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PM Bill English gave two speeches on Waitangi Day. Both were remarkable. Both were almost entirely ignored

By **Simon Wilson**
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The prime minister spent his first Waitangi Day in office not at the treaty grounds, but at Bastion Point, where Simon Wilson watched him give two of the most surprising Waitangi speeches in living memory.

Did you know Bill English used Waitangi Day to praise the great protest struggle of Bastion Point?

He made two speeches on the marae at Bastion Point that day, both of them in front of TV cameras and other media. Almost none of what he said got reported. Instead, there was a frenzy of excitement over his utterly inconsequential phone call with Donald Trump. But what the prime minister said on the marae at Bastion Point was extraordinary.

English chose not to go to Waitangi, preferring to attend a breakfast hosted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. When it came his turn to speak during the powhiri, which was held inside the wharenuī, he began with a short mihi and then he said, "I want to tell you why I've come here, to this marae."

He said it was because of what had been achieved by Ngāti Whātua and the manner of its achievement. He spoke directly to Joe Hawke, the much-loved Uncle Joe, the man who in 1976-78 led a 506-day protest "Occupation" of the peninsula and the river on that day. Hawke sat front and centre across from English, flanked by other kaumātua, many of whom were also protest veterans. He soaked it up.

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Hawke is silver haired now, a thin man with the sad eyes of age, but what draws you is the whispery smile that keeps flitting over his face, creasing the skin, puckering the

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lips, lighting those eyes. He leaves it to others to do the talking, and none of them leaves you in any doubt of their pride at their achievements.

English understood it very well. He told them the modern history of Ngāti Whātua was a story of great success. And he wanted them to know he did not view the protest as an aberration in that story, but as a vital part of it. Later, over breakfast in the wharekai, he built on his theme.



AT A MEDIA STAND UP ON JANUARY 9, PM BILL ENGLISH EXPLAINS WHY HE WILL NOT BE ATTENDING THE WAITANGI DAY EVENTS AT WAITANGI'S TE TII MARAE.

There was a large audience – Ngāti Whātua, politicians, community representatives and media – and he said we are all engaged in a “great enterprise” of building a country based on “fairness, tolerance and respect”. Then he said, “We’ve all got better at it because of our struggles over the treaty.”

“Our struggles.” Bastion Point was the biggest and most important Māori land struggle of modern times. Takaparawhā (Bastion Point) was taken by the Crown for defence purposes in 1885 (the Russians were coming, supposedly) and never returned. In 1976 the government announced plans to sell the land for luxury housing and the protest began. It ended in 1978 when the police marched in, tore down the protesters’ buildings and other structures and forcibly removed 202 people.

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But the sale didn't happen. It was three years after Whina Cooper had led a land rights hiko from the Far North; three years also since the Waitangi Tribunal was established. After the eviction a long period of negotiations and legal actions kicked in; finally, in 2011, Ngāti Whātua and the Crown signed a Treaty of Waitangi Deed of

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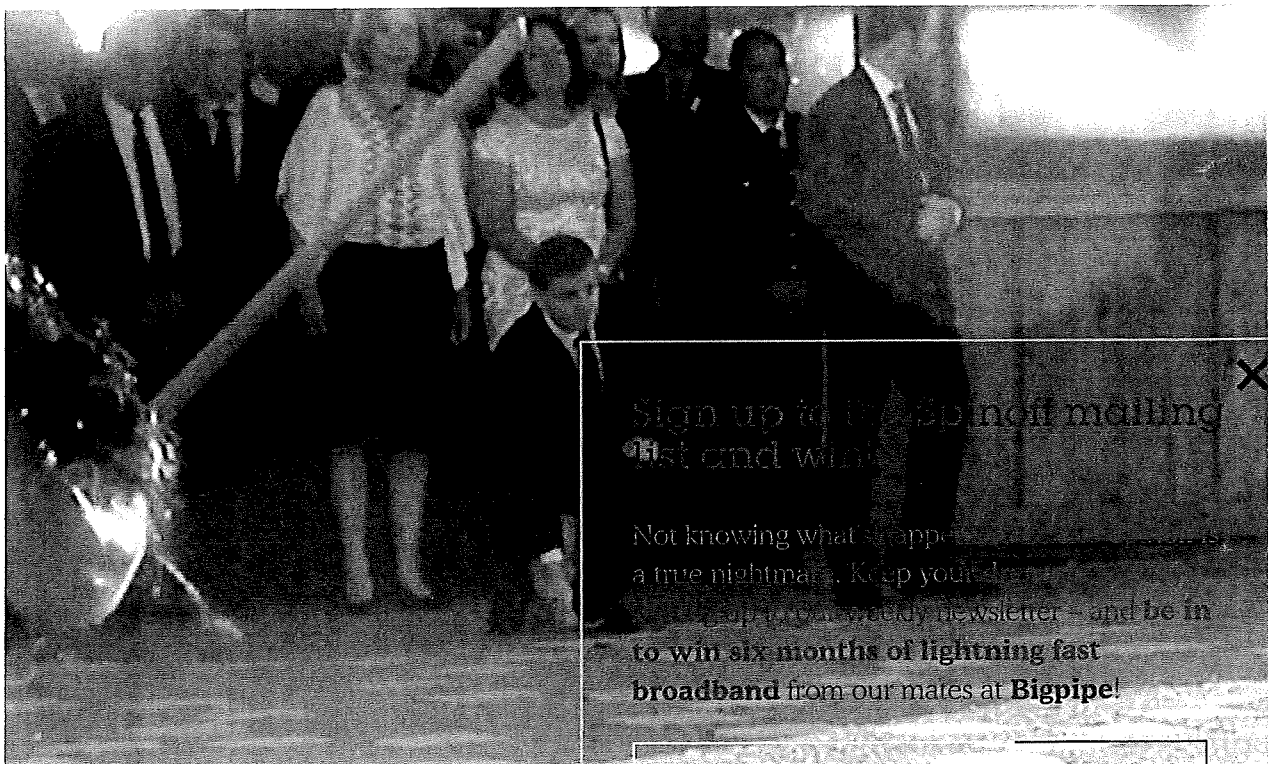
Settlement. The iwi regained undisputed ownership of Bastion Point, an apology for historic wrongs and, among other things, compensation of \$18 million.

