

Rugby, racism and the battle for the soul of Aotearoa New Zealand

The Springboks' tour and the protests that ensued 40 years ago helped set the fight for Māori rights on a stronger path



Anti-apartheid demonstrators invade the pitch in Hamilton during the Springboks' 1981 rugby tour of New Zealand.

John Minto

Sun 15 Aug 2021

The 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand will always have a special place in any narrative about the international fight against apartheid in South Africa.

The protests against the Springboks reverberated around the world – delivering a savage psychological blow to South Africa's white regime while giving a resounding boost to the oppressed majority.

This weekend marks the 40th anniversary of the first rugby Test of the Springboks' tour of New Zealand in Christchurch, but well before that game was played, the political significance of the visit had eclipsed any results on the field.

Three weeks before the first Test, the second game of the tour was to be played in Hamilton, and white South Africans in their droves got out of bed in the middle of the night to watch the first ever live telecast of a rugby game in the country.

It was to be a special moment in South Africa, but not as expected. Instead of the Springboks vs Waikato game, fans saw 300 protesters linking arms in the middle of

Hamilton's Rugby Park – declaring they would not leave till the tour had been called off.

The anger that swept through white South Africa was nearly as palpable, if not as physical, as the anger expressed on Hamilton's streets in the ensuing hours.

On South Africa's Robben Island, Nelson Mandela was spending his 18th year in jail. He said when the prisoners learned that an anti-apartheid protest had stopped the game, they were jubilant. They grabbed the bars of their cell doors and rattled them around the prison; he said it was like the sun came out.

Here in Aotearoa New Zealand, the tour protests also had a profound impact, although this took longer to play out. It was the closest we had come to civil war since the 19th century land wars, but more importantly the tour shone a harsh spotlight on racism in this country. Māori activists asked how could we be concerned about racism 10,000km away and ignore it in our own backyard? Fair question.

In the aftermath of the tour, racism took centre stage with an intense public debate that helped set Aotearoa New Zealand on a new path.

A decade earlier, Māori activist groups like Ngā Tamatoa (the young warriors) had challenged the Pākehā (European) majority about patronising attitudes and lazy racism that meant Māori were in effect second-class citizens.

Politicians are slow followers of public opinion, but four years after the tour and the wide discussion and debate it helped spur, the Waitangi Tribunal was given the responsibility to investigate historic breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi – previously the tribunal had only been mandated to look at possible future breaches. And so began its investigations into our history of racism and oppression and the injustices of colonisation, which continue to resonate for Māori in the present.

Since then numerous positive developments have given a stronger political voice to Māori.

In our most recent budget, the health minister, Andrew Little, announced the formation of a national Māori health authority that will have the power to contract health services for Indigenous New Zealanders where the state system has served them poorly. “By Māori, for Māori” is seen as a way to enhance our democracy with a turn away from the “tyranny of the majority”, under which they have fared poorly.

It's not all plain sailing though, and recent debate about Māori rights to representation on local councils has met hostile, albeit minority, opposition.

But the direction continues to be forward and work is under way to incorporate the history of colonisation in these South Pacific islands into the school curriculum.

The irony in these positive developments is that the overall situation for most Māori is getting worse, with New Zealand's Indigenous people disproportionately affected by poverty and inequality, which continues to grow relentlessly with the pandemic.

The civil disruption from the tour and the debate that followed benefited both New Zealand and South Africa in ways that we didn't see at the time. We are a better country for it.

John Minto was national organiser of Halt All Racist Tours (HART) in 1981 and is currently the national chair of Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa.