

PRUE KAPUA

Tihei mauri ora

Tuia ki runga

Tuia ki raro

Tuia ki roto

Tuia ki waho

Tuia te here tangata

Ka rongō te po

Ka rongō te ao

E nga mana

E nga reo

E nga karanga maha

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena ra koutou katoa

I stand before you as the 21st National President of Te Ropu Wahine Maori Toko i te Ora – the Maori Women’s Welfare League.

The League was the first national Maori organisation and we are today the oldest Maori women’s national organisation in Aotearoa.

And as we begin on this journey of considering collaboration, it is relevant to consider our beginnings. We began virtually as the community component of the Department of Maori Affairs. In 1937 Nurse Ruby Cameron established the Womens Health Leagues, particularly in the Bay of Plenty. The focus was on Maori health in 3 areas – infant mortality, water sanitation and TB. With the agreement of Te Arawa elders the Women’s Health League committees were based on marae and had some success in addressing all three issues.

In the 1940s there was significant movement of Maori to the cities mainly looking for work. But there were no supports in place and for the first time many faced new issues, not the least being poverty. They faced issues with housing, health issues, alcohol and many encountered racism and discrimination head on for the first time in their lives. In 1943 the Maori War Effort Organisation formed largely to recruit Maori for war. 315 tribal committees were set up with 41 tribal executives. But their members were men and their concerns were largely around land issues.

But because of the increasing effects and awareness of urbanisation, the Maori War Effort Organisation recommended the appointment of 6 Maori women welfare officers to work with the tribal committees. They were appointed by the National Service Department in 1943.

And then in 1945 the Maori Social and Economic Advancement Act was passed bringing the tribal committees directly under the Department of Native Affairs (as it was known then) and establishing a Controller of Welfare, Rangiataahua Royal. He soon realised that 6 welfare officers weren’t enough and organised women into local working groups, known as women’s welfare committees. He then tried to join these local committees and the Women’s Health League committees together and called them to a hui in Rotorua in 1950. He and his staff began work on a Constitution, apparently based on the RSA Constitution at

the time, and during the following year his welfare officers went about the country setting up branches.

An inaugural Conference was planned for September 1951 in Wellington but the Women's Health League pulled out, preferring to remain independent. Today there are still some branches of the Women's Health League operating, mainly around Rotorua.

However, the Conference still went ahead and the Maori Women's Welfare League was born. At that time, and as a result of the work of the welfare officers, there were 187 branches reporting to 22 district councils and 27 isolated or independent branches. There was a membership of just over 2,500. By 1954 there were 303 branches and almost 4,000 members.

The President elected in 1951 was Whina Cooper and the Patron was Princess Te Puea, which began the association with the Kingitanga. But the remaining members of the Executive, representing the regions, were all employees of the Department of Maori Affairs and all secretariat tasks were undertaken by and at the cost of the Department of Maori Affairs.

The purposes and objectives of the League in 1951 were not too different from today. In 1951 it was to promote activities that would improve the position of Maori, particularly women and children, in health, education and welfare. Today it is about enhancing the complete wellbeing of Maori women and their whanau in health, education, economic development, employment, te reo me ona tikanga and justice.

The 1951 objectives were those identified by the Department of Maori Affairs and accepted by all the members that had joined branches by the time of the inaugural Conference.

And so if we look at one meaning of collaboration, we see an organisation coming together within a government department to work toward agreed objectives.

But therein lay a problem, which gave rise to tensions on occasion. There was a view that some of the functions of the League were too closely connected with the aims of the government. There were concerns that the assimilationist policies advocated by the government were being endorsed by the League. The members saw themselves as separate from any Government department and undertook voluntary work in their respective communities. But as increasing numbers of Maori tamariki and rangatahi came to the attention of Child Welfare and the Children's Courts in the 1950s and 1960s, the League took an active role in trying to address the issues. But the decision makers exercised their own, often uninformed and ignorant judgment. If Child welfare officers did try to involve Maori they usually sought out the predominantly statutory male tribal committees. Occasionally they would look to Maori welfare officers for help, but usually only in limited ways such as dealing with local whanau. Never in terms of policy. And never with resources. And despite the rapid growth of the League from 1951 child welfare officers did not seek the assistance of the League.

In fact, as League members became increasingly concerned at the rising numbers of tamariki and rangatahi before the Courts they implored the child welfare Division to allow their branches to deal first with cases of Maori offending. That offer was rejected by the Minister of Education on the basis that it would necessitate a drastic change in administration and that a similar "privilege" would have to be given to non-Maori as well.

And we are only too well aware of what harm was caused by decisions that determined that institutional care was the appropriate option by the State, in its parent role, for large numbers of children, particularly Maori.

These rejections for community based involvement by the League raised questions about whether there was any benefit to a relationship with a government department. Members started to show their concern by proposing in 1954 that regional representatives on the Executive should reside in their districts. The Executive Committee did not however accept that proposal. In 1956 the Secretary for Maori Affairs stated publically that tribal committees and MWWL branches were under the direction of the Department of Maori Affairs.

