

Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman
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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

History in the Making

New Zealand history is full of contradictions. In the very week that the government launched their \$1 million road show to educate the public about the "official" history of New Zealand and the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi, a UK based group released a different interpretation of world history (see www.economist.com).

Gavin Menzies and his 1421 Team presented new evidence of early Chinese exploration by Zheng He, strengthening their belief that Chinese colonies existed in New Zealand for hundreds of years before the arrival of Maori.

While our government appears to hold tightly onto the view that Maori are tangata whenua (with even the stories of the early Moriori occupation that our generation was taught in school having almost disappeared), local and international research is now painting a different picture of the early history of New Zealand.

Claims have been made that New Zealand enjoyed waves of exploration from as early as 600BC by Phoenician, Indian, Greek and Arab voyagers. In fact, claims of these visits help to explain the existence in the South Island of the fossilised remains of rats that have been carbon dated at 160 BC - more than 1,000 years before Maori!

There are further claims that before Maori arrived in New Zealand settlements had already been established, by the Waitaha, the peace-loving fair skinned ancestors of the Moriori, by Chinese miners, and by the Celts.

The testing of Maori DNA a technique that is now frequently used in historical research - would go a long way towards confirming or refuting these claims, but sadly, many Maori appear to be opposed

to it's use. In fact, last July, the Herald reported on the unwillingness of Maori to participate in the National Geographic's Genographic Project. This ambitious project aims to use DNA analysis to help explain how the ancestors of indigenous people moved out of Africa 60,000 years ago to spread across the globe. But the response from many Maori groups has been lukewarm, with their concern focusing on: "What's in it for indigenous people? What's the point of challenging generations of oral history and spiritual belief?"

Should evidence of pre-Maori colonization be discovered, the ramifications would be obvious. In the words of historian Dr James Belich, the greatest dread of historians is to discover an artifact or skeleton "which would invalidate the research of decades".

As a result of his investigations, Gavin Menzies is sure that the early Chinese played a far more significant part in our history than we realise. He would like to be given permission to

DNA test some early human remains. He says, "The New Zealand Government posses several skeletons carbon dated to centuries before the Maori claimed to have reached the North and South Islands. These skeletons should have their DNA examined. I have approached the leading expert (at Cambridge University) and he agreed to carry out this examination. However we need the consent of the New Zealand government who, as may be expected, have passed the buck by saying we need Maori consent".

Of further concern are claims that officialdom is making historic investigation nigh on impossible. If discoveries are on Department of Conservation land it is apparently extraordinarily difficult to gain

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permission to carry out scientific analysis. In cases where the discoveries include ancient human remains, it appears that rather than allowing carbon dating and DNA testing, the normal protocol (as Gavin Menzies and many others have found), is to return the material to local iwi for disposal.

This process poses two ironies. Firstly, when it is claimed that the remains are not of Maori descent, iwi should have no prior right of access or possession. Secondly, it would be a tragic twist of fate if people conquered, enslaved and killed by Maori were given back to Maori, thus preventing the detail of their background and history from ever being discovered.

In fact, as a matter of standard protocol, such remains should be held in Museums - as the safest and most appropriate place - until the origins and dates are clearly established.

The refusal of the government to cooperate over DNA testing of human remains is a huge contradiction. Such an isolationist attitude is in complete contrast to the Prime Minister's stance this week with regard to building closer trade relations with the United States. One would think that the answers to the unsolved mysteries of

mankind would lay in greater international cooperation not less, just as the PM has now finally realised that New Zealand's future prosperity depends on closer economic relations with our international trading partners.

Opening one's eyes to international trade yet closing one's eyes to international history is contradiction that has not yet been put to the government at a political or fourth estate level. Just as the public would show immense hostility

to the censorship of current news, so it should also be revolted by the censorship of historical record. If we live in the open and free society we like to presume, then all opinions should have an opportunity to be aired, considered and either accepted or rejected.

This week's poll asks whether you believe that the government should allow ancient human remains to be DNA tested.

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Useful websites:

<http://www.tepapa.govt.nz>
<http://www.1421.tv>
<http://www.celticnz.co.nz>
<http://www.zealand.org.nz>

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