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Small stories, small acts in sites of struggle: the establishment of Māori wards in Taranaki

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ABSTRACT

Between 2001 and 2021, the eight iwi of Taranaki entered into Deeds of Settlement with the Crown. These settlements, which saw the Crown acknowledge and apologise for its historical breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, also served to extinguish the rights of Taranaki Māori to seek further redress from the Crown. The Treaty Settlement process over, Taranaki Māori and the many non-Māori that have settled in the rohe (tribal territory) are left to themselves to deal with any lingering tensions, ongoing enmity and forms of structural injustice stemming from the settler-colonial process. This paper is not about the formal processes of colonisation or Crown-initiated attempts to atone for the past through the Treaty Settlement process. Rather, this paper concerns the painstaking work of change undertaken on the ground by local people, Māori and non-Māori alike. It concerns the 'small stories' of colonisation, the myriad endeavours of local people working for change in local contexts. In particular, the article concerns the fight for Māori wards on Councils in New Plymouth and South Taranaki, and the extraordinary work done by ordinary people in attempting to forge some kind of future of togetherness in a region riven by the violence of colonisation.

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Introduction

On 25 April 1859, Wiremu Kingi Te Rangitāke (Te Ātiawa, Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Kura) paramount rangatira of Te Ātiawa wrote to then Governor of New Zealand, Thomas Gore Browne, expressing his opposition to the Crown's proposed purchase of land at Waitara. The land in question had been offered for sale by a junior Te Ātiawa rangatira, Te Teira, against the wishes of many of his people, including Te Rangitāke and Te Teira's own father, Te Raru (see: Taranaki Report 1996, p. 67). Te Rangitāke told Browne that he could not 'agree to his bedroom being sold ... for this bed belongs to the whole of us' (Wiremu Kingi to the Governor, 25 April 1859 in Hadfield 1861: 51). Further, Te Rangitāke warned of the disruptive impact of Browne's insistence on completing the purchase not just for Māori but for Pākehā settlers as well. 'You should remember that

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the Maories and the Pakehas are living quietly on their pieces of land, and therefore do not disturb them' (ibid).

Here, Te Rangitāke highlights an important, if often overlooked, aspect of settler-colonialism in Aotearoa. Quite aside from the formal processes of colonisation, the wars of conquest, confiscation, the forced individualisation of communal land title, forced assimilation, ecological devastation and the myriad other weapons deployed by the settler-State against Māori, Pākehā settlers came to live in Aotearoa alongside and among Māori, together and apart, close by and faraway.

This article is not about the formal processes of colonisation, nor is it about formal State-initiated attempts to atone for the scars of history embodied in the Treaty Settlement process, although it touches briefly on both. Rather, it is about the slow and painstaking work of change, of peoples coming together, overcoming resentments and tensions, changing minds and forging alliances. It concerns the importance and impact of some of the 'small stories' (see Padmore 2009; Buchanan 2012; Bell 2017) of colonisation, those recounting the endeavours of local people working for change in local contexts. In particular, the article concerns the fight for Māori wards on Councils in New Plymouth and South Taranaki, and the extraordinary work done by ordinary people in attempting to forge some kind of future of togetherness in a region riven by the violence of colonisation. The paper starts with a brief historical overview of the settler-colonial process in Taranaki and the Treaty Settlement process that followed, and then details the struggle for Māori wards on New Plymouth District Council and South Taranaki District Council, the personalities involved, and the slow, contested push towards meaningful change.

'Condign Punishment': the never-ending war in Taranaki

According to the authors of Waitangi Tribunal's Taranaki Report, contest over land in the region has continued, with scant amelioration, since the arrival of the first settlers in 1841 (Taranaki Report 1996, p. 1). The tension over the aforementioned land at Waitara was just one among many potential flashpoints but ultimately the one that tipped the region over into what the Tribunal has called 'neverending war' (see also Keenan 2021). In the end, Te Rangitāke's impassioned pleas to hold on to the land of his ancestors fell on deaf ears and Governor Browne did what colonising authorities do. On March 4, Browne arrived with a force of 400 bluejackets and marines to occupy what was tellingly referred to as Kingi's (Te Rangitāke's) pā. Tensions continued to grow until March 17 when the invading force ordered Te Rangitāke and his supporters to surrender at Te Kohia Pā: when they refused the invaders opened fire and the crucible of history was lit (Taranaki Report 1996, p. 77; Cowan 1955, p. 164). In the decades that followed, Taranaki Māori were subjected to some of the worst excesses of colonial violence and injustice visited upon an Indigenous population anywhere in Aotearoa New Zealand (see: Taranaki Report 1996).