In her last year as President, Whina Cooper was clearly concerned about the independence of the League and, two years later, in 1959 a resolution was passed at the Annual Conference that the League would be entirely separate from the Department of Maori Affairs. And from that point the challenge of finding funding began.

So - if we look at another meaning of collaboration – traitorous co-operation with the enemy – it could be said that the decision to separate in 1959 came about because of a collaborative relationship that was not seen as positive.

And in the area of children in state care it is difficult not to consider collaboration – given the number of times the word appears in the Final Expert Advisory Report.

But if we are going to talk about collaboration we have to recognise that there are specific matters that have to be addressed when we are looking at collaboration to effect better outcomes for Maori.

From the outset, there has to be an acknowledgment of the fact that Maori today are the result of colonisation and an unwillingness to recognise institutional and systemic discrimination and racism. And more than that there has to be an acceptance that that systemic racism and discrimination that dwells

in the structures that sit over us privilege all those from the dominant Pakeha culture.

It is not as if we haven't had plenty of reports and reviews that identify the need to address services to those most in need – and those most in need in this area are Maori. Pu Ao Te Atatu was significant in its recognition of systemic, institutional discrimination. It was significant in its unequivocal emphasis on the need for involvement of Maori.

But the recommendations of Pu Ao Te Atatu and the vision of a model that reflected Maori culture, values, belief and history did not materialise. Instead another restructure, funding decisions and a move to business units put paid to any suggestion of embracing an alternative.

Because if we are ever to move beyond just talking about collaboration with Maori we have to change the methods and the models. What do we have to lose? The existing ones don't result in positive outcomes for Maori. And that is where acknowledgment comes in. To merely state that there are inequalities is not good enough. The inequalities we bear as Maori are attributable to the failure of institutional systems, policies, practices and perspectives. Our inequality stems from social, political and historical circumstances. It is about our lived reality. And that is about our history as a people. It requires consideration of self determination alongside decolonisation. It emphasises the importance of culture, language, issues of identity and place. And it recognises that Maori often have to operate in both traditional and dominant cultures.

As tangata whenua we have a different starting point from any other group. We live with the consequences of colonisation every day. We need to go through a process of reclaiming historical and traditional aspects of our culture and to deprogramme those parts that have been imposed by colonisation.

But perhaps the most debilitating legacy of colonisation is the effect that it has had on our perceptions of ourselves.

If we are committed to achieving better outcomes for Maori we have to go beyond cultural competence training, capacity building and partnerships between Pakeha institutions and Maori community groups to sharing power, decision making and acknowledging systemic bias and racism. It is those institutions that privilege the dominant culture and increase the inequalities.

We can't draw a line and pretend that we start again unencumbered by the inconvenience of the past. We can't ignore history. We do not all suddenly become equal. And so we need to have models, methods and frameworks that reflect that reality. They must not be based on Western institutionalised measures. They have to reflect a Maori view of place, community, values and culture. They must reflect a collective rather than an individual view. And they must be controlled by Maori and be properly resourced and allow power sharing and decision making.

And if there is to be any collaboration, of the positive kind, then it seems that the power sharing and role in decision making is fundamental. And that can only occur meaningfully when there is trust between those wanting to collaborate. For NGOs and community organisations establishing, building and maintaining trust is achievable. From my perspective that begins with recognition and acknowledgment of the reality of Maori today. About integrating the past, the present and our vision of the future.

But collaboration with government agencies and bodies is more difficult. We can build positive and meaningful relationships with individuals within government but they are in the end representative of a structure that has shown little or no desire to recognise its own bias and racism. The necessary element of trust is often missing. Trust is something that is built up over time and the most cursory review of the past does not conjure up trust. We are subject to

the vagaries of an imposed system, dominant culture perceptions of operating, funding and resource cuts at will and a refusal to see that the systems and institutions are part of the problem.

It is now time for change. I have confidence that there are a number of community groups with a willingness to collaborate with Maori organisations in a manner that is respectful and dignified and recognises our particular place as the indigenous people of Aotearoa. Such collaboration will bring about better outcomes for Maori but only within the parameters of the limits we have as community groups.

Those with the resources to effect change will be more difficult to bring to the table with a commitment to collaboration. It has to start with the acknowledgment that the institutions determining the delivery of services have an inherent bias. It requires an acceptance that politics and expediency drive decision making. And it requires an acceptance that the existing systems, models and control have not worked. Our statistics in all areas bear testimony to that.

And fundamental to any collaborative reality, beyond rhetoric, has to be a willingness by government departments to hand over power and control in a manner that is supportive and optimistic of success.

Maori frameworks within government departments don't work. This is not about separating out but transforming the power and decision making base to those best placed to identify the priorities and to create kaupapa Maori frameworks based on community values and Maori perspectives.

Prue Kapua

National President

Maori Women's Welfare League Inc. / Te Ropu Wahine Maori Toko i te Ora