

1
John Rangihau Double

ADDRESS BY JOHN RANGIHAU
CHRISTCHURCH CONFERENCE 28-30 AUGUST 1987

" B E Y O N D C R I S I S "

KIA ORA KOUTOU KATOA - LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is of some amusement to me that this is the First New Zealand Conference on Social Work Education. For me it signifies many things, not the least of which being the reflection of the image that social work has of itself. During the last two decades New Zealand social work has tried to cover itself with a certain cloak of professionalism. To date I am not sure where that cloak has got to. I have vague recall that sometime back the high priests of social work commissioned the making of the garment but it is apparent to me, from my humble Maori perspective, that the "rangatira" for whom the cloak was made never emerged from the world of darkness to take his place in the sun, surrounded imminently by the aura of the sibling professions of law, medicine, architecture and those which took root from the "hard" sciences.

In 1974 for instance, a visiting professor of social work made the profound comment that "on the international scale he was not sure whether the pains social work was suffering from were growing pains, or the onset of paralysis as the precondition of rigor mortis".

Quite apart from the fact that the above quotation was not mine but rather from a celebrated professor from a respectful English University, my immediate reaction at the time was that these were very prophetic words which if examined from the Maori viewpoint had every chance of coming true but with a heavy predilection towards the rigor mortis theory. Whilst I do not want to sound too stiff in making my own analysis, I find the present state of the art condition of social work as not being that of a corpse which should be buried but rather as an embarrassing skeleton in the cupboard. Whether its resurrection or reincarnation is a problem for present day practitioners concerns me not in the slightest; I am merely here as a Maori, who has witnessed tragedies of many degrees brought down on hosts of other Maori people and Maori communities in order that society complete its homage to the defunct gods of social work.

Having said that, let me now reserve to myself the right to comment as if the god of social work were still alive, as no doubt many of you here are under the illusion that it is.

In the first instance, does it not appear odd to you all that in spite of the history of social work in New Zealand that this present assembly marks the "First New Zealand Conference on Social Work Education." If in fact, New Zealand social work, was as professional as it thought itself to be, why then is this the first conference of this nature. It is significant to me as a completely neutral observer, that education was categorised as one world authority on the subject as a "subversive activity". As a consequence of my observation in the last two years of the activities of certain social workers, I am beginning to wonder whether sabotage and social work are in fact synonymous. Innovation and change within the established professions appear to occur within the ambience of orthodox procedures and educative parameters but alas, I wonder if we can say the same for social work. In terms of the responsibilities assigned to social work educators, it would certainly appear that common ground, accountability and spheres of expertise are areas that have no claim to continuity or uniformity in the different university courses.

As opposed to other self respecting professions that can speak with one voice, it would seem to me that social work apes the religious cults of "speaking in tongues."

Communities, in my view, have some overriding criticisms of social work. You will allow me the privilege of communicating some of them to you, having completed as it were two major consultations with the New Zealand community, both Maori and Pakeha.

The gap between practice and accountability is possibly a condition that does not exist in any other area of professional work. If there are ethical standards to be imbued into the work performance then certainly I have found no evidence of such. Perhaps that is the reason that clients say to me: "we have no way of calling the practitioners to account, either to their profession or to the client community, so where do you seek redress?"

Of late, we have seen a new development, namely, that if "community management" variously epitomised by such Maori equivalents as "Kokiri management." By and large it appears to be accountable to the community both in planning, practice and performance. The best example of this exists possibly in West Auckland but by and large it has faltered in many other areas. The breakdown has occurred because, in essence, the dynamic of community work or community management devolves on a process of continual renewal. The dynamic evolves, proceeds and then breaks down whereupon renewal must then emerge. Maori communities in their continued existence must develop through a cultural leadership that can direct and redirect a specific focus. The most enduring and successful examples of these are in the main tribally predicated.

However, apart from the Maori development, other European variations are absent as a methodology in the New Zealand social work scene. It is absent because largely it is a situation which threatens practitioners. Being called to share power and account for decisions are, I am afraid, not the desire of either the pundits or the practitioners.

