

21st Century Murihiku: “Back to the Future”?

Science and Innovation Wānanga

24 November 2021

Transport World, Invercargill

A lot of people and a number of institutions made this wānanga possible. Success has many parents. I do not propose to individually acknowledge you all, but I would like to single out a few of you in my opening remarks. Firstly, I thank Rio Tinto for announcing in July 2020 that New Zealand Aluminium Smelters Limited intends to cease operating at Tiwai Point. This event, and these important conversations, simply would not be happening, had Rio not made that decision. Given the subsequent uptick in global aluminium prices, the smelter’s closure, currently scheduled for late 2024, is not a given. Regardless, Rio Tinto remains engaged in ongoing site investigations and closure plan development, and I further thank the company for involving us at Te Rūnaka o Awarua in those processes.

Secondly, I express my gratitude to Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, and specifically our CEO, Arihia Bennett, but also Rakihia Tau, Jacqui Caine and Mike Pohio, for their sustained support of ngā papatipu rūnanga ki Murihiku as we think our way through the challenges *and* opportunities – economic, social, cultural and environmental – that the smelter’s closure presents us with, as an iwi, and as a region.

Next, I thank the Richardson Group for its interest in these questions, and its growing understanding of, and engagement with, Ngāi Tahu at both local and central levels. Special thanks in this respect are due to Scott and Jocelyn O’Donnell and Albert Brantley. The synergies between our values and aspirations is increasingly apparent to us all, as is the potential for mutual advantage, in ways that benefit this province we both hold so dear. Scott, we valued seeing you on our marae earlier this year. We hope we might see you there again soon. And we appreciate you and Jocelyn opening the doors to your own whare-nui here today.

My penultimate hat doff goes to Bluff’s other diamond in the rough, the inimitable Terry Nicholas. To paraphrase Michael Joseph Savage, you might have made mistakes in your time, Terry, but you have made other things too. This wānanga is wonderful testament to those

other things, and plenty of people within and beyond Awarua are grateful to you for those efforts. We see you, and we see the better angels of your nature.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to the Hon Dr Megan Woods for her consistent championing of Ngāi Tahu and the South Island – whose interests are interdependent – as she goes about her unenviable work within the Molesworth Street Triangle (where, as Tā Tipene likes to say, good ideas go to die!).

Enough of the pleasantries. I have a misanthropic reputation to uphold! On that note, I decided against preparing slides today – because power corrupts...and PowerPoint corrupts absolutely!

Right then, I want you all to imagine a southern Murihiku that is fundamentally different from the one we currently have. This alternative Murihiku utilises one of the region's natural resources – and our close proximity to the Australian continent – to produce a global energy commodity. We sell this to distant industrial markets to pay our way in the world and improve ourselves materially. I want to you to imagine that this globally-sought energy-source is produced by marrying imported technology, and hardware, with Ngāi Tahu environmental knowledge, Ngāi Tahu investment, and Ngāi Tahu labour. This creates *new* jobs for our whānau. But also enhances *pre-existing* lifeways and culture. At any iwi-level, this exercise shifts our investment focus, and indeed many of our people, away from Canterbury and south to Murihiku. This is subsequently validated from both economic and risk management perspectives. In developing this energy source for export, swathes of new migrants are attracted to Murihiku, from all corners of the world. Their new skills, ideas – and genes – *reshape* southern Ngāi Tahu, but leave us *intact*. The upshot is a culturally diverse but meritocratic industry and associated workplaces. The energy commodity to which I refer is loaded onto zero-emission ships at Bluff, driving population growth at that port. And all of this is conceived of immediately before, and developed during, a pandemic – in which Sydney is a key vector of transmission.

What I have just described to you is not a thought experiment. Or rather, it is not *just* a thought experiment. It is in fact **a description of Murihiku in the 1830s.**

The natural resource was whales. The resultant energy commodity was whale oil. This is the stuff that lit the streets of London, Paris, Boston and Bremen, and greased the wheels of the Industrial Revolution, which spun belts made from bison hides off the Great Plains. The imported technology to these coasts included clinker dinghies, oars and sails, harpoons, trypots, wet-weather clothing, oil lamps, and weatherboard houses with internal fireplaces and camp-ovens. Ngāi Tahu knowledge of weather, tides and whale migration routes was the necessary software. The new jobs were found on shore-whaling stations, which were not British bridgeheads, as James Belich asserted; they operated in a Māori cultural world. Even so, it was by such means that our proximate tīpuna were introduced to capitalism and new consumer products. They were introduced to wage labouring and the operation of credit. They purchased Chinese tea and Indian tobacco among other things. As several historians have noted, this all reshaped Ngāi Tahu family patterns of labour allocation, production, and consumption. But it rewarded our underlying maritime inclinations and *amplified* earlier activities, especially inshore fishing and the seasonal tītī harvest. Big boats meant bigger hauls of muttonbirds.

