

# THE KOKIRI UNIT

The kokiri experience to be implanted in Auckland is the result of a turnaround in government bureaucracy specifically in the Department of Maori Affairs. Here Rangi Walker outlines the background of the department, tracing the progression from a guardian of Maori rights to present-day innovators of social change.



There is a quiet revolution going on in the Department of Maori Affairs. A government bureaucracy is being transformed so that it serves the needs of the clientele in what they perceive to be in their best interests. This has not been the case in the past.

## In conflict

The department had its origins in the Native Protectors, established in 1841 to ensure that Maori rights as embodied in the Treaty of Waitangi were safeguarded. The Chief Protector, George Clark, and his four assistants soon found their protective role in conflict with their de facto role as land-purchase agents. Their solution, based on Maori custom of negotiating land-sales with the chief and the whole tribe, did not endear them to land speculators and would-be sellers. The process was slow and liable to be blocked by a chief opposed to land-selling.

In 1846 Governor Grey established the Native Land purchase Department to give effect to the Crown's right of pre-emption under the Treaty of Waitangi. Potential resistance from the Protectors was removed by the simple expedient of replacing them with a Native Secretary. Ten years later the office of Native Secretary and the functions of the Native Land Purchase Department were amalgamated. This conjunction of offices in the person of Donald McLean, indirectly precipitated the New Zealand Land Wars, for McLean ignored established land-pur-

**A Kokiri Wananga was held at Kokiri Marae, Seaview in March with people attending from the lower half of the North Island. It was a chance for Wellington's three kokiri units to evaluate progress and also explain how kokiri works.**

**Porirua Kokiri Unit in singing mood: (from left) Ioane Teao, Winnie Schmidt, Te Paeru Tereora, Hine Tatana.**

chase procedures and brought the Waitara Block against the wishes of Wiremu Kingi.

## Less costly

After the Land Wars a less costly way of acquiring Maori land was devised in the Native Land Court established in 1867. The report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Maori Land Court ambiguously states that the purpose of the court was "to ensure ownership, use and disposal of Maori land". The commission might just as well have tacked on the phrase "to Pakehas". In a century of operation, the court facilitated the alienation of 95 per cent of Maori land as it systematically destroyed the principle of communal ownership.

Even as late as 1934 the Native Department was comprised of basically the Native Land Court and the Maori Land Councils. By this time only marginal land remained in Maori hands as the department began a programme of

land development initiated by Ngata when he was the Minister.

## Functions extended

It was not until World War II that the department extended its functions to welfare work. On the recommendation of the Maori War Effort Organisation, six women welfare officers were appointed to the major urban centres in 1943. The work of the MWEO with tribal executive committees culminated in the Maori Social Economic Advancement Act (1945).

The act effectively defined what should have been the functions of the department rather than a network of voluntary tribal executives without resources.

It is ironic that the 1953 Maori Affairs Act, which sets out the present aims and functions of the department, states that it must have regard as far as possible to "The retention of Maori land in the hands of its owners and its use or administration by them or for their benefit". Almost too little too late, as Maori frustration and anger mounted in the 70's and culminated in the Maori Land March of 1975.

## New course

After a review of the department by the Assistant Commissioner of State Services, Kara Puketapu in 1977, community services and departmental activities were restructured. By 1979 Puketapu, as Secretary of Maori Affairs, had clearly set a new course for his department. The annual report stated that "the main objectives of the Department for Maori Affairs are not those of a social welfare agency giving handouts to people as is often alleged. Instead it is an agency investing the taxpayers money in land, buildings and people. The task is to fully develop this powerful and creative resource for the common good of all New Zealanders".

## Bring together

Puketapu's philosophy of belief in people is summed up in his concept of Kokiri (community) administration. Essentially Kokiri is an overall administration group responsible for bringing Maori voluntary associations together to identify priorities in community development. When this has been done, resources the department has for community programmes are then allocated.

The theory behind Kokiri administration is that by marshalling community groups and backing their programmes with department resources, more of an impact will be made on many of the social issues that have been grappled with separately for so many years. As the country drifts about in a state of depressed uncertainty as to its future, this innovative response by the Department of Maori Affairs to what appear to be intractable social issues deserves to succeed.