

The Languages of New Zealand

Address to the conference of the National Association of ESOL Home Tutor Schemes, Waipuna Conference Centre, Mt Wellington, 4 July 2003, by Joris de Bres, Race Relations Commissioner

I've had a somewhat rapid reintroduction to the art of public speaking since I took up my position as Race Relations Commissioner in September last year. My first major effort was to a small gathering of the faithful at dawn on a wet Wellington morning in early December to mark the International Day of Cultural Heritage. The day was established by the United Nations and Unesco to remind the world of the deplorable act of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in dynamiting the ancient and splendid Bamiyan Buddha statues carved from a rock face and cherished and admired by people from around the world. Unesco wanted to highlight the importance of protecting both physical and intangible heritage, so I took that as my theme.

Well, the media took the brief reference to the Taliban as a generic comparison between their regime and New Zealand's colonial governments in the nineteenth century. My considered comments about the Treaty of Waitangi, wahi tapu and Maori language and a plea for mutual respect and tolerance went by the board and for the next three weeks there was a media frenzy, debates in Parliament, calls for my resignation and even a complaint, still continuing, before the Human Rights Proceedings Tribunal.

So now I choose my words and imagery very carefully. And I get rather a lot of invitations to speak. Some people are probably disappointed that I'm not actually in the business of extravagant statements or polarisation, but rather of promoting greater understanding and tolerance.

But the climate can be such in New Zealand that even when I think I'm saying something relatively harmless, it can attract media headlines and parliamentary debate. In March the Dominion Post asked me to make some comment on the use of Maori language in public. I made a few suggestions encouraging businesses to make some more use of Maori in their signage, branding and marketing. Hardly top news, but it was on the front page the next day with an introduction that seemed to suggest to some readers and commentators that I was telling business what to do. Hostile parliamentary questions and editorials in various newspapers followed, and letters rolled in. One particularly took my fancy. The correspondent said that "even to suggest that businesses consider using the Maori language was tantamount to bureaucratic regulation". Another said "I consider that the crusade encouraging the people of New Zealand to learn, write and speak the Maori language to be divisive and retrograde. The entire human race would enjoy more harmony and peace if all people spoke one language. The Maori language should be allowed to die like other ineffective languages".

I know I'm speaking to people tonight who are confronted with language issues in the course of their everyday work, and so I'll take the risk of sharing a few of my thoughts about language with you. You are going to have plenty

of practical discussions about ESOL over the next two days, and you're all greater experts on that than me. I do think that the job you do is vitally important, and that competency in the English language for all New Zealand residents is critical to the welfare of citizens and the wellbeing of our nation. It is the only language in which we are all likely to be able to communicate together. Because it is a preeminent world language, it is also a major economic asset, as we can see from the \$2.8 billion that we are earning by teaching English to overseas students.

The Ministry of Education released a curriculum report last month which recommends that our schools be required to offer classes in a second language, although it shies away from making instruction in a second language compulsory for students from the age of 10 to 14.

It is perhaps telling that this is even an issue in New Zealand, given that, from the beginnings of our modern nation, two languages, Maori and English, have been spoken in New Zealand. Only recently has Maori been given wider public recognition, but it is now being learnt by many thousands of people. We have an increasing number of people in New Zealand who are bi-lingual – whether Maori, Pacific Island, Asian or from other ethnic groups, yet we have failed to tap the potential that this offers.

Learning another language, even just a little is not just developing an additional linguistic skill – it opens us up to another culture, and it sends a signal that we are a genuine multi-cultural society. As a minimum, it helps us to show respect by pronouncing non-English words correctly.

I am a personal beneficiary of ESOL training, because when I arrived at school as a seven year old I couldn't speak a word of English. I got six weeks personal tuition by the Infant Mistress at Eastern Hutt Primary School, but on my first day in a mainstream class I was still unable to find the words to ask to go to the toilet. After I burst into tears the teacher called my older sister from another class to find out what the matter was. The good thing was, I remember, that I got the rest of the day off school.

