

## Refashioning Racism: Immigration, Multiculturalism and an Election Year

We wish to examine a number of events arising from statements made by New Zealand First leader Winston Peters during the 1996 election campaign and the public response to them. In focusing upon some of the unexpected (though certainly not unpredictable) and sometimes contradictory responses to Peters's comments, our intent is to map out some of the important ways that the contours of the geographies of racism are shifting during the latter half of the 1990s in Aotearoa. Given the constraints of a brief comment, our analysis is not meant to be comprehensive. We do not discuss, for example, the way that racism articulates with and is constitutive of other forms of exploitation and oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, and colonialism (cf. Anderson, 1996; Berg forthcoming; Young, 1995). Rather, we hope to focus our analysis in order to indicate some of the ways that racist rhetorics are shifting in the 1990s.

Our comments are structured in the following manner. We first position ourselves in the debates surrounding the geographies of 'race' and racism in Aotearoa specifically and in the academy more generally. We then discuss recent shifts in the political economy of global capitalism which have led to a new form of incorporative multiculturalism. We ground these shifts in local cultural politics with a discussion of the politics of recognition and incorporation in Aotearoa. With this material as background, we examine comments about immigration made by New Zealand First leader Winston Peters during the 1996 election campaign. We focus in particular on the racialisation of immigrants in Peters's rhetoric, and the subsequent response from the Office of the Race Relations Conciliator and Saatchi and Saatchi advertising agency — the now (in)famous 'Racist Brains' campaign.

As authors, we approach these politics and contemporary expressions of racism from different histories, albeit broadly common sympathies. I (Paul) have had an active involvement with the Office of the Race Relations Conciliator since 1974, not long after its formation. In this capacity, I was privileged to observe some of the discussions and activities which produced, then evaluated, the 'Brains' advertisement. I (Lawrence) have a similar background in anti-racist politics in British Columbia. My interest in the racialisation of immigration in Aotearoa was piqued by personal experiences during mid-1995, when my family was having difficulty obtaining the

necessary 'points' for permanent residency. It was not uncommon during this time for us to receive comments from Pakeha New Zealanders to the effect that it was "too bad they were letting in all those 'Asians' when people like you are having such trouble". As 'white' Canadians from a (loosely) middle-class background, we were not marked out as racialised immigrants.

As academics, both of us subscribe to now well-rehearsed social constructionist perspectives which view 'race' not as an inherent 'biological' fact, but instead as the product of social relations of domination and exploitation (e.g., Anderson, 1991; Berg, 1993, 1998; Berg and Kearns 1996; Jackson, 1987; Jackson and Penrose, 1993; Spoonley, 1993; Spoonley *et al.*, 1996). As Lawrence Berg (1993) has previously argued, 'race' is a socially constructed, geographically specific and culturally contingent historical phenomenon which itself must be explained through historico-geographical analysis.

### Multiculturalism and global capitalism

David Theo Goldberg (1996: 9) observes that recent "shifts in the political economy and geoculture of the world system have enabled the contours of a new standard to emerge, a new set of self-understandings, presuppositions, principles and practices". He is referring to the process of cultural transformation, and notably transformative incorporation whereby previously marginalised groups are accommodated into the body politic with implications for dominant values as well as the increased recognition of those of the 'insurgent group' (Goldberg, 1996: 9). A form of multiculturalism has begun to replace the 'unchallenged ideological common sense of the first half of the century', monoculturalism (Goldberg, 1996: 11).<sup>1</sup> However, the nature of the recognition of insurgent groups and the degree of their incorporation are problematic issues for states which have long been defined as synonymous with nations, hence 'nation-states', as though one was consistent with the other. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of many contemporary states and the significance of cultural identity in evolving debates about citizenship have dramatically displaced the previously dominant monoculturalism. The transformation of policy in heterogeneous states has been encouraged by geopolitical concerns and the need to rebuild alliances to reflect changes in the global economy (Castells, 1996), as well as the pressures that have

arisen domestically from the articulation of identity politics. Aotearoa provides one example of how these politics of recognition and incorporation are being played out.

