

No cause to grumble

Maoris are not the only people with cause to grumble about the way they are treated. Here Gilbert Oskaboose writes about some of the hassles of being a Canadian Indian.

He writes in a light-hearted vein, but the similarities between what he writes and what many have experienced suggests there is a lot of truth behind the jokes.

Gilbert Oskaboose is editor of Indian News, in which this article first appeared. Advertising itself as "the next best thing to smoke signals", Indian News is published in English and French by Canada's Department of Indian Affairs.

What's it like to be an Indian?

How many times have Indian people heard that question and how many attempts have been made to answer it once and for all.

An old chief with a penchant for purple prose might respond with something flowery like this: "There are many Indians, my son, therefore the answers must be as many as the marsh grasses that bend and sway in the evening breezes." A young militant may be more succinct. "It's the pits, man!"

If you were to catch me on one of my bad days which, incidentally, are coming closer and closer together, I'd probably say: To Be Indian ...

... Is to be expected to be an expert on all things pertaining to the Great Outdoors. An Indian must be totally familiar with the Indian, English and Latin names of all Canadian flora and fauna, be fully cognizant of their medicinal and/or magical properties, and, aside from knowing most moose by their first names, must be able to converse fluently with at least 15 separate species.

... Is to be painfully aware that most white folks sincerely believe your religion consists mainly of worshipping totem poles and talking to rocks.

... Is to have your child come home from an elementary class with the following pearl and know how insidious bigotry is and how young children are exposed to it. Teacher's tip: The best way to remember the correct spelling of the word arithmetic is to incorporate the letters into a catchy little sentence like: A Red Indian Thought He Might Eat Tobacco In Church.

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The Round Table: A forum for Maori views, perspectives

Ever since King Arthur's days, a Round Table has been associated with making plans and forming strategies vital to the development of a people, a nation or a race.

Here in New Zealand, that same concept exists for a small group of Maori people charged with the job of producing, for the country's planners and decision makers, a set of Maori viewpoints and perspectives on the country's development. The group meet under the name of the Round Table, set up by the New Zealand Planning Council, which was itself established in 1977.

The council has a broad brief which covers both advising Government on planning for the country's economic, social, and cultural development and stimulating New Zealanders to think about issues likely to confront us over the next few years. It has close links with the decision makers in Government and has the right to publish on important issues of the day.

Originally the group was called Rangi's Round Table, after Planning Council member, Dr Rangi Mete-Kingi. The efforts of that group led to the publication in 1979 of the book "He Matapuna — a Source" which is a collection of viewpoints from 12 noted Maori contributors.

To date, the Maori members on the New Zealand Planning Council have been Dr Mete-Kingi, Miss Anne Delamere and currently, Chief Judge Durie, who has taken over from Dr Mete-Kingi as convenor of the Round Table.

The Maori members of the council secretariat, of 12 professionals with support staff, have been Mr Wishie Jaram and Mrs Tilly Reedy, who was the secretary organiser of the activities of the original Round Table. Her duties were assumed by Rana Waitai when he joined the secretariat in August, 1980.

The group of Maori leaders and thinkers who produced "He Matapuna" provided a useful introduction to important issues of New Zealand's development as seen through Maori eyes.

However, on the advice of its Maori colleagues, the council, decided that input should be obtained from a wider range of Maori "grass roots" opinion in the second phase of the Round Table's existence.

One year after his appointment as secretary/organiser, Rana Waitai describes how this objective was achieved.

Tuning in to the dynamics of Maoridom is a massive task and

therefore there are limits to what can be achieved by a static "think tank".

Bishop Manuhia Bennett had to some extent hinted at this in his summary of "He Matapuna" when he said: "The one thing that calls for an immediate reaction is the fact that nearly all the contributors belong to the same socio-economic academic group."

The Round Table membership themselves seemed to sense the need for a broader range of membership and so the concept that was to emerge in 1980 was a natural evolution for the Round Table idea.

CHANGING MEMBERSHIP

Instead of a fixed group, which although given the best will in the world can only by its inherent nature touch a small area of Maoridom it was decided that a more effective canvassing could be achieved by means of a constantly changing membership.

Although constantly changing, the membership remained fairly exclusive in that it was on an invitation-only basis. This was necessary to prevent the Round Table becoming a general forum for airing views unrelated to the issue under discussion.

By balancing the range of people invited it was possible to guarantee a voice to people who do not normally indulge in public debate.

NEW STYLE

To date, in terms of the new style Round Table, eight meetings have been convened and some 58 people have attended. As a rule a maximum