161 years later, on 27 February 2021, Te Iwi o Ngāti Maruwharanui (Ngāti Maru) and the Crown signed a Deed of Settlement, formally extinguishing the right of Ngāti Maru to seek redress for historical grievances stemming from the Acts and Omissions of the Crown. The Ngāti Maru Settlement, which included financial redress of NZ\$30 million, is the last of eight concluded between the Crown and the iwi of Taranaki that

also include Deeds signed by Ngāti Ruanui in March 2001 for \$41 million, Ngāti Tama in December 2001 for \$14.5 million, Ngaa Rauru Kītahi in November 2003 for \$31 million, Ngāti Mutunga in July 2005 for \$14.9 million, Ngāruahine and Te Ātiawa in August 2014 for \$67.5 million and \$87 million respectively, and Taranaki Iwi in September 2015 for \$70 million.

These settlements with the iwi of Taranaki are not the first time that the Crown has admitted liability and provided compensation for its various Acts and Omission that have breached Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In 1928, the Crown appointed Sim Commission into the confiscation of Māori land, found that the confiscations were excessive and unjust and recommended compensation. For the 1,275,000 acres unjustly confiscated from Taranaki iwi, the Crown offered a £5000 annuity and an additional £300 in compensation for the ‘destruction and loss’ of certain ‘goods and chattels owned by the Maori inhabitants of Parihaka’ (see Taranaki Claims Settlement Act 1944; see also Wynyard 2019).

As noted above however, Taranaki bore witness to some of the worst excesses of Crown violence and injustice, including the largest confiscation or raupatu effected by the Crown of some 1.275 million acres of land and the brutal invasion of the pacifist settlement at Parihaka. In its recent, multiple settlements with the Iwi of Taranaki, the Crown has gone much further than before and has acknowledged the impact of confiscation in displacing Taranaki Māori and robbing them of access to waahi tapu and other sites of ancestral significance, as well as traditional sources of food and other resources. Further, the Crown has acknowledged that it failed to consult the Iwi of Taranaki about the establishment of the Native Land Court, which forcibly individualised title to communal land and paved the way for excessive Crown and private purchasing leaving many Taranaki Māori functionally landless and contributing to the breakdown of traditional tribal structures (see: Ngāti Maru DoS 2021, pp. 62–64; Ngāti Ruanui DoS 2001, pp. 43–44; Ngāti Tama DoS 2001, pp. 34–35; Ngaa Rauru Kītahi DoS 2003, pp. 53–55; Ngāti Mutunga DoS 2005, pp. 66–67; Ngāruahine DoS’ 51–52; Te Ātiawa DoS 2014, pp. 29–31; Taranaki Iwi DoS 2015, pp. 60–63).

In addition to the loss of vast swathes of Taranaki land, the Crown has also acknowledged that its troops committed a number of rapes during the invasion of Parihaka (see: Te Kawenata Ō Rongo 2017), that unarmed children were killed by Crown forces at Handley’s woolshed (see: Ngaa Rauru Kītahi DoS 2003, p. 55), that the Crown adopted ‘scorched earth’ tactics during its invasion of South Taranaki (ibid; see also: Ngāruahine DoS 2014, p. 51), that it shelled and other wise devastated important kāinga sites throughout the region (see: Ngāruahine DoS 2014, p. 51; Taranaki Iwi DoS 2015, p. 60), that it ‘indefinitely’ detained hundreds of Taranaki Māori without trial (see: Te Ātiawa DoS 2014, p. 30), that Crown troops ‘took the heads’ of followers of the Ngāruahine leader Titokowaru, including that of ‘at least one’ other Ngāruahine rangatira (see: Ngāruahine DoS 2014, p. 52), and that successive policies have led to widespread ecological devastation including freshwater and marine pollution and the displacement of Indigenous flora and fauna (ibid; see also: Te Ātiawa DoS 2014, p. 31).