The geo-political circumstances of the late twentieth century, and notably the increasing significance of the economies of Asia, have effected a fundamental re-orientation in New Zealand's economic and political policies.<sup>2</sup> The domestic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s saw the dismantling of a regulated economy supported by the welfare state, and a departure from the colonial reliance on Europe and especially Britain. The 'imperatives' of the new order require an international competitiveness in expanding markets in the Asia region. Politically, this is reflected in the willingness to encourage the migration of both capital and people to New Zealand from what is a non-traditional source, and the promotion of a limited and liberal form of multiculturalism within New Zealand as a strategy of incorporation. While it may help reduce localised tensions, such multiculturalism — as Katharyne Mitchell (1993: 288) observes in another setting — can also be "part of a broader strategy of hegemonic production in the interests of global capitalism."

### The politics of recognition and incorporation

Tangata whenua concerns have been the most significant influence in destabilising the monoculturalism of a traditional colonialism in Aotearoa. Maori urban migrants produced a new leadership who in turn combined traditional concerns about cultural and resource alienation with the claims and strategies of contemporary New Social Movements (Walker, 1992). The 'liberalism' of the 1970s was receptive to the claims of this politicised ethnicity, and some minor forms of recognition (*Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975*) marked a new stage in the incorporation of Maori into the central institutions and practices of New Zealand (Barber, 1989). The expectations and skills of the new leadership, and the evolving strength of the representative bodies of both iwi and urban Maori, increased the pressure to resolve long-standing grievances and to see more effective and inclusive policies and structures.

The demand for tino rangatiratanga for Maori, and biculturalism<sup>3</sup> within major institutions, was reflected in a series of statements and legislative changes in the

mid-1980s, and the resolution, albeit within state-defined parameters, of historical claims. The degree of accommodation should not be overstated, as Jane Kelsey (1995) reminds us. At the same time, the old order has been significantly undermined as any number of commentators (cf. Haden 1997; Scott 1995) are anxious to point out, always with dire warnings about the 'irrelevance' or 'backwardness' of tikanga Maori. As Goldberg (1996, 10) observes: "... incorporative undertakings are transgressive, engaged by definition in infringing and exceeding the norms of the monocultural status quo and transforming the values and representations that have held racist culture together".

However, Maori politics do not represent the only challenge to monoculturalism. One other significant influence, although by no means the only one, is the need for Aotearoa to adjust to changes in the global economy, and in particular the decline of Britain, and the increasing economic and political importance of Asia. The realignment of Aotearoa towards the new centres of world production had been occurring since the 1970s, but in policy terms, recognition has been associated particularly with the liberalisation of production and regulation in Aotearoa after 1984 and the ostensible need for domestic producers to be internationally competitive in fundamentally new ways (Britton, *et al.*, 1992; Le Heron and Pawson, 1996). By the 1990s, there are manifest expressions from conservative cabinet ministers of the need to align the future economic success of New Zealand with the economies of Asia. National MP and Parliamentary Speaker Doug Kidd (1996), for example, recently asserted that: "... our future prosperity and security is bound up in the internal and external dynamics of the Asia-Pacific strategic region...the reality of geography has overcome both history and sentiment ... both of the latter being Eurocentric".

Two aspects of this new geopolitical 'reality' affected New Zealanders. One was the continued growth of foreign ownership of assets in Aotearoa. Although the most significant new owners were from Australia and North America, many saw the threat to sovereignty as personified by Asian interests. In 1995, East Asian business investment in New Zealand was \$326 million compared with \$33 million from Europe, while East Asians contributed \$285.5 million (Europe, \$16.4 million) to general investment (Legat, 1996: 58). The other manifestation was the arrival of migrants from East Asia. Migration policy was altered in the late 1980s and then again in 1991. Significant flows of migrants continued to come from traditional source countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia, with new

or increased flows from South Africa and East Asia (on Asian migration, see Vasil and Yoon, 1996).