I want at this point to move quickly on to another issue that emerges directly from the previous consultations that I have already mentioned. What astounds the ordinary citizen is the extraordinary gulf between the actions of policy makers and the supposed principles verbally enshrined by the practitioners of social work. Let me give you a simple example.

"Whanau" as a concept has been accepted by the community and social workers as a method of work. Volumes have been written and it has been largely eulogised by exponents of all persuasions. However, what do the policy makers do in their new planning attempts? They draw up a new Bill, incorporated under the Children and Young Persons Act, whereby a nullification of whanau powers is written into law. So no longer does the whanau have the right to make decisions concerning the destiny of young people under its control. In any other profession, this variance between policy makers and the exponents does not exist but it would seem that social workers and the utterances of social workers do not count for much in the realms of power. That to me is a clear indication of the status of the work itself.

Of course, it is interesting to observe the other ways in which concepts largely emanating from the people become sabotaged by policy makers or those in power. The whanau, for instances in both rural and urban situations has no resources, in both the physical and material sense. Its obsolescence becomes possible when resources which should be allocated to it are cut off. The belief that the whanau can provide for all things then becomes part of the way in which it becomes responsible for its own demise.

Whilst this is all happening what is also very evident is that social workers who are supposed to espouse "whanau" as founding principle of work are vicariously heading off into all sorts of areas of work largely under the guise of "whanau" but mainly as a ploy to perpetuate the old method of casework. Therefore what commenced as a New Zealand modality of social work has been largely sabotaged by both the policy makers, the allocators of resources and the social workers themselves. A collusion between practitioners and educators does not, to me, seem a healthy environment for professional self esteem to spring from.

I want to develop one further point at this stage, and it is a point which says something about a certain deviousness which becomes employed to escape commitment to essential principles. For decades, an attempt has been ongoing to get both Pakeha and Maori to embrace biculturalism.

Biculturalism for me is that way in which Maori and Pakeha can honestly confront the attitudes of one another, and share the resources of both cultures. I have no doubt that culture, especially the one I know is a resource. But interestingly enough, when that resource is offered to the other party, it becomes of no consequence, because what is then offered as a methodology is not Biculturalism but Multiculturalism. So in effect what happens is that we drown in the morass of diffuse multicultural pursuits before we have even come to grips with each others cultures - so the loser is once again the Maori.

I offer to you all again the essential dictum that culture is a resource and I am referring to Maori culture. It is a vital resource that can only be found in this country. In spite of vigorous attempts to diminish it or bring about its demise, by governments with all the powers of state, and with all the status of power but, it survives today and activates

some of the most innovative ventures in community development. I am at present chairing the Government Review of the Kohanga Reo programme. It is of no surprise to me that what began four years ago as a Maori child care programme, now heads an international push towards a new Pacific thrust towards community development. Kohanga Reo is being adapted at this present time by three other Pacific states. It is a venture that has become energised by a cultural rhythm that arrived here with the original canoes and saw the light of day in Hawaiki. That is how far back we have had to reach to secure a new foothold in this urban world. If things from the ancient, old world of the Maori can provide solutions for the computerised world of the electronic age and its social problems, would one not surmise that social work tap into some of that momentum? I am saying to you that for years, we have talked about and analysed the MAORI PROBLEM. In the infinite sense, the MAORI has become the most analysed human being in the Pacific. However, that of course is the downfall of our times. We seem to be able to review, report on, analyse, measure and inspect but that is where it all ends. When we give you the solutions, those solutions are either thrown out, down graded or killed off through being under-resourced. In recent times we have witnessed a modern trend whereby social workers have become preoccupied, almost fixated, with a drive towards professionalism. Oddly enough this professionalism has never arrived and has left social work looking more like a "cargo cult" or a para-professional backwater. In spite of the increase in the numbers of social workers numerically, I cannot personally see one solid piece of social progress that we can attribute to it. We have tried to import foreign models of intervention into what is, at base, a Pacific centre of activity. Models from the USA and Britain are littered on the learning pathways of New Zealand social work, health systems and numerous other development activities.