For these and other Acts and Omission the Crown has provided a total redress package of some \$355.9 million, a significant sum no doubt, but a mere trifle when considered against the value of the losses suffered by the Iwi of Taranaki or indeed the total value of Crown expenditure during the period of these settlements, estimated at \$1322

Billion since the start of the Treaty Settlement process (see: Fryers 2018). One additional settlement remains to be concluded, that for the ancestral maunga of Ngā Iwi o Taranaki, Taranaki Maunga, Pouākai and the Kaitaki Ranges. The Crown has indicated that any future settlement will not include any financial or commercial redress (see: Ngā Iwi O Taranaki and the Crown 2017).

It is important to note that, as with the Ngāti Maru settlement mentioned above, these Treaty Settlements formally extinguish the rights of Taranaki Māori to seek additional redress for the Crown's historical breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi. The Treaty Settlement process over, for now at least, Taranaki Māori and the many Pākehā that have settled in the rohe are left to themselves to deal with any lingering tensions, ongoing enmity and forms of structural injustice that have not, and probably cannot, be mitigated with Crown money and 'kind words'. It is to that slow and painstaking work of change that we now turn, via a focus on the contests over the establishment (or otherwise) of Māori wards for local authority elections. When set against the backdrop of staggering injustice detailed above, the fight for Māori participation in and representation on local and regional councils might seem at once both quaint and preposterously long-overdue. More, local and regional authorities are tasked with making decisions that impact the everyday lives of Māori and the lands, waters and other taonga that have long sustained them. To many people, the authors included, the idea that Māori be adequately represented on these authorities is obvious to the point of incontestable. Yet, the push for Māori wards and constituencies has been vociferously opposed and contested and remains far from complete even today (see Hayward 2011, 2002; Bargh 2016a, 2016b, 2020; Bell 2018).

The origins of the Māori wards

Environment Bay of Plenty's (EBoP) local body election in 1995 first shone light on the lack of Māori representation in local government: despite the fact that 28% of the Bay of Plenty's population identified as Māori (a significant number of whom were property owners and ratepayers), no Māori were elected to council (Hayward 2011, p. 192). For Maureen Waaka, a representative of Te Arawa on EBoP's iwi committee, this provided the impetus for the suggestion that the council consider establishing Māori constituencies.

A working party of Māori and non-Māori suggested the establishment of three Māori constituencies as means of guaranteeing representation (Hayward 2002, p. 26). That suggestion was put to the public: of the 1012 written submissions received, 760 approved and 252 opposed the initiative. An independent commissioner was then appointed to conduct hearings and deliver a report on the proposal (Human Rights Commission 2010, p. 11). Judge Trapski recommended that the Bay of Plenty Regional Council proceed with the Māori constituencies (Trapski 1998, pp. 8–9): EBoP accepted that recommendation, and drafted the Bay of Plenty Regional Council (Maori Constituency Empowering) Bill, which was introduced into the House in September 2000, and enacted in October 2001.

The ability to establish Māori wards for territorial authorities and regional councils was subsequently extended to all councils through the Local Electoral Amendment Act 2002. However, there was a hook in the legislation: section 19Z stated that if a council resolved to establish a Māori ward, the public must be notified of their right to challenge

the decision through a poll. A petition signed by 5% of enrolled electors would generate a poll, and for the wards to be established over 50% of those voters had to support the proposal (Hayward 2011, p. 193). It is worth noting that until it was revoked by amending legislation in 2021, the 5% threshold needed to launch a binding referendum (and potentially overturn the council's decision) applied only to the establishment of Māori wards (Department of Internal Affairs 2021). No such proviso existed apropos the establishment of general wards.

The politics of the majority: attempts to repeal and amend the Māori ward provisions

The discrimination embedded in section 19Z became central to the argument for amending the legislation (Utiger 2015; Davidson 2017b; Mahuta 2021). There was an early attempt to do so in 2017, when Green Party MP Marama Davidson unsuccessfully introduced legislation proposing that the poll provision be removed, and that the process for the establishment of Māori wards be the same as for general wards. Davidson stated that her Bill was inspired by New Plymouth Mayor Andrew Judd's experiences of attempting to establish a Māori ward, which had resulted in a petition to parliament asking for the removal of the poll provision (Davidson 2017a).

