

ARE WE A NATION OF CONFORMISTS?

THIS is the text of a talk on "Personal Relationships" given by DR CLEM HILL, Lecturer in Education at Otago University. Dr Hill was speaking in the NZBS series, "New Zealand Attitudes"

I WONDER if you've noticed the way so many New Zealanders ask any and every visitor to our country what he thinks of it, whether he likes us, and so on. It seems to me that in asking such questions we appear like the person who is not sure of himself—eager for praise, but resenting criticism. And, of course, as our approach in these matters is quite blatant, we receive the rosy praise we're after. Let, for instance, Lord Bledisloe speak on behalf of our visitors. "Socially the people are almost ideally democratic; courtesy and good manners are universal; there is very little swearing and drunkenness and a shabbily dressed person is seldom seen."

Now, my only comment is that he hasn't "been around." In order to see ourselves as we really are, we ought not to accept such statements at their face value. We need to look at ourselves more critically and with more detachment, till we reach the stage of taking ourselves and our habits for granted. It's a stage of development we haven't reached yet, perhaps because we haven't lived long enough in our country to acquire this kind of attitude. Many of the critical comments I mention will be well enough known to you, but perhaps few of you have seen them against the pattern I'm suggesting is behind them.

Don't think from what I have to say that I think personal relationships in general in New Zealand are in an extremely bad way. No! One could list many advantages. Tipping—a social evil—is practically non-existent; one can talk and mix freely with workers, shop assistants, cabinet ministers, and even dentists; and domestic helpers (where they exist) and boarders tend to be treated as one of the family. But even advantages like these lose much of their value in a society which is markedly conformist—where social pressures are such that one must fit in almost totally with such class-leveilling practices, without much opportunity for initiative in different sorts of circumstances. There may well be occasions when one wishes to give a little extra for special services. One may want to be more independent about mixing with all other people merely on the grounds that all people are meant to be equal. And one may not really desire the boarder to merge into the household—in fact, the boarder may, himself, wish to be free of the family ties.

I'm not suggesting we change the values behind these practices, but I am making the plea that we must not expect people to conform to these all the time. Yet there's little doubt that in general this is what we do. We're recognised as a highly-conforming society and yet paradoxically we're termed a race of individualists—enterprising and adaptable. I suggest, however, that this enterprise and adaptability is largely confined to material things and does not extend in blanket fashion over our social and emotional reactions. When we go overseas, into a fairly rigid class society, we seem more adaptable socially because we prudently and sincerely take people at

their face value. But in relation to other New Zealanders, the individualism takes the form of self-concern.

Now, whether this self-concern is a cause or a consequence of a welfare state is a matter for sociologists to ponder over, but the self-concern expresses itself in a feeling of insecurity by over-conforming in the society. We don't want to look conspicuous or different. We want above all to be a good Kiwi and like all the others. Not that we are without tolerance of eccentricity or crankiness in others. In fact our tolerance and fairmindedness makes great allowances for such deviation in others provided they are not New Zealanders. We in fact feel that we want to like the others and to be like them. Partially our conformity is due to the provincialism of New Zealand—we know and are known by many people everywhere; social and geographical mobility make this so. The mystical but commanding "they" operates overtime in this overtime-conscious country. We claim we are free but freedom has its limits and ours tend to be those of middle-class provincialism.

One test of a mature person is that he is accepted as a member of a group and can yet remain a unique individual. As I see it, we New Zealanders have difficulty in retaining uniqueness in our general conformity to the group. Perhaps in a similar way to adolescent groups we feel it necessary to conform in dress, speech and behaviour. Even when we arrange parties, we try to get together people of the same interests as far as is possible, so nothing untoward happens. When controversial issues arise we like to be nearly all of the same mind. Of course, I'm generalising, but this is an observation common to visitors and indeed many Kiwis.