Since the Maori social and economic advancement of 1945, we have been formally and informally trying to say to Pakeha New Zealanders that Maori social problems need Maori solutions. Now, KOHANGA REO is one such solution, but it can and must be only the first of many. If we make some mistakes along the way, you will simply have to be patient, because we have given you nearly 150 years with no accruing benefits to the Maori. What began as a sacred Treaty has now been long dishonoured and I state that fact from the vantage point of a Maori whose ancestors had grave reservations about signing and in fact they refrained from signing and resisted Pakeha dominance.

But I repeat again to you all, the need to hear the Maori exhortation to return to those solutions that abide in the time tested meridians of the old world. Therein, lies our salvation, but that the only duty of today's administrators is that it should be acknowledged AND RESOURCED.

Let me return to this old chestnut of "professionalism". The Maori would equate "professionalism" with the word "expert". In the Maori mind, his experts were elevated into an echelon of essential significance. If you wanted knowledge from the world of psychology, meditation, medicine, astrology, religion, warfare, social learning - all these exist to the highest degree in the Maori firmament. You would probably be astounded to hear this - but every psychological concept that has been articulated by the Pakeha, in fact has a Maori equivalent. What we are saying to you now, is that with KOHANGA REO we have given you a sample of how social tools can be transmogrified to take on many tasks. But what we cannot allow you to do is to collude with other agents to plan their downfall through poor resourcing, poor understanding or a poverty of planning.

There has been a long cry from Maori people active in social programmes that in his own right, and within his own cultural purview, the Maori is as professional or more professional than his counterpart from the Pakeha world. But we all know what value is placed on this Maori professionalism. It is usually the last appendage that gets attached to the social machine with twine of doubtful strength. It is usually an expertise that is downgraded and employed at the lowest level of recompense if recompensed at all.

Let me recall to you a story which occurred in Auckland. A young Pakeha lad in his early teens appeared in the Young Persons Court. He had been analysed and reported on by psychiatrists and psychologists of every persuasion. Before sentencing him to intense custodial training the Judge agreed to allow him to remain in the care of an old lady who had befriended him and appeared to be giving him the care and love he had missed out on. Within a year that young boy was still in her care and amazingly had never reoffended. That boy never ended up in an institution and is still at large today, married and with children. He is still as a Pakeha, grateful to that little old lady who saw him through difficult times. That old lady was a Maori!

In reaching back to those time honoured ways of nurturing that old Maori lady achieved in one fell swoop what a band of modern psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers could not achieve. So I ask you - what is the price of your professionalism? As I travel around New Zealand, I am seeing Maori projects as professional as any Pakeha model but I am afraid that the price of that Maori professionalism will be at the cost of intense struggle.

The Maori drive towards self-determination and recognition of Maori professionalism is going to be fought in the hardest of battle fields. I do hope that the contest does not dig two graves. But I do offer this encouragement, that the more Pakeha society keeps seeing Maori initiatives as a threat, the more it will delay its own destiny. The last thing that Maori people want is a dependency on a welfare system. It will be financially more cheaper for this country to divert funds into community development initiatives than to bury itself in the negative funding that has accrued unto itself the financing of career structures and material assets that bring back no return to the community at large.

It may not be too long though before it is realised by professional groups that intervention strategies vis-a-vis social problems may not be limited solely to social strategies but will need to depend on an amalgam of cultural and economic remedies. Maori people have long held the view that "people development" is synonymous with "economic development". If you align that viewpoint with people being inseparable from their culture, you then have a recipe that takes us out of "welfare" and into "development" and the new negotiated order of "empowered communities."

It may well be that the new economic chieftains who can resource the right cultural innovations will be the only ones that will survive, to build a new social order in this country. Social work in the orthodox sense is a piece of fossilised antiquity, and unless its sprotagonists throw out its remains, that ghost will never take you into the 21st century.

Kia ora