In 2021 Local Government Minister Nanaia Mahuta introduced the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill. Akin to Davidson's, Mahuta's Bill sought to remove the poll provision for Māori wards, providing local authorities with the ability to establish wards for the 2022 local authority elections without conducting polls (Mahuta 2021).

The Bill, which was introduced under parliamentary urgency, was hotly debated in the House. Labour's Tāmami Coffey captured the sentiments of supporters by emphasising the 'racist' essence of the poll provisions (Coffey 2021), while the opposition National Party – who opposed the use of urgency – filibustered by debating all ten clauses (Wade 2021). The opposition's determination notwithstanding, the Bill gained royal assent on the 1st of March 2021 – just one month after it was introduced to the House.

The Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act 2021 provides for a two-step process to be implemented over a three year period. The first stage removed the poll provision and enabled councils to establish Māori wards in time for the 2022 local elections by extending the deadline for decisions to be made regarding Māori wards to the 21st of May 2021. The second stage established a new process for local authorities to consider the establishment of Māori wards and constituencies (Mahuta 2021).

New Plymouth District Council

The new legislation has altered the statutory bases of the Māori wards, but it is important to be clear about the contested nature of the regime it replaced. In this section we provide two vignettes of the sorts of tensions it gave rise to, the first in New Plymouth and the second in south Taranaki.

In 2013 Pākehā optometrist Andrew Judd became the mayor of the New Plymouth District Council (NPDC).¹ Early in his tenure, TVNZ asked Judd to take part in a

story about protests by Pākehā leaseholders over council-owned land in Waitara, which had been offered to Te Ātiawa as part of their treaty settlement. Despite the council's CEO warning him not to get involved with 'a treaty settlement', Judd spoke with distraught leaseholders, who were concerned that Te Ātiawa would 'kick them off' the property they leased if the iwi decided to acquire the land. Judd took the side of leaseholders, declaring, 'I'm the mayor. I'm in a position where I can change that. Enough of this handout' (Husband 2018). However, Judd found his subsequent reading on the history behind the proposed settlement – which detailed the Crown's confiscation of Te Ātiawa's entire rohe of some 185,000 acres (Graham 1998) – highly confronting. His initial reaction was to disassociate himself from that history, but knowledge of what had happened to Te Ātiawa 'chipped away' at him (Husband 2018; Judd 2018).

At the same time, Judd was working through the matter of Māori representation on and engagement with the Council. He suggested setting up a komiti Māori. However, the response from Māori was tepid, with kaumātua and other leaders responding:

Look, with all due respect, we understand komiti Māori but, actually, we don't want it because we're moving from grievance to participation mode. It's just compliance, really. We feel it's not real. It has the same status as your youth committee. Things aren't written. So, with all due respect – obviously you can put it together and you'll find some people that will be on it – but, no thanks'. (Husband 2018)

Instead, kaumātua raised the option of Māori wards, even though they were 'aware it would never fly in our province' (Judd 2016). Judd's own position on Māori representation on council was shifting:

I was doing more research and reading. And I became especially interested in Parihaka. So I read Dick Scott's book *Ask That Mountain*. And I was moved to tears. Why don't we talk about our history? This is bizarre! No wonder I've been like I was. Parihaka has been an inconvenient truth. Not only do we not talk about what was done, but how it was done. Yet we stand on a world stage like we're the be-all and end-all of race relations. No, we're not. We're no different. (Husband 2018)

In 2014 Judd proposed the establishment of a Māori ward (Judd 2016). Not all local Māori supported Judd's plan. Te Ātiawa kaumātua Harry Nicholas considered that the council had not thoroughly consulted iwi and hapū and requested them not to establish the wards until such consultation had been completed. Howie Tamati, on the other hand, said kaumātua and iwi chairs had discussed the proposal. Māori were under some pressure to decide whether they wanted wards because of the short time frame needed to establish them in time for the 2016 election (Utiger 2014a). In the event, the motion was passed by seven votes to six, and in 2014 New Plymouth became the first district council to vote for the establishment of Māori wards (Utiger 2014a).

This was not the first time the NPDC had broached the idea of bolstering Māori representation through wards. The first proposal came in 2011 (Hayward 2011, p. 193). However, that initiative was effectively quashed by Grey Power, whose public position was that its 2200 local members (which nearly equalled the 5% of eligible electors needed to push a referendum) opposed the wards, and who threatened to organise a petition to take any council decision in favour of Māori wards to a poll. In any case, the council voted against the proposal and Grey Power's poll was not required (Utiger and Ong 2014).

