

Epps trial lays bare the thread

Deep seated problems concealed beneath an apparently calm surface emerged during the recent Lester Epps murder trial in Wellington.

Fourteen men, all members of the Eastern Suburbs Rugby League Club, and all but three Maoris, were charged with the murder of the Mongrel Mob leader on August 15, 1981.

The incident which led to Epp's death pitted Maori against Maori, sporting club against gang.

The verdict, passed by an all-male, all-European jury after more than 24 hours deliberation, found all the men guilty of manslaughter, imprisoned them for 18 months and threw their families and friends into disruption and misery.

The trial planted a series of question marks squarely before the public in general and the Maori community in particular.

It questioned some young Maoris' motivation in joining gangs, and half-posed the answer that they join to conform, and stay because of intimidation by existing gang members.

It revealed the depth of resentment gang members felt toward the young men who turned from them to the sporting club.

And it hinted at future conflict which could spring up if the sporting clubs grow stronger and tougher.

The dilemmas

In their statements some of the accused tried to answer the dilemmas.

Some pointed the finger at the management of the hotel which had allowed club and gang members to continue to drink side by side. Others pointed to the police, who they accused of being "too soft on the gangs."

Gang members, in their turn, said that the sporting club members were not as lily white as they had been painted.

"I really hope and pray that when all this is over, all behind us, a bit of good will come out of it," said one of the 14 men, Whai Walker, widower, father of four.

"That one day these things won't be happening — 'specially among Maoris.

"It will open a few eyes to the problems that the Maoris in particular are having. I think that it goes deeper than the gangs and unemployment. The Maoris who are doing well are turning away from the Maoris' problems."

Wouldn't turn

One of the founders of the Eastern Suburbs Rugby League Club, Whare

Henry, vowed the club would not turn its back on the 14 men, who had said they carried out the raid on the Mongrel Mob house to try and stop intimidation of club members, particularly the younger players.

Henry, who saw two brothers imprisoned for their part in the raid, pledged the club to continue to try and help young Maoris who came from the country to the city.

For their part the Mongrel Mob promised they would not seek vengeance on their former leader's behalf.

One said he thought the men convicted of Epp's manslaughter had "got what they deserved."

"We feel sorry for their families," he said.

Founding members

The Eastern Suburbs Rugby League Club was founded in 1975, and many of the founding members were Maoris from country areas away from the capital.

Some of them, remembering the days when they had arrived in the city green, penniless and with few friends, kept an eye on the younger members.

"We tried to show them there was something else in life than belonging to a gang," said Whare Henry. "Our idea was to give them protectors."

The policy seemed to work. Some of the younger members were asked, but declined, to join the Mongrel Mob and other gangs.

Trouble sprang up when the tables were turned and gang members wanted to join the club.

During the trial, one of the accused, Whetu Henry, told in his statement of an incident which happened when his cousin was staying with a former gang member who had joined the club.

Persuasion

He said the Mongrel Mob had gone to the house, held an axe to his cousin's throat and a shotgun to his friend's head and tried to "persuade" him to return to the Mob.

Many of the convicted mens' statements referred to the gang's resentment of the fact that younger Maoris

had turned to the Club rather than the gang.

One told a policeman interviewing him that the raid was partly the police force's fault for doing little about Mongrel Mob intimidation of Club members.

In reply the policeman had said, "We can't do much if you're not prepared to give us information and co-operate in telling us what is going on."

One of the strengths which emerged and grew during the trial was the strength the group derived from each other and their friends and families.

The inner group of 14 men grew stronger and closer. And while they depended upon one another, they seemed to be equally dependent upon the larger group of family and friends around them.

In a reflective comment in his statement, Whetu Henry perhaps spoke for all the group when he said, "The whole thing was a tragedy because it was Maoris against Maoris."

Summing up in a different way, Mr Justice Savage said, "No group is entitled to take the law into its own hands and deal another group a taste of its medicine."

The 14 men now in prison were dealt a severe lesson which will have long-lasting repercussions for them, their families and friends.

Only time will tell whether the community can prevent a repeat of their tragedy by looking at some of the problems which created it.

Does the community offer young people, especially those coming, often friendless and without money, from the country to the city, enough alternatives to gang membership?

Is it reaching out to them with kindness and friendship, to give them a bulwark against the loneliness and sense of alienation which often drives them into gangs?

The trial showed that many of the people involved regarded the police almost as the enemy, and that dealing with matters in their own way can only result in trouble.

Surely a direct, frank approach and definite plea for help is the way the community should be working.

Increasingly, a thread of violence runs through New Zealand society.

This trial laid bare that thread.

But violence leads to hate, and hate to destruction, a negative, bitter result.

There is an alternative. The community can take positive action, and help young people before bitterness and resentment set in and they turn against the community to violence.