It was the latter group who came to represent the new and often unacceptable face of immigration in the 1990s. They were variously seen as responsible for 'heating' up the economy, especially in Auckland, and thereby for sustaining high interest rates, putting pressure on facilities such as schools and housing, and creating problems because of cultural differences (they were wealthy, they did not speak English, they were demanding, they were poor drivers). In addition, they were seen to lack a commitment to New Zealand (astronaut families, on-migration, withdrawal of capital) (see, e.g., Taylor, 1996). Since 1990, there had been a number of expressions of public hostility, from derogatory labels such as 'Chowick' (a simplistic punning reference to the perceived number of 'Asian' migrants in Howick), to newspaper articles decrying Asian migration (see Heeringa, 1996, for an overview), to the formation of reactionary groups such as the Government Accountability League. But the politics of exclusion gained its most obvious expression during an election year through the comments of Winston Peters.

#### Election Year 1996

Winston Peters, beginning with a major speech in February 1996 which was critical of immigrants, gave voice to the concern — shared by many New Zealanders — about the growing levels of immigration, and specifically at the arrival of East Asian migrants. By 1995, public opinion polls indicated that between 40 to 50 per cent of New Zealanders believed that there were "too many Asians in New Zealand", and in May 1996, 41 per cent of respondents to a poll agreed that "current levels of immigration that we have are ruining this country" (Clifton, 1996). However, unlike earlier forms of anti-Asian racism of the late 19th and early 20th century, the public statements of Peters were relatively guarded and couched in the imagery of a new racism. His rhetoric drew less, in its public form, from a biological racism but rather invoked arguments about cultural difference and sovereignty (cf. Berg and Kearns, 1996). Peters's arguments rested on an appeal to those who felt that control was being wrested from New Zealanders, itself a problematic term in this context, and given to outsiders who were deemed not to have New Zealand interests at heart (see Pullman, 1996; Taylor, 1996). This was embodied in the rhetoric of an 'invasion' of immigrants who were undermining New Zealanders' sovereignty. The language was not racially or ethnically specific, but it relied upon well-rehearsed boundary-marking exercises that drew upon specific exclusionary Pakeha discourses of

'community' (Berg and Kearns, 1996; Young, 1990) and the abstract spaces (LeFebvre, 1991) that they inhabit. In this sense, it was clear that most who agreed with Peters interpreted 'immigrants' as a signifier for East Asian migrants, rather than migrants from traditional source countries. Likewise, these Peters supporters seemed to be little concerned with the increase in 'white' migrants from South Africa.

Such arguments and coded signs appealed to both those New Zealanders most committed to the retention of a traditional notion of sovereignty (New Zealand for New Zealanders), typically over 55 years of age in provincial areas (and sometimes immigrants themselves) and those who had just started to regain a degree of sovereignty over resources, notably Maori (see, e.g., Rae, 1996; NZPA, 1996). Within a matter of months, however, there was a significant and rather different response, especially given the concern that Peters' comments were seen as a threat to the alignment of New Zealand with Asian economic interests (see Holm, 1996; Riordan, 1996).

#### The Brains advertisement

The apparent appeal and nature of the arguments offered up by Winston Peters helped provoke an interesting intervention in the form of an advertisement about racism. Comments from Saatchi and Saatchi NZ specifically identified the February 1996 speech by Winston Peters as an important catalyst for their involvement. They imported an advertisement that had been developed by Saatchi and Saatchi in the United Kingdom on behalf of the Commission for Racial Equality. Three brains of equal size were depicted on a black background, although the labels were altered from the United Kingdom. 'European', 'Asian' and 'African' became 'Pakeha', 'Asian' and 'Maori' for New Zealand. A fourth brain was considerably smaller and labelled as 'racist'. Saatchi and Saatchi worked with the Office of the Race Relations Conciliator to place the advertisement in all the major daily newspapers in April 1996, and on thirteen billboards in New Zealand's main centres. A sizeable discount was negotiated.

The campaign is significant for a number of reasons. The first is the advocacy of a highly public form of anti-racism by corporate New Zealand represented by Saatchi and Saatchi, and the help provided by the media. The chairperson of Saatchi and Saatchi (Australia), Peter Cullinan signalled the agency's 'strong' commitment for the campaign (*Chronicle*, 29 April 1996), and spokespeople from the firm continued to support the campaign although they were also forced to apologise to the parents

of intellectually disabled children (*Northland Times*, 30 April 1996).