Representatives of local iwi had much to say during the 2011 debate. Peter Moeahu stepped down from the council's komiti Māori, stating that the council's decision not to support Māori wards was a great disappointment to the majority of Te Ātiawa (Moeahu Stands Down 2011). He also led a walkout of Māori from the council, and Te Ātiawa suspended its involvement with komiti Māori for three months (Utiger 2014b). Wikitoria Keenan, who took Moeahu's place on the komiti, was more forthright in her opinion: 'in a way [Te Ātiawa Iwi Authority] are not surprised [the council] did not support the wards because New Plymouth is quite a redneck town. To a lot of people Māori are invisible and they don't want to give Māori respect for anything' (Rilkoff 2011). Keenan's remarks caused some controversy, yet she stood by them, adding that 'if [Māori are] good enough to sing and dance, fly the flag and provide a bit of colour to what they have up at council then we should have a proper say on what happens as well.' Keenan's views were supported by other Māori leaders. However, Howie Tamati kept his distance citing that 'her comments were made at a time when emotions were running high' and that the council's decision 'was not the end of the day' (Moir 2011).

In 2014 Grey Power responded much as they had in 2011, by initiating a petition to force a poll. However, the organisation's then president, Hugh Johnson, stepped down from his position to pursue the poll as an individual. The interim Grey Power president noted that '[Grey Power New Plymouth] did not want to risk any controversy being associated with the wider Grey Power association throughout New Zealand' (Rilkoff 2014), which perhaps signalled a slight shift in attitude.

Nonetheless, Johnson had nearly gathered enough signatures to force the poll well before the cut-off date. His argument was that:

we are one county, and we are one lot of people, not divided. The Maori (sic) seats in parliament for one thing separates the parliament and we don't need to spread it out into the local government area. [...] I am a New Zealander, I am not a Maori (sic), I have no Maori (sic) blood in me. I am sick of being called a New Zealand European, I'm not. I'm a non-Maori (sic) New Zealander and I believe we are one country and I believe in democracy. I believe that the changes to go on in local government of this sort of nature that people should have the say, hence the referendum. (Martin 2015)

Johnson received well over the 5% of eligible electors' signatures needed to force the poll. Registered electors received their voting papers in early 2015 and had just over two weeks to send them back (Ewing 2015). With the looming poll on the horizon, local Māori remained steadfast in their support of Māori wards. Grant Knuckey asserted, 'we're not going to go away. We're sick of this. We've had 150 years of living in this country where our views are not taken into account.' He also added that the Māori ward debate had become a hot topic amongst tangata whenua in New Plymouth and that he had never seen so many Māori concerned about how the community regarded them (Coster 2015).

In the event, 45% of eligible voters took part in the referendum and a resounding 83% of those voters opposed the establishment of a Māori ward (New Plymouth District Council n.d.). Some of the backlash was far less diplomatic than a ballot vote. Andrew Judd was labelled a 'separatist,' a supporter of 'apartheid' and verbally abused and spat on in the street (Husband 2018; Coster 2020). (New Plymouth was no outlier either;

prominent Māori wards advocate Toni Boynton of Whakātane described ‘the type of racism that comes across during a Māori ward campaign [as being as if] you have an eight or six-month campaign where racism is legalised’ (Brett Kelly 2021).

Judd felt deeply let down by the result, yet stated, ‘although this option was defeated, I am not defeated.’ The fight for Māori wards appeared to light something of a fire in Judd. He stated that he was in consultation with the United Nations over the ‘flawed piece of legislation’ which enabled the wards to be overturned through the poll mechanism, and that he was drawing up a complaint against the New Zealand Government about the issue, not in his role as mayor but as an individual. Judd asked, ‘why is it you have a piece of legislation that only does a binding referendum for a ward that is Maori (sic)? How did this get under the radar of everybody? I find it abhorrent’ (Utiger 2015).

