

## Bi-Culture Wars

I was enjoying my conversation with a fellow passenger on an Air New Zealand flight to Christchurch. He was a capable and lively professional, good at communicating. And we seemed to share many ideas about good governance and management.

We talked for half an hour before I remembered to introduce myself. He reciprocated. “Oh, like everyone from my country, I have a very long name. It’s on my card here. But just call me Hazik. In the Tamil language, my name means cheerful!”

And cheerful he was. Hazik explained his current role with gusto. “I’m a business analyst working with New Zealand government departments. My job is to help them get better value for money, by evaluating results from different programs to see what works well and what doesn’t. For example I just finished evaluating rehabilitation programs for prisoners. Very interesting! Some programs achieve a lot at not much cost, others are the opposite.”

“So what will happen from that evaluation?” I asked.

“Well of course they should act on the results”, Hazik said breezily. “Continue or expand the effective programs, and close down the others.” Then he gave me a sly smile. “But actually, what they usually do is continue, maybe even expand, the effective programs – and also the ones that are not effective!” His cheerfulness was infectious and we laughed loudly together.

I changed the subject. “You said before that you were working in southern Africa, at the same time I was working there. Were you born there? And, if you don’t mind me asking, how did you come to be working in New Zealand?”

Hazik was happy to explain. “I was born in Sri Lanka and went to school there. I did very well at school. But as you probably know, we have terrible ethnic divisions there, and opportunities for Tamils like me were limited. My family decided it would be better for me to work somewhere else. I had relatives in Africa, so I went there. Then I made friends with a Kiwi, who said that with my maths skills I could probably find work here. So I came for a visit and to study, and then looked for a job.”

Hazik smiled again, and continued. “My Kiwi friend helped me apply for a job with a government department. They needed my skills, and

everything was going really well. I got to the final interview and I thought I would get a job offer for sure! But I did something foolish and spoiled it.”

I was intrigued. “What did you do?”

“They said they had just one more question: ‘What did I think about bi-culturalism?’”

Hazik shook his head. “I never heard this term before! So I asked them, ‘What does it mean?’ They explained that it is wrong to think of everyone in New Zealand as having one national identity. Based on history, there are two different cultures – Maori and European. Those two cultures are separate, and have different history, customs and language. So surely the government should apply bi-culturalism, and treat each individual as belonging to one of those cultures.”

Hazik smiled ruefully. “‘What did I think about that idea?’, they asked me again.” He shook his head. “That was when I was very foolish. I told them ‘I think this biculturalism would be a very bad idea. That is what we have in Sri Lanka, and so we always have prejudice and discrimination, and sometimes riots, and even a civil war killing many people. Government should not create differences between people. It would be much better to emphasise what all the citizens have in common as New Zealand citizens, to strengthen unity and to help treat everyone fairly.’”

I smiled. “I bet that wasn’t the answer they expected!”

“Yes, it surprised them,” Haziq said cheerfully. “‘Oh no!’, the Maori person on the interview panel said. ‘We don’t want problems like those in Sri Lanka. We just want to emphasise the identity of our Maori people, so we can feel attached to the land of our ancestors, speak our own language, and receive government services tribally. And we want to vote separately for our own Maori representatives in Parliament.’”

“What did you say then?”

Hazik shook his head again. “I made it worse! I told them ‘That sounds to me like apartheid in South Africa. When I was working in Africa, everyone there knew apartheid drove people of different races further away from each other. It was wrong! We were all against it. In a democracy, everyone of all races should have equal opportunities and the same voting rights. So we were very happy when New Zealand rejected apartheid and would not play rugby with the Springboks.’”

It was my turn to laugh. “So you didn’t get the job?”

Hazik grew serious for a moment. “Of course not. My friend was furious with me. He explained how I must say that I support government policy on biculturalism, and not say what I truly believe.” Then he brightened. “Before my next interview, I practiced exactly what to say. So that time I had no problem getting the job. Since then I say only the right things, and now I am doing very well!”

We broke off to prepare for landing. I never saw Hazik again. Our conversation stayed with me though. Hazik had personally experienced where “bi-culturalism” can lead, and knew first-hand that what people have in common should be emphasised over their cultural identity. And he had learned another lesson. For those who hold a different opinion but want to work in New Zealand’s government, honesty is not the best policy.