Today, the restored and greatly expanded marae is the heart of a thriving iwi enterprise: there are extensive health, education and other social programmes, including pioneering housing projects. The marae has extensive gardens and a tree nursery that services the whole city. There's a busy cultural schedule and a big raft of commercial activity. Because of the treaty settlement and a smart property investment programme, that \$18 million settlement has grown to an asset base of \$717 million.

Bill English acknowledged the "massive achievements of Ngāti Whātua in such a short space of time" and said he wanted to "celebrate a group of people with the leadership and courage to make... decisions".

He said he knew what it cost the kaumātua who negotiated treaty settlements. At another iwi, one leader had told him he'd been unable to sleep the night before they signed. "He said he struggled with the burden of knowing he must say to his ancestors, 'That's enough.' And he struggled with the responsibility of saying the same to his descendants."

There are so many ways in which treaty settlements are different for Māori and Pākehā, and that's one of them: Pākehā don't think like that.



BILL ENGLISH AT THE POWHIRI AT NGĀTI WHĀTUA-O-ŌRĀKEI MARAE ON WAITANGI DAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2017.

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English also said, "Ngāti Whātua's future is New Zealand's future." It wasn't a mere platitude about diverse peoples coming together in national unity. He was pointing specifically to the economic and cultural importance of iwi to whole country.

"In the regions," he said, "and I include Auckland in that, I would say that almost without exception the organisations that are most committed to development are the local iwi."

That's another remarkable thing for him to say. Iwi are economic powerhouses in the regions and major agents of social cohesion. Despite what Don Brash and his band of Hobson's Pledge ostriches might want us to think, they're not stripping the country of its assets and infrastructure – they're building them.

"But," English added, speaking not just of iwi but of the government and the country as a whole, "much as we have good intentions the truth is we have not met our aspirations." He cited domestic violence, educational underachievement and the high rate of imprisonment: "These things are the signs of failure."

Which is why, he said, Whānau Ora is important. Whānau Ora, which empowers iwi and smaller communities within them to develop services and direct them where they are needed most. Whānau Ora, said English, "represents the best and truest chance of the next 20 to 30 years".

The takeaways were provocative. First, have we ever before had a National Party prime minister who speaks so unequivocally in support of Māori agency – and of Māori activism that lays the foundation for Māori agency?

Second, if the Bastion Point protest was historically invaluable, what does that say for other protest movements today – inside Māoridom and more widely?

Third, if English will say these things on the marae, will he say them in Parliament, and in the regions, to business groups and to his own party – will he say them to audiences who are not already primed to agree? He's a diffident leader, a quiet explainer more than an engaging winner of hearts and minds, and he's as liable as most politicians to duck the difficult issues when it's hard to stand up for them.

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Mind you, he probably thought he was saying all this to a Kiwi audience because he probably assumed his Waitangi Day speeches would be reported. Especially as he made it clear he knew Ngāti Whātua's achievements were founded on that great protest occupation. Audrey Young in the *Herald* covered some of it; almost no other media mentioned anything. It's not English's fault if he gets ignored when he speaks up.

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