial Maori funeral or wake

⁴ Ancestors or line of descent

⁵ a Maori community or people

how he's going to classify them. He comes to the Pacific and meets a whole lot of Indigenous peoples. He observes them and classifies them according to certain traits, which were really about how closely they resembled the British.

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For instance, if you were an agricultural people, if you tilled the soil, Cook saw you as being higher on the scale of progress than people who were deemed to be hunter-gatherers. In Aotearoa, he found people who cultivated the soil. They grew kūmara. So, Māori were higher on his scale. Then, as time went on and missionaries arrived, the argument developed that, because the people in New Zealand were a special kind of Indigenous people, they needed to be protected from people like land speculators.

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So, when Hobson turned up and the Treaty was signed, Article Three promised Māori the rights of British subjects and her Majesty's Royal Protection. And that was something different from what had happened in other colonies. Because it was unique in British colonial policy, it was seen by some as a privilege bestowed upon Māori. What it meant in practice was the policy of pre-emption, which said the Crown could be the only buyer of land in Aotearoa. That would stop speculators getting hold of Māori land.

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But the settlers wanted what Māori had, which was land. As the colony grew, settlers started to argue that Māori should be able to sell land to whoever they liked. They had the idea that, because pre-emption was a form of privilege, it should be done away with. They were making similar statements to what people like Hobson's Pledge and others of that ilk are making today. For example, the New Zealand Company had a problem with a department called the Protectorate of Aborigines. Its job was to oversee land purchases to make sure Māori weren't being ripped off. And, when you read the way in which the company tried to undermine the protectorate, it's very similar to the comments that people make today about the Waitangi Tribunal. In the end, they were successful, and pre-emption was abolished for a time. The Native Land Court was set up instead, so that Māori could have their rights in land declared and be given a title — which settlers had argued was, in effect, having the same rights and privileges as British subjects.

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And, in that period, there was free trade in land through the court. But, in many ways, it was no different from pre-emption, as the result in both cases was Māori still losing their land. When the Liberals came to power in the 1890s, they reimposed Crown pre-emption. But, at the time, New Zealand was coming out of a depression — and wool, meat, and dairy products became increasingly important. Getting more settlers on the land was a priority for the Liberal government. So there was a push by the Crown to acquire more land, which, by default, meant Māori land. From there into the 1900s, we saw hundreds of thousands of more acres lost to Māori.

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So even policies like pre-emption that had been framed as protecting Māori, and were therefore seen by some as a privilege, still paved the way for Māori land to be transferred to settlers. Then, in 1900, after Māori petitioned Queen Victoria and parliament, the Native Lands Administration Act was passed. Māori were hopeful that it would give them more say over their own land. There were provisions within the Act that allowed for Māori to lease their land, rather than selling it outright. That was to overcome the issue of Māori lacking the capital to bring land into production in the new economy that was emerging.

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Unlike settlers, who could go to the government and get a loan, which they then used to break land in, Māori didn't have that option. The government wouldn't lend against Māori land with multiple owners. James Carroll, the Māori MP, and others wanted to allow Māori owners to lease land and retain the freehold title. It would allow Carroll to kind of nod to the government and say: "We're not holding things up here. There's land that can be brought into production, but we're not going to give up ownership."

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90 Well, that idea was met with severe opposition by people such as the Farmers' Union who later became Federated Farmers. The arguments they made were things like this: We left Britain because of landlordism. Why should we put up with landlords in this country? And they argued that leasing was a form of privilege.

95 Not only that. They also argued that it was bad for Māori because, if you allowed them to lease their land, they'd become indolent. They argued that Pākehā farmers would make the land profitable, while Māori would collect rent and spend it on tobacco. It's the kind of rhetoric that carries through to today. People don't understand the restrictions that were placed on Māori at that time, and the very limited options they had to try and operate and survive in the colonial system.

100 From 1900, when the Act was introduced, arguments about Māori privilege were deployed in earnest by the Farmers' Union and the conservative opposition party. By 1909, the leasing provisions in the Act had been amended away. It's a good example of how notions of privilege can be used to swing policy in favour of settlers. When people make claims of Māori privilege, what they're actually talking about in practice is safeguarding coloniser privilege. It's why the idea of Māori privilege has been so durable.

105 In the first hundred years of colonisation, the notion of Māori privilege aided and abetted the taking of Māori land and resources. Now it's deployed to constrain Māori aspirations and to maintain the power imbalance. Even though most of the land and resources are now gone from Māori control, the idea hasn't lost its utility.

110 When I heard that Māori communities would be receiving funding as part of the recovery on the East Coast in Hawke's Bay, I just knew it wouldn't be long until the same arguments of privilege were deployed. And that's exactly what happened. We saw it in the pandemic as well. When Māori communities were trying to take control and provide leadership for their people, we saw the claims and assertions of Māori privilege again.

115 Part of that goes back to how New Zealanders see themselves. They have a view about their country and about how it was built. And they've retained the idea that what happened in New Zealand was different from other places, and that Māori received a special deal. Some people, I think, almost see what Māori are doing now is being ungrateful for what they were "given". They see Māori fighting to retain a place in this nation as tearing apart the very fabric of what it means to be a New Zealander.

120 But the origins of these claims of privilege in our history were to try to undermine Māori collectivism, to undermine the tribe, to more easily divest us of our land. If that history tells us anything, it tells us that when some Pākehā people feel under threat, these notions of Māori privilege become more pronounced.

125 We're seeing it now in the conversation around co-governance. And, when there's a peak in these claims and assertions of Māori privilege, then historically at least, we've seen that Māori have lost things. Notions of privilege, first used to systematically dispossess and marginalise Māori, are being redeployed to consolidate the power imbalance established in the previous centuries. These notions also allow us to forget how generous Māori have been.

130 If I think about my own iwi, Ngāti Kuia, in the Marlborough Sounds. A few months ago, we had our own flooding down here. Our awa did what it often does and it breached its banks. When our people were forced onto native reserves, we built where it didn't flood, because our people had historic mātauranga about where to place their whare. So, during the recent floods it was our unaffected marae that looked after the whole community. It was our landless people who offered manaakitanga to our Pākehā community.

140 I feel a little bit mamae because I know that the same people who don't like the notion of co-governance,
don't mind accepting our manaaki when they need it. It does worry me that we have good initiatives which
may be under threat because they're seen as privileging Māori. Things like Whānau Ora, which has really
helped our communities over the last few years, are the sort of initiatives that become vulnerable to claims
of privilege, which always ramp up in an election year. So, it's good for all of us to understand that these
145 claims have deep roots in our history, that they're not new. And what history tells us is that the thing that
gets described as a privilege is essentially a right.

If local iwi communities are given the opportunity to share their histories and their stories from their
perspectives, it will, I think, chip away at those long-held beliefs about the benevolence of British
colonisation. From my own perspective, I do have hope that things are changing. I believe there's a growing
150 realisation that Māori have made a significant contribution to New Zealand society, not least in the
provision of a home for ambitious and industrious settlers.

Some might say that is the greatest privilege of all.

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