This phenomenon appears repeatedly in discussion groups, committees (of which we have so many) and conferences—too few of the members speak their minds *openly*. We seem afraid to commit ourselves for fear of stepping out of line with what most people will think. Our relationships with others, we feel, depend on whether we think alike and act alike. This leads us into further problems in business. The workman or clerk calls his boss "Jim" and the boss calls him "Bob," and this is as I feel it should be. But we run into difficulties when boss "Jim" has to criticise or correct "Dick" about his job. The resentment that often arises is a personal one—sometimes quite upsetting to the outwardly satisfactory relationship.

Now this sort of situation suggests to me a feeling of insecurity, a feeling which is expressed in all sorts of other situations too, and arises because in personal relationships New Zealanders are insecure. You see, we either call a man by his Christian name—and this is the more common practice—or we refer to him as "Mr So and So." To use the bare surname sounds rude and most of us bridle when someone says to us, "I say, Smith—" though one gets quite used to this overseas. It's curious that although it's a common practice in high schools for teachers to use the surname only and for pupils to feel this is a mark of maturity, it's not carried on



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into adult life. Instead when it happens we react as the adolescent does to criticism.

Perhaps many of the so-called "immature" aspects others observe in our behaviour are indications that as a young nation we've not grown through this phase in personal relationships. Don't mistake this interpretation as derogatory. After all, there's nothing wrong with being at any particular stage of development, and one is all the better for knowing where one is placed. We either accept a person wholeheartedly or we treat them very formally. We haven't the in-between gradations that can be so helpful in different sets of circumstances. And we are scared of admitting there can be differences between people which do not necessitate rigid social distinctions. We must have things cut and dried for us—either be accepted or be on the outer—and yet we're continually in difficulty deciding which is correct for which occasion.

In our personal letter-writing the same thing occurs. Are we to write, "My Smith, Dear Sir," and sign off "Yours faithfully," or are we to write "Dear Jack," signing off "Sincerely yours," or "Regards"? On enquiry I find these problems do create some degree of concern in most of us because it's important for us to be right and at the same time genuine Kiwis. Practical and adaptable as we are in material matters, we are much less so in our relations with others. Furthermore, we seem to be bound by the conventions of manners rather than by the sense of them—though we can claim no monopoly in this field. We've thrown over certain acts as being outmoded in these days of sex equality (I almost said *identity*)—things such as men walking on the street side of women, and men standing up for women in public transport. In the latter, however, we've thrown out the kumara with the peelings, for we aren't discriminating in the choice of whom to stand up for. It

seems common sense that older men and women and young wives laden with parcels, for instance, could well qualify, but rather than let the side down, men tend to remain seated regardless of who is standing. Dare to stand, fly in the face of this new convention, and you risk disgusted looks from glowering and perhaps slightly guilty-looking males.

I can't deal at length with the manners of motorists because, as a pedestrian, I daren't risk local consequences, but again the lack of deep feeling for others comes to the fore. In spite of the traffic regulations, most pedestrians are still hesitant about venturing forth boldly on to a zebra crossing. Their safety lies less in the strength of the law than in the consideration of the drivers who, when all is said and done, are fellow citizens. I think another example of our immaturity is in the amount of swearing that goes on: it's a sign of poverty in both emotional and language development. Foreigners especially, notice the way many New Zealanders swear in front of women.

And yet, you'll say, this unconcern for others is surely not as typical as I've suggested. We are a friendly hospitable people, especially towards the South, in much the same way as hospitality is said to increase towards the North in England. Perhaps the climate plays a more important role here than we've realised. Is the hospitality warmer because of the need to entertain indoors in front of fires, or is it that certain traditions of open-house have stayed with the descendants of certain groups of settlers? Whatever the reason, when someone in New Zealand says, "You must come round to our place, sometime," he really means it and acts on it by setting a time or by just expecting you to pop in.

This leads us on to the general question of friendship. New Zealanders have often been described as typically a friendly people, but I wonder if this is not a misleading description. I think

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