

"The whole point is to start from what the children have got, to build on what they have – not to take it away," he says.

"Whenever I enrolled the children of immigrants and minorities I told them we value their language and their culture and encouraged them to retain it. It's all too easy to let slip away."

Hirsh rejected that his commitment to Zionism is a form of racism. He also rejected the view that the conciliator should have to be a Maori. Nobody, he says, can claim to have a monopoly on racial sensitivity, no group can claim exclusive understanding of the needs of ethnic minorities.

Hirsh is quite proficient at booming a greeting in Maori and singing a waiata on the marae.

The following is Hirsh's after dinner speech at Mt Maunganui:

"Institutionalised racism as it is being demonstrated in NZ today is cause for alarm. This is demonstrated in three of four particular ways. One is the ethnic composition of staff where power and decision making rests with one group. And there are many agencies of our state and many institutions, companies and all sorts of organisations within our community where this decision-making rests with one group.

"Another area is the appointment, selection and promotion of staff which is often culturally or ethnically biased.

"Individual racism is expressed in many ways in this country and ranges over a broad spectrum. Some people in the extreme right hold to views of superiority and let us not underestimate the membership of those groups here.

"It has been identified that there are some 70 groups whose members hold nationalist and racist arguments, who have a commitment to elitist beliefs and the right for the elite to govern. And further, they believe that inequality is both inevitable and desirable. And if this isn't enough, these groups are very often committed to action in this area.

"I continue to dream of what New Zealand could become and I am an eternal optimist. We all dream about a better life for ourselves, our children and the

whole community. I think of a social order in which every person will be able to obtain the fullest stature of which they are capable of and be accepted and recognised by others for who they are, regardless of their circumstances, their birth, race, colour or position in life.

"If we examine the paradoxes of plain social injustices that exist in our society, one is forced to wonder if our cherished dream is, at best, a mirage, or worse, a vehicle for our own hypocrisy.

"Racism and inequality exists in our country and we have a shared obligation to do something about it, and urgently, in order to restore and preserve the social fabric of NZ. We must move from a mono-cultural society which we have been for so long, through to a bi-cultural society recognising the very special place in this country of the tangata whenua, of the Maori people.

"If multi-culturalism can succeed anywhere, it can succeed in NZ. The greatest resource we have in this country are people. We cannot expect people to have a sense of social responsibility unless they feel good about themselves and enjoy the tastes of success. Feelings of self worth are absolutely fundamental for the basis of contributing to the community.

"There is a lot of concern about those who behave in an anti-social way. I would suggest that one of the first steps in overcoming that behaviour is to find ways to help people to stand tall and feel good about themselves. If we don't try to achieve this then we will allow the forces of destruction and social ills to continue.

"New Zealand could show the world what racial harmony, social justice, health and education really are. But action is needed. Manifestations of inequality are known to all. Rates of education failure, social dislocation, crime rates, imprisonments, health, unemployed – you can draw a line across those statistics and the line is represented largely by a definition of race because below that line is a proportionate number of the Maori and Pacific Island people in particular.

"There is an emphasis of superiority of members of one group in this country over another. This is expressed here in many ways. The pakeha expression of authority over Maori and Pacific Island people, intolerance of other ethnic minorities by keeping them at varying levels of insecurity, expressions and actions of many individuals, and, most crucial, the belief that the assimilation theory is the path to go along, rather than cultural maintenance.

"The Maori community in this country has suffered under that particular aspect of racism – the process of trying to force a diverse group of people through a channel, in the hope that they will come out bearing some remarkable sameness. It doesn't work. It couldn't work.

"To wish away humankind's underlying ethnocentric tendencies is proving to be costly, dangerous and totally and morally indefensible. This is to wish away someone's culture, language, traditions, customs and beliefs.

"I am aware that some people are threatened by multi-culturalism, and who believe that cultural maintenance promotes divisiveness. In NZ today, where there is a new thrust for every ethnic group to maintain its character and particularly to give the rightful place in this country to the Maori people, there are some who find this threatening.

"Hasn't our experience shown exactly what our assimilation and practice has done? It has taken something from the Maori people in particular. I believe it is our moral duty to give it back and to work for its restoration.

"To take away the Maori language and its use in NZ takes something from the Maori people which is very important to them. If the language does not survive here it will not survive anywhere and to allow that not to happen is morally indefensible. We have to listen to what one another is saying – it's easy to talk but to hear takes a bit more effort. We need to have a vision, a commitment for all of us, if that dream I spoke of is not to become a nightmare."

Maori and Jew historical links

NZ Times (February 2:86)

The recent appointment of a Jewish race relations conciliator, Wally Hirsh, created a stir. Pro-Palestinian groups opposed the choice. And some Maoris were unhappy with the male, "middle-class", Pakeha appointment. But times have changed, as Times correspondent BRONWYN ELSMORE reports.

THE history of the Maori people during the past century and a half has been greatly affected by the struggle of the Jewish nation.

With the arrival of the missions in New Zealand in the early 19th century, the good news was given a mixed reception. After an initial period of little interest, the message of Christianity was taken up enthusiastically in many areas – partly for its own sake, but often spurred along by additional motivations.

When the faith flourished, people clamoured for books of scripture, and for baptism. Some of the new Christian communities were often models of behaviour from which the white settlers could have learned a lot – had they been interested.

The great increase in settlement after colonisation in 1840, however, caused a growth in social problems and this in turn produced an alteration in the attitude of the Maori towards the Pakeha and his religion. Introduced diseases to