The media provided aid by discounting the advertisements although editorially, different positions were adopted, especially once Peters had attacked the ads as a 'gross abuse of taxpayers money in a mindless way' and criticised the media for 'taking sides' (Young, 1996). The Managing Director of Independent Newspapers replied that newspapers were not taking sides and the ads were accepted on a commercial basis (*Dominion*, 1 May 1996). Editorially, some newspapers were supportive of the campaign ('Conciliator hits the racism mark', *Nelson Mail*, 30 April 1996), while others provided a qualified support that pointed to Peter's role in lifting 'the scab on a festering sore of white bigotry' but said that there was a danger that too much attention was being paid to the 'limited racism that exists' (*Evening Post*, 1 May 1996). Yet others focused on the 'economic xenophobia' of Peters and the damage it was doing in East Asia (*New Zealand Herald*, 30 April 1996).

There was a considerable and vocal public reaction to the advertisements, expressed through letters to the editor, talkback shows, contact with politicians and the Race Relations Office. One of the most significant points of opposition was the use of the label 'Pakeha'. The media officer for the Office said that they had received numerous letters and calls, and that there was an objection to the use of Pakeha 'largely by older British immigrants' for two reasons - one was that they believed it to be derogatory and the second is that it is Maori in origin (*Sunday Star-Times*, 5 May 1996). This was certainly echoed in letters which argued that it was a 'Maori term of abuse for non-Maori' (*Sunday Star-Times*, 5 May 1996) and that the mere use of Pakeha 'to refer to Caucasian people is racist' (*Dominion*, 8 May).

Such reactionary comments point to the fact that 'whiteness' is supposedly neutral and it 'constitutes the prevailing social texts in which social norms are made and remade' (McLaren, 1996: 59; also see Frankenberg, 1993). The naming of Pakeha challenges this authority in the sense that it invites a critical consideration of what it means to be 'white' in Aotearoa in the 1990s, and helps politicise the answer. The 'Brains ad' contributed to the interrogation, in a minor way, of the naming of the dominant group, and the post-colonial implications of this (Spoonley, 1995).

### The significance of 1996

A limited expression of pluralism exists in present day Aotearoa, but there has been little substantive change in the cultural practices of major institutions such as the education system. Post-migration policies which require adaptation on behalf of local

institutions and personnel are notably absent so that there is no requirement and little guidance for those required to provide services for the new migrants from East Asia. Instead, there has been a significant and negative reaction to Asian migration that has been exemplified by Winston Peters. The level of hostility prompted the intervention of corporate New Zealand in the form of Saatchi and Saatchi, with the aid of the media, who sought to promote a message of a tolerant New Zealand community. However, such 'tolerance' was constructed within a liberal discourse of 'community' whereby concrete specificity is subsumed by abstract universality (Berg and Kearns, 1996). As Goldberg (1996: 26) suggests, "... liberalism's primary response to heterogeneity within social formations is in terms of tolerating the difference, thus presupposing the moral and political primacy of the homogeneous".

Goldberg (1996, 29) goes on to point out that a managed multiculturalism by corporate interests does what is necessary to contain 'diversity that otherwise might be unmanageable and overwhelming'. Certainly the flow of migrants from East Asia had largely evaporated by late 1996 as new restrictions on who was eligible were imposed and the conditions (notably with regard to language) altered to a much more restrictive option. This has left unaddressed the question of managing a form of multiculturalism domestically which would incorporate those East Asian migrants who had already settled, not aggravate trading partners and encourage positive attitudes towards Asia and its peoples. That task is yet to be completed, although the outright hostility of an election year has noticeably waned.

