

## The case for a Maori ward

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Critics of the New Plymouth District Council's plan to create a Maori ward are missing the point, argues New Plymouth Mayor Andrew Judd .

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GARETH MORGAN has argued against having Maori wards on councils, as the New Plymouth District Council has recently decided to do (Special privileges for Maori replace doing the right thing, March 3).

When I became mayor in October 2013 I set about establishing the New Plymouth District Council's committee structure.

When I talked to iwi chairs about continuing to have a Maori subcommittee, I quickly learnt that having a subcommittee was not effective for Maori.

The iwi chairs expressed to me their concerns about being ignored and having minimal impact on council decision making.

As a result, I took a proposal to the council to appoint iwi representatives to the three main council committees. This was rejected by some councillors on the grounds that appointees were unelected and the system would be undemocratic.

So I took heed and brought to the council a proposal for a Maori ward as set out in the Local Electoral Act 2001.

The Act allows for councils to establish Maori wards, but it also allows the community to over-ride that decision by way of a binding citizens-initiated referendum. In May we will be holding such a referendum here in New Plymouth. Interestingly, the law affords no such referendum opportunity when any other form of electoral ward is created. So far, only the Bay of Plenty and Waikato regional councils have seats for Maori.

The response from Morgan, and many other opponents of Maori wards that I have talked to, is that this decision for a Maori ward is undemocratic.

To me this misses that Maori would have no more voting power than the general population, and that there is a major issue with the current system - Maori are systemically under-represented in local authorities throughout New Zealand.

On my council one out of 14 councillors identifies as Maori - and he, like all the other councillors, is a representative of the district as a whole and not of Maori specifically.

Nationwide only about 4 per cent of councillors are Maori when tangata whenua make up 15 per cent of the population.

How is it "democratic" that a Treaty partner is so comprehensively under-represented around council tables?

This systemic under-representation might not matter if local government only dealt with building regulations and roads. But councils deal with water and land consents, telling local stories in libraries and museums, and managing parks and reserves. These issues are of major cultural significance to tangata whenua as these are crucial parts of their taonga.

We are dealing with the regulation of taonga on behalf of both the wider community and Maoridom. But Maoridom were guaranteed rangitiratanga over their taonga by the Treaty of Waitangi. So how do we address that inconsistency without giving Maori a seat at the table?

Having a Maori ward ensures there is a person who can bring a tangata whenua voice and an understanding of Te Ao Maori to the main table, to speak and, more importantly, vote on every issue. A Maori ward councillor will also provide a conduit for the council into the world of Maoridom, iwi relations and Treaty settlements.

In order to have the rights of two societies to exist and thrive together, as Morgan argues is the summation of the Treaty, we need to have both parties represented at every level of government. We

cannot run two separate government systems in New Zealand - that would be separatism - but we can work together.

Having a seat around a table doesn't lead to division; it leads to co-existence, understanding and kotahitanga. Democracy does not mean ignoring tangata whenua.

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Part: A

Section: NEWS

Sub-Section: GENERAL

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