My first foray into English writing was a story for the school magazine when I was in Standard One. I had to ask the girl sitting next to me for some of the words, without explaining the context. "One day", I wrote, "my brother had an accident. There was a car with bright lights and a car with dim lights. The car with the sharp lights blinded the car with the blunt lights and there was an accident. My brother was taken to hospital. He had a great big prick". I was very proud of the story, and so were my parents. I still don't know whether the teachers selected it for publication to encourage me, or to amuse others. They succeeded on both counts. At our naturalisation ceremony, four years later, my Presbyterian minister father read it out to a packed audience in his strong Dutch accent. "A grrett bik prrick". I squirmed, everyone laughed. I don't think, even then, he knew what that particular phrase meant.

That was back in the 1950's. The official policy was assimilation. It wasn't just a matter of learning English, but of forgetting your own language. My

parents, like many Maori at the time, encouraged us to speak only English at home, and over time we lost much of our mother tongue. Interestingly, while we left our Dutch language behind, my parents did both take classes in Maori, and we were encouraged to learn some words ourselves.

Perhaps because we weren't from an Anglo-Celtic background, we didn't have the same resistance to the recognition of Maori or the use of Maori that seems to have characterised so many Pakeha New Zealanders. Perhaps it is just that when you have learnt more than one language, you develop more of an interest in other languages and differences in pronunciation. It is unfortunate that the development of public pride in New Zealand English pronunciation from the 1960's should at the same time have entrenched the Pakeha mispronunciation of Maori words as part of that language. Ironically, maybe because French was the most commonly taught foreign language of the time, most New Zealanders made an effort to pronounce my own name as de Bray, although the Dutch pronounce it de Bres. At the same time few made any effort to show the same erudition with Maori.

When I arrived in New Zealand in 1954, the vast majority of New Zealanders were of Anglo-Celtic extraction. Maori were a very small minority, and there were only a few Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Indians, and continental Europeans. Today, of course, we live in a different ethnic and linguistic environment. At the last census, Maori, Pacific Island and other ethnic groups formed a quarter of the population. In twenty years this proportion will be nearer 40% and in fifty years it will be around 50%. Almost a million New Zealanders will be of Maori descent. At least half the population will therefore have a connection with another language and another culture. The forecasts for the working population are even more dramatic, and we may well see the day where some taxpayers are complaining that too many Pakeha are beneficiaries and that their superannuation payments are a burden on the taxpayer.

Already, young people leaving school are more comfortable with diversity, and generally pronounce Maori words properly and with ease. The goal of Maori Language Week this year (at the end of July) is to extend the use of Maori in the public domain. The theme is NZ Reo, NZ Pride, and promotes Maori as a language for all New Zealanders, Te Reo o te Whenua. If people are willing to make the shift in pronunciation, it will be a simple case of "Parents, ask your children first". I hope we will really begin to affirm the Maori language as a uniquely New Zealand asset alongside English.

I believe that language is an important key to tolerance and good race relations. It is my hope that all New Zealanders will end up having some knowledge of Maori, and all speak at least two languages. If they have a mother tongue other than English, I hope that they will be supported in maintaining it. I studied languages at university, and have a good working knowledge of French, German, Dutch and English. That was unusual in New Zealand, but when I returned to Holland I found that even people who had never been to university were better at those languages than I was. It's time to realise the value of languages in New Zealand, upskill ourselves and in the

process open ourselves up to a greater understanding of other cultures, including our own indigenous language and culture.

So what has that got to do with ESOL teachers? Well, firstly, I know you are committed through your policies to introducing your students to a bi-cultural rather than a mono-cultural New Zealand. But secondly, you are New Zealanders who know first hand the worlds that knowledge of another language can open up. I hope that you will communicate that knowledge and that enthusiasm to your friends and in public debate, especially when it comes to acceptance and promotion of the Maori language for New Zealanders as a whole. There are some simple things that you can do as New Zealanders in Maori Language Week:

- Focus on some basic Maori words, greetings and cultural practices with your students, and the words of the national anthem in English and Maori
- Design an A4 poster on your computer that your students can put on their wall with a welcome to their home in Maori, English and their own language
- Make sure you know your own occupation in Maori
- If you have friends or relations in business, get them to put up some signs in Maori at their workplace, business or professional premises
- Use Maori greetings and goodbyes on the phone and in conversation\
- Brush up your own pronunciation of Maori place names
- Visit the Maori Language Commission website for more ideas

No reira, tena koutou, koutou, tena koutou katoa. I wish you all the best with your conference.