This Ngāi Tahu re-set, and southern shift in focus, had an impact beyond individual whānau. Our earlier economic system centred on the Kaiapoi Pā entrepot, was irrevocably changed. And a good thing it was – by drawing several of our key rangatira south to Ruapuke Island, we were able to acquire muskets, cannons, and boats: all of which were used to head-off – pun-intended – Te Pūoho on the Maitai River – and earlier halt Te Rauparaha and Ngāti Toa in their tracks and push them back north of Kaikoura. By such means, we regained control of our tribal territory. In the modern era of *corporate* raiding, Ngāi Tahu Holdings Corporation would do well to heed the lesson on display there. Simply put, Invercargill is not Christchurch's poor cousin. We are its saviour-in-waiting.

As is well-known, many of our Ngāi Tahu great-great-grandmothers married many of these whaling newcomers – tāngata pora, as they were termed here – the shipmen. These blokes came from every nook of the British Isles – Banff, Bristol, Greenwich and Penzance – but also continental Europe – including France, Portugal, Finland and Norway. Native Americans, African Americans, Euro-Americans were also in the mix, as were Indigenous Australians. Our pou-wāhine on Te Rau Aroha Marae mark the enduring significance of this moment in our history. Other markers include our surnames: names like Acker, Bradshaw, Bragg, Gomez,

Spencer, Stirling, and Ryan – all now threads in the woven cloak of Tahu under which we shelter on the edge of the Roaring Forties. Of course, intercultural relations on the pre-colonial frontier were not always straightforward or peaceful. But mutual accommodation was achieved, and this period is viewed as relatively benign compared with the era of colonial settlement, which began for us in 1848 and, by 1891, left 90% of individual Ngāi Tahu landless – a very difficult thing in a capitalist society, the intergenerational impact of which continues to take a heavy toll.

As I alluded to, large quantities of whale-oil generated in bays and beaches throughout Foveaux Strait, were stowed within the calmer waters of Bluff Harbour before voyages back to Sydney, and even directly to ports of origin in the Northern Hemisphere: the Bremens and the Bostons. It is by such means a young Māori boy spent 1838 living in a Mission House in northern Germany. In any event, much of this oil came from whaling operations conducted directly at Bluff, where a station was established in 1836. This was hot on the heels of measles and influenza epidemics at Sydney making their way to Ruapuke and Ōtākou on whaleships – the *Children* and the *Sydney Packet* respectively – which killed an enormous amount of our people. The cultural memory of that devastating time, which fortunately passed quite quickly, goes quite some way to explaining our tribal responsiveness to COVID-19.

Everything I have just relayed to you was a direct consequence of the establishment of the New South Wales penal colony and its expanding frontier, which quickly encompassed northern Te Ika a Māui with southern Te Waipounamu. That meant that the world of our tīpuna got big, really big, and really quickly. But they filled that bigger space. And they lived in the whole world. We owe it to them to recommit ourselves to that horizon of vision. Which brings me to my key point, because I am a historian, I spend a lot of time thinking about the *future*. Because I am a historian of Ngāi Tahu and southern Te Waipounamu, I have a particular set of aspirations for this part of New Zealand and our iwi. This is consistent with Churchill's contention that "The longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward."

Looking forward, as he terms it, to what we might call "futuribles" – there's a neologism for you – which is to say, available futures, is not an act of *passive* forecasting, but rather one of *active* creation: of possible futures – "futures which do not simply happen *of themselves*, but can be *made to* happen...within reasonable horizons of expectation." Historical literacy is a

necessary first step though. This approach is not especially common within New Zealand Inc, but it is at the heart of Ngāi Tahu conceptions of ourselves and of this nation, and our aspirations for both. The Spanish-American intellectual George Santayana asserted that “A country without a memory is a country of madmen.” I agree. That being so, you should understand this wānanga as an affirmation of Ngāi Tahu as New Zealand’s voice of sanity.

That humble self-definition goes a long way to explaining why ngā papatipu rūnanga o Murihiku, and Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu are so open – but by no means beholden – to the notion of wide-scale green hydrogen production in Murihiku. Its feasibility thus needs to include us – not just for moral, political, and even legal reasons – all of which are arguably present – but because of our historical experience, our knowledge of that history, and our visions shaped by it.

That same consciousness reminds us that we knew and used the Tiwai Peninsula long *before* it hosted an aluminium smelter. And it reassures us that we have maintained many of those material connections *since* the smelter was commissioned. And that is what enables us to reimagine the site – and the province – *without* the smelter, which many of our fellow Southlanders cannot yet easily do. I should add at this point that we, Ngāi Tahu, are not willing the smelter gone; we are certainly not ghosting Rio Tinto. But let me re-state here and now, that we will not accept, we cannot accept, business as usual. There is no renewal of its social licence, if such is sought, without a thorough remediation of the Tiwai Peninsula. In summary then, the Ngāi Tahu position – at and beyond Awarua – is not opposed to Rio Tinto – but rather, in favour of a de-carbonising, regenerative future. And we are open the *possibility* of Rio Tinto being able and willing to reimagine and reposition itself as part of that future.

Thus, however the cards fall on these questions, I am convinced that Murihiku is about to become better, and look different. Yogi Berra is once said to have made the profound observation that “the future aint what it used to be.” But actually, for Murihiku, the future might yet be a lot like it used to be. I for one certainly hope so.

In 1918 – Rt. Hon. Sir Joseph Ward: “when the water-forces throughout New Zealand are harnessed for use we will become one of the greatest manufacturing countries in the world”.