While the quest for Māori wards was dampened for the time being, Judd kept the flame alive. He led a peace walk from the mayor’s office to Parihaka in 2016 and requested MP Te Ururoa Flavell to forward a petition to Parliament to overturn the 5% poll provision (Keith 2016). By the end of 2020 Judd, who frequently refers to himself as a ‘recovering racist’, had given over 350 speeches on Māori representation around the country and debated Don Brash on live television. His status as a Pākehā advocating for Māori representation had not gone unnoticed. Glen Bennett, the current MP for New Plymouth, said that ‘It gladdens me, and it saddens me, that it takes someone like Andrew Judd to be the face and voice to challenge the legislation’ acknowledging that Judd being a male Pākehā mayor had significantly impacted what transpired (Coster 2020).

Despite the failure to establish Māori wards in 2014, the desire to secure Māori representation did not disappear. In 2020, another review of representation was on the table, and new Councillor Sam Bennett wasted no time in proposing the establishment of Māori wards, without public consultation. This time the motion was passed 12-2.² Of the six councillors who were on the Council in 2014, four had not changed their stances, one was absent and one changed his vote from a no to a yes (Tucker 2020). Mayor Neil Holdom abstained, citing that while he supported Māori wards, he did not support the bypassing of the public consultation process (Persico 2020). The councillor who changed his mind, Colin Johnston, explained his decision:

There’s change in the wind isn’t there? And it used to be in our face, but now it’s behind us. And you know that journey that we are on? We are probably only halfway there, in the passing lane. So I fully support the recommendation, there’s no doubt about that. You know, during discussions over the Maori (sic) ward, I had to duck a couple of times, but [...] six years ago when I agreed with not having a Maori (sic) ward, I had to duck too. So you know, the future is bright. I think we are on the right track here. Let’s get on with it. It is going to be fantastic. (Johnston 2021)

One example of Johnston’s change in the wind is that Grey Power did not organise a petition to force a referendum in 2020, although Councillor Murray Chong, always an outspoken critic of Māori wards, was quick to step into this space and announced his plans to organise one. Significantly, too, Hobson’s Pledge, a national lobby group established in 2016 to eliminate ‘race-based privilege’ for Māori under the banner ‘we are now one people,’ emerged to support Chong. The group also funded an anti-Māori ward petition in the *North Taranaki Midweek* paper (Lander 2021).

2020 also saw the emergence of new voices supporting Māori wards, including newcomer councillor, Dinnie Moeahu. He said of the Council's decision:

I do feel that there's been a fundamental shift within our community since six years ago and I know where that seismic shift has come from. It hasn't come from Māoridom [...], we have been in this space for generations. This seismic shift has come from our Pākehā brothers and sisters who have educated themselves, or willing to educate themselves to find an understanding and know that this is a good thing for our community. (Moeahu 2020)

Six months later, Moeahu noted that the petition to force a poll had not received the immediate support the 2014 petition did. He also observed that:

Now what you are seeing is even members of Grey Power are coming to council, better understanding and advocating. What you are getting is other organisations, professionals, getting educated around the benefits of a Māori ward and advocating. And that's what we have seen, that ocean of change. (Moeahu 2021)

Puna Wano-Bryant of Rongomou Community Action, a group founded in 2020 to campaign for Māori representation on Taranaki councils, also noted how community feeling had changed since the 2014 representation review: 'people are more informed, more confident to support this, they understand that change adds value to local government and democracy. I think a lot of myths have been busted' (Groenestein 2021). Another member, Karen Venables, voiced similar thoughts, noting that the community's attitude towards Māori wards had shifted since 2014 and that she felt optimistic that the petition would not receive the number of signatures needed (Shaskey 2020).

Venables was right; the New Plymouth District Council did not receive a petition before the 22nd of February cut-off, and Māori wards were established for the 2022 elections (Groenestein 2021).

South Taranaki District Council

In the south of the rohe, too, Māori representation was an issue, and in October 2021 South Taranaki District Council (STDC)³ also successfully established Māori wards. STDC were the first council in Taranaki to vote unanimously to establish Māori wards. This decision, and the unanimity, also had a history.