However, the corporate intervention in the form of the 'Brains ad' had interesting results that could have been predicted but which obviously were not. The naming of the dominant group as Pakeha in the ad was deeply disturbing to those groups who had an investment in a colonial past which did not countenance such local naming practices. The 'politics of recognition' — which see a struggle over representation, self-naming and the 'language of articulation' as important in identifying new political possibilities (Goldberg, 1996, 13) — were (unwittingly) reflected in the advertisement. The use of the word Pakeha named the dominant group in Aotearoa, and at least implicitly invoked a set of critical understandings of colonialism and the relationship of settler and Tangata Whenua. 'Whiteness' was no longer invisible (cf. McLaren, 1996, 49; Berg, 1998). The mere act of naming then invited a significant response from those unsympathetic to such politics. The Race Relations Office, at least its media officer, was happy to defend the

use the label Pakeha, although there was a noticeable silence by Saatchi and Saatchi. It is interesting to speculate on whether they would continue to use the same language in any future intervention into public debate.

### Conclusion

Election year 1996 produced one of the most sustained periods of hostility towards those who are culturally different, and saw the ongoing racialisation of the word 'immigrant' as representing the threats to sovereignty provided by East Asians. On one side were ranged New Zealand First, and its leader, Winston Peters, along with groups such as the Government Accountability League. Polls suggest that the most significant constituency for these politics came from older New Zealanders, principally over the age of 55 years, but they were joined by Maori who viewed the growing heterogeneity of New Zealand and the issue of sovereignty as undermining the gains they had made in the 1980s and 1990s in resolving issues of Tangata Whenua sovereignty.

On the other side were those politicians and economic interests who were committed to developing linkages with Asian economies through attracting capital investment, migrants and encouraging exports. Fundamental to this project is an acceptance of Asians as neighbours, whether in a geo-political sense or as literally neighbours in the same street or school. In the wake of the growing racialisation of 'immigrants' and 'Asians' during the early part of 1996, senior members of the Cabinet (especially Jim Bolger and Doug Graham), Saatchi and Saatchi, the media and the Office of the Race Relations Conciliator intervened in public debate with a high profile, 'in yer face' advertisement campaign about the size of a racist's brain. It was not a sustained campaign and undoubtedly some of the proponents were surprised by the response that was engendered but it did help position Peters as feeding racism, if not being explicitly racist himself, during an election campaign. It also prompted a reaction to the naming of Pakeha New Zealanders. All three of the labels used resonate within a particular history of colonialism, with the term 'Asian' having a long history of being used as a signifier of a 'racial' threat. Maori and Pakeha have both been constructed in the process of colonisation, although the equivalence between the terms is not accepted by 'European' New Zealanders who react negatively to one but not the other. Those who have a "deep emotional investment in the myth of 'sameness' (hooks, 1990) and for whom 'whiteness'...constitutes the

prevailing social texts in which social norms are made and remade" (McLaren, 1996, 59) were deeply aggrieved by the simple act of naming.

The 'Brains' advertisement was a tentative but instructive contribution to current debates about racism, promoted by a temporary alliance between corporate New Zealand, the media and the Race Relations Office. It was prompted by the

public racism of an election campaign, and the explicit imagery and naming of the groups reflected a more confrontational style of anti-racism than was intended. Comments, particularly from some media representatives and Saatchi and Saatchi, indicated that an acceptable and softer form of pluralism was the object. As Bhabha (in McLaren, 1996, 54) observes: "It is a declaration of democratic faith in a

plural, diverse society and, at the same time, a defence against the real, subversive demands that the articulation of cultural difference - the empowering of minorities - makes upon democratic pluralism."

Such liberal pluralism extends the corporate interest in managing heterogeneity but not in challenging unjust structures or geographies of racialisation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Monoculturalism is used here to indicate the hegemony of a specific cultural group to the virtual exclusion of all other cultural groups. In the settler society that is New Zealand - particularly from the 1860s through to the 1980s - European-derived values and practices have been privileged and tikanga Maori has been marginalised. Indeed, the process of colonisation depends for success on marginalisation and in many instances, the complete destruction of indigenous ways of life. Multiculturalism is the explicit recognition of the cultural diversity of a given society, although the implications of such recognition vary from nominal acknowledgement (soft multiculturalism) to the radical restructuring of major institutions and public policy (critical multiculturalism).

<sup>2</sup> We shift between the names Aotearoa and New Zealand to highlight the contested nature of these terms (cf. Berg and Kearns, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> For a further elaboration of 'biculturalism', see the discussion in Kearns (1997) and McClean, *et al.* (1997).

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