

# Maori Affairs Secretary promotes official maori language policy

Whether or not the Crown was and is obliged to safeguard the maori language as a treasure of Aotearoa under the terms of the Treaty of Waitangi is a grey area. That's what the Waitangi Tribunal has to decide about, following the close of hearings last year in the claim by Nga Kaiwhakapumau I Te Reo.

Several government departments and other agencies of the Crown defended their policies in regard to recognition of the maori language, but only one department, Maori Affairs acknowledged the validity of the claim and provided some answers.

In his submission, the Secretary of Maori Affairs, Tamati Reedy said the Treaty contained the hopes of the Maori people in that their tikanga and taonga would be protected.

He saw the first step in this as the Crown accepting its role in developing an official maori language policy.

"This paper discusses and recommends ways in which maori language can be made an official language in New Zealand. The Government's policy (1984 Election Manifesto) states:

"Believing that language is the basis of culture, and that Maori people have a right to foster and promote their own culture, Labour will:

legislate to make maori an official language of New Zealand so that a person can speak maori in court, Parliament, or on any official occasion as of right."

These comments and recommendations are made in the light of the experience gained recently from my visit (13 October — 10 November) to Paraguay, Canada, Wales, Irish Republic of Ireland, Israel and Singapore. The purpose was to investigate official bilingual or multilingual regimes in respect of their legislation, promotion, administration, and practical effects with the community at large.

## Why maori as an official language of New Zealand?

The principal reasons for declaring maori an official language of New Zealand are for reasons of national identity and national unity. Every country visited — even in Canada where bilingual policy is based on two non-indigenous languages, English and French — gave these motives for the promotion of their chosen languages at a national level. In the case of countries fostering an indigenous language — e.g. Malay in Singapore, Hebrew in Israel, Irish in

Ireland, Welsh in Wales along with English or Guarani in Paraguay along with Spanish, identity of a nation as preserved and promoted through the indigenous language was a powerful reason. 'Uniqueness in the world', 'harmony of the nation', 'national unity', were all recurring expressions. The power of language to divide and unite was accepted as a reality of life.

The case for maori as an official language is simply stated as:

(a) It is the foundation language of New Zealand and a taonga of the Treaty of Waitangi.

(b) It provides New Zealand with a unique language identity in relation to the rest of the world.

(c) It offers a point for unifying Maori and pakeha at a time when maoridom's call for a self-determination model of development is perceived by some New Zealanders as separatist.

(d) It offers a powerful social force for the reconstruction of a damaged and deteriorated self image among the Maori young — and not so young — of New Zealand.

## What is an official language policy?

The Governments' intention is quite explicit. It will

"legislate to make maori an official language of New Zealand so that a person can speak maori in court, Parliament, or on any official occasion as of right."

Apart from reasons previously discussed, this legislation is clearly to remedy situations such as the denial to Mr Mihaka (Mihaka v Police [1980]) of the right to represent himself in the maori language. The High Court on that occasion ruled that:

(a) English was the language of the courts.

(b) Legislation is required for use of maori in the courts.

The case for its use in Parliament has been formally remedied by its recent adoption in Parliament's Standing Orders.

The use of maori "on any official occasion as of right" has wide ramifica-



tions and offers possibilities for growth rather than constraint. As a long term aim, "any official occasion" should allow for as broad a recognition as a school classroom, courtroom, state department building, or even the territorial confines of New Zealand — the land of one's birth, as long as one is a recognised citizen of New Zealand. In the interim for practical reasons 'any official occasion' might be limited to mean specifically ceremonial occasions.

From the overseas experience emerges two concepts about language recognition which the government can consider in its policy: the notions of national language/s and official language/s. The notion of national recognition for maori appeals and would be acceptable generally to the New Zealand community.

In Paraguay, both Spanish (their international working language) and Guarani (their indigenous language) are recognised national languages. This fact is enshrined in the Constitution of Paraguay.

In Ireland, Irish language is given pre-eminent status as the national language and the first official language. The English language is recognised as the second official language. (Constitution of Ireland 1937, Article 8.) Here, Irish is recognised as the national language because it is the indigenous language and is given first official status over English. However, the reality today is that English is the dominant official language. Conversely though while the native speaking population is reported as declining, the speakers who 'acquire' the language through schools and language groups is said to be increasing. These are parallels to the New Zealand situation.