Having rejected Māori wards for the 2013 and 2016 local government elections (Deena 2014), in 2018 council again discussed increasing Māori representation through the ward system and decided not to proceed. Bonita Bigham reflected on this decision at STDC's 2020 Māori wards resolution meeting. Bigham is a central figure in STDC's work to establish wards, as she served nine years on the council and is currently the chair of Te Maruata, a sub-committee of the National Council of Local Government New Zealand, which aims to increase Māori representation and enhance Māori participation in local government (Local Government New Zealand n.d.). Regarding the 2018 resolution, Bigham noted that local iwi were perturbed by what had occurred in New Plymouth in 2014 and did not want to put their community through a similar experience (South Taranaki District Council 2020, p. 70).⁴ Bigham also harked back to an earlier representation discussion in 2011, stating that the council had decided against wards as they believed there was disagreement amongst iwi over the issue (South Taranaki District Council 2020, p. 70). A newspaper article of the time indicates that iwi were unsure

which was the best representation option to pursue. For instance, Darren Ratana suggested increasing the influence of the iwi liaison committee, whereas Ngapari Nui believed developing a better partnership with the council rather than ‘adding another layer’ was the best way to move forward (Harper 2011). Despite the idea of wards not going ahead, Taranaki iwi trustee Peter Moeahu commended the South Taranaki council’s approach and that the council had sent ‘very positive message to Maori’ through their careful consideration of the issue (Smith 2011).

By 2020 the political atmosphere had radically transformed and iwi were ready to move ahead with the establishment of Māori wards. The impetus for their establishment came from South Taranaki iwi, who requested the council undertake a representation review three years early (Groenestein 2020a) in the hope of establishing wards for the 2022 election. The Council agreed. Allie Hemara-Wahanui, a local figure and supporter of Māori wards, stated that she was pleased with the decision to bring forward the review and that it served as an excellent opportunity for iwi, the council and the wider community to come together and discuss representation on council. She also highlighted that the issue of representation was ‘such a topical kaupapa regionally and with what is happening nationally as well’ (Groenestein 2020a).

Comments from within and beyond the region on the issue reveal the various motivations behind the establishment of Māori wards. For instance, Ngapari Nui, who had expressed his desire for a better partnership between iwi and council ten years prior, believed both that the wards were the only way to increase Māori representation, and that iwi were more prepared for them than had been the case ten years earlier. Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, from Pātea and co-leader of the Te Pāti Māori, asserted that despite the historic displacement of tangata whenua, and the pain this had caused, iwi had returned to the region after their settlement. Iwi ‘did not return hate with hate’ and were waiting on those ‘in charge’ to do the right thing (South Taranaki District Council 2020, p. 74). The only person to speak against the resolution was Carroll Walsh, an elderly resident of Taranaki, who deployed the common argument that he did not believe in the formation of a ‘race-based ward’ because all New Zealanders should have equal rights. He also stated that elderly people were financially struggling due to low returns on declining interest rates and that Māori wards were another cost to ratepayers (South Taranaki District Council 2020, p. 74).

Conversely, Mayor Nixon, Deputy Mayor Northcott and Councillors Rangiwhahia, Roach, Rook and Langton all referred to the strength and desire of iwi to establish a ward in their remarks in support of the resolution, Northcott adding that ‘I’m a Pātea boy, these are my whānau. These are my friends, we don’t see us and them, we just see people’ (Groenestein 2020b). Councillor Roach stated that the New Zealanders who had acknowledged history were all going on the same journey. Several other councillors also thanked those from the public, iwi and other institutions for coming to speak, saying that the submissions they gave had enhanced their knowledge on the issue and strengthened their support of the resolution (South Taranaki District Council 2020, p. 75).

Despite the Council’s unanimous vote, Hobson’s Pledge attempted to initiate a referendum to overturn the decision, delivering flyers across the district (Persico 2021). Unlike the situation further north in New Plymouth, however, reports in local media suggest that Hobson’s Pledge appeared to provide virtually the *only* opposition to the

Council's position. True, the Council did receive a petition demanding a poll, but it was ruled invalid due to errors and duplicated signatures (Groenestein 2021), and STDC established their wards in time for the 2022 election. Bonita Bigham, reflecting on the failed petition, noted that 'society has definitely moved on, local government has moved on. The decisions that these councils have made are local decisions made by local people who understand their local communities'. Her parting remark is likely a jibe at Hobson's Pledge, the out-of-towners who swooped in and attempted to overturn South Taranaki's Māori wards decision (Groenestein 2021).

Conclusion: a 'seismic shift' across Aotearoa New Zealand?

