

‘Leave our people alone’ – Maori Anglican Church angry at police anti-terrorist action in Tuhoe country

The breath and depth of Maori anger at police tactics during the armed offender’s squad raid at Ruatoki was underlined at the Runanganui, or parliament, of Te Pihopatanga o Aotearoa (the Maori stream of the Anglican Church) which held its two-yearly meeting in Christchurch this past weekend.

There was particular frustration and sadness at the effects of heavy-handed police action in a Maori community: and there was also suspicion that anti-terror legislation provides a cloak for state action against lawful opponents of government policy, and against Maori opponents in particular.

These concerns were first outlined in Archbishop Brown Turei’s opening charge to the gathering.

Archbishop Turei – who is both the Primate or overall leader of the Anglican Church here as well as Te Pihopa o Aotearoa, or head of the Maori stream of the Anglican Church in particular – is a gentle, mild-mannered man who has been a priest for 57 years. He was uncharacteristically blunt and sceptical about the raids.

He likened the Terrorism Suppression Act (which was the basis for the Ruatoki raid, and for other related raids throughout the country) to the 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act, which was one of the chief legal instruments for the attempted assimilation of Maori during the early part of the twentieth century.

“This is pharaoh and the Hebrews in Egypt all over again”, he said. “Acts of suppression are the instruments of the powerful to bring the people in line with an acceptable system...”

“Moses said: ‘Let my people go.’ Maybe we can say: ‘Leave our people alone.’”

The Runanganui passed a resolution that, as a united body, it would express its shock at the Ruatoki raids and concern for the “trauma, fear, terror and humiliation experienced by the Tuhoe people.”

It called on the government and the police to apologise to Tuhoe and to the people of Ruatoki in particular, and asked the Police Commissioner to involve the Maori Police Advisory Group and Iwi Liaison Officers “at all levels of police operations, not just on selective occasions.”

The resolution went on to say that it was worried about the use of anti-terrorism legislation in the arrests.

“Maori have a history of opposing policies and programmes implemented by the Government,” it said, and noted that the anti terrorism legislation could mean that protest leaders could expect the same kind of treatment as the people of Ruatoki had tasted.

The resolution was moved by The Rev Jim Biddle, who is Kaihautu, or head of the Anglican Taapapa, or theological college, at Rotorua – and seconded by The Rev Awanui Timutimu, an Anglican clergyman who lives at Ruatoki, who is in his seventies, and who was caught up in the raid.

He told the gathering that on the morning of the raid he was driving to the hardware shop in Whakatane. Armed, helmeted, black-clad para-military police stopped him at a road block. They were questioning all drivers, and searching all vehicles leaving Ruatoki.

The Rev Timutimu was ordered to get out of his car. The police searched it, examined its underside with a mirror on a pole, and then photographed the Rev Timutimu next to the numberplate of his car before sending him on his way.

He later heard that armed offenders squad had trashed houses, removed computers, and boarded a bus carrying Ruatoki toddlers to kohanga reo. He is particularly angry “that they would not spare children from being traumatised.”

The Rev Timutimu is a navy veteran, who served in South-East Asia, the Far East and the Pacific (where he was one of the guinea-pig Kiwi sailors who observed the nuclear blasts) during the 1950s. He says he was proud to serve under the flag of his country, and he and a number of other local ex-servicemen felt that Tame Iti had gone overboard in his January 2005 flag shooting.

But he said there were well-oiled routines in the valley for dealing with Tame Iti, which involved community elders, a Maori Police Advisory Group, and Iwi Liaison Officers.

“We like to deal with Tame Iti ourselves,” he says, “rather than through an outside agency.” But the police raids were carried out without those bodies being brought into the picture.

The Runanganui passed a further resolution urging parliament to reconsider the anti-terrorism and the foreshore and seabed legislation with a view to repealing or amending these acts “to remove their discriminatory features.” This resolution also urged the General Synod – the overall policymaking body of the Anglican Church – to stand with te Runanganui on this.

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