Citizenship and the Treaty of Waitangi

The Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of New Zealand/Aotearoa, was also the first to deal with citizenship.

Māori are the tāngata whenua (the indigenous people) of the land of New Zealand and this culture is an integral part of the fabric of life in New Zealand. 'The Natives of New Zealand' – meaning Māori – became British subjects following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840.

The key words in the Māori text affirmed that Māori had:

• ...ngā tikanga katoa rite tahi ki ana mea ki ngā tāngata o Ingarangi
• ...the same rights and duties of citizenship as the people of [the United Kingdom]

The English text of the third article of the Treaty provides that the Queen "extends to the Natives of New Zealand Her royal protection and imparts to them all the Rights and Privileges of British subjects". Present-day New Zealand citizenship replaces the concept of "British subject".

As well as the obvious meaning of the words in the Treaty, there are deeper considerations. Citizenship was not restricted to one people. The citizenship of those who immigrated here and those born here was understood to be the same. And in each case citizenship created not only rights, but duties.

The Treaty also, of course, established the authority of the Crown, the governing authority which continues to this day as part of our modern democracy.

Using the governance, or kawanatanga authority established initially by the Treaty, the Crown has provided for immigration, first from a few source countries and now from many. It has passed laws protecting the human rights of all, continued to provide for immigration, and to uphold the principle of equal citizenship.

Sometimes people see the Treaty as being of relevance only for Māori and Māori relations with the Crown. In fact, it is the origin of our common citizenship and common nation. It also provides, through consideration of our shared citizenship, a way for all ethnic and cultural groups to relate to Māori, giving a bicultural foundation to our multiculturalism.

The signing of the Treaty is commemorated on 6 February each year. You can see the original treaty documents signed in different parts of the country in Wellington, where they are cared for by Archives New Zealand.

Special citizenship ceremonies may be held on Waitangi Day, including at the Governor-General’s official residence at Government House in Wellington, providing a visible link between our founding document and modern citizenship.