Some 35 of Aotearoa New Zealand's 78 local authorities will have Māori wards or constituencies for the 2022 local elections, a remarkable change considering that only three councils had managed to establish wards before the enactment of the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill in 2021. This rapid instantiation of Māori wards was, at one level, the result of a small change in legislation, one that came about at least in part because of a shift in the political zeitgeist; a broader social and cultural current whereby there is more willingness amongst (some) Pākehā to accept that Māori representation is appropriate and right, and that Māori should also shape what Aotearoa New Zealand is and is going to be.

We would like to think this trend is not exclusive to either Taranaki or to the issue of Māori wards, but that it is part of a broader story of reckoning with the ongoing effects of colonisation and attempting to redress historical (and contemporary) wrongs in order to move to a more hopeful future. Other strands in this tale include the 2015 Ōtorohanga College petition that led to the establishment of He Rā Maumahara (a national day of remembrance of the New Zealand Wars); the 2020 decision by the news media website *Stuff* to introduce the Tiriti principles of partnership, participation and protection into the company charter (and the historic front page apology to Māori for *Stuff's* depictions of Māori over the company's 163-year history); and the implementation of an Aotearoa New Zealand Histories curriculum (which the taura of Ōtorohanga College had also called for).

We are not so naïve as to understate the scale and scope of the challenges that have and continue to flow from the historical trauma that began with, in the case of Taranaki, the Crown's actions at Waitara. (Neither are we blind to the facts that only 49 of the 188 submissions to the Māori Affairs Committee supported the Ōtorohanga College petition, or that the views of 'An Individual' that 'the situation came about when Waikato Maori (sic) stated their intention to go up to Auckland and slaughter all the Europeans there' are probably shared by others.⁵)

That said, we feel it is important to acknowledge Dinnie Moeahu's assessment that what occurred in NPDC represented a 'seismic shift'. Additionally, it matters that the shift occurred because (and sometimes in spite) of the efforts of a great many people who, often over long times frames, committed to improving political representation for Māori at local authority level. In this respect the two vignettes presented here sit at the intersection of the 'big' stories of colonisation in Taranaki and the 'small' ones. The former are forged in government ministers' offices, public bureaucracies and

court rooms. But the latter – the ones that embody the doing of and active resistance to colonisation; the ones which determine the zeitgeist – are just as consequential.

In Taranaki's ward debates, the small stories are the ones woven by kaumātua; by Māori and Pākehā grassroots organisations; by dedicated individuals such as the Moeahu whānau, Puna Wano-Bryant, Howie Tamati, Andrew Judd, Karen Venables and Sam Bennett. And they are, too, the ones told by Murray Chong and the members of Grey Power and Hobson's Pledge.

Those small stories are a form of voice, and they speak to matters whose roots can be traced back to the letter written on April 25 1859 by Wiremu Kingi Te Rangitāke, in which the great paramount rangatira of Te Ātiawa expressed his opposition to the Crown's proposed purchase of land at Waitara. The small stories recounted here are also about expressions of opposition, principally to the marginalisation of Māori within the formal institutions of local democracy. Cumulatively, the actions of which they speak are a key reason those institutions are now in the throes of change. Not the only reasons, granted, but evidence nonetheless that small acts, by small local actors, can change things.

Notes

1. Some 17.8% of New Plymouth District residents identify as Māori (residents can identify with more than one ethnic group) (Statistics New Zealand 2018).
2. There had been a significant change in councillors since the 2014 Māori wards resolution. Nine new councillors and six councillors from the 2014 resolution voted in 2020, with all new councillors voting for Māori wards. Newcomer Anneka Carlson described the 2019 council as 'diverse' and it was the first election in which NPDC used the Single Transferable Voting (STV) system (Persico 2019; Persico and Keith 2019). Using STV increases the likelihood of diversity on a council if varied candidates stand for election (Hayward 2011, p. 190).
3. 27.6% of residents in the South Taranaki District identify as Māori.
4. There are no additional sources that explain the stance of iwi and council regarding the 2018 decision, and while STDC's 2018–2019 report mentions the representation review, there is no mention of Māori wards (South Taranaki District Council 2019).
5. The 188 submissions to the select committee on the petition presented by Waimarama Anderson and Leah Bell can be found here: https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/sc/submissions-and-advice/all?Criteria.page=VirtualListing&Criteria.Related=51DBHOH_PET68056_1&Criteria.ViewAll=1

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