

Abdullah Drury je kandidat za doktorat na Victoria universitetu u Wellingtonu. Magistrirao je na filozofiji na Waikato univerzitetu, istražujući historiju muslimanske zajednice Novog Zelanda. Također, nositelj je diplome magistra umjetnosti s počastima prve klase u povijesti na Waikato univerzitetu. Služio je kao gostujući predavač u ime dodiplomskog kursa Islam i Zapad na programu religijskih studija na Waikato univerzitetu. Autor je knjige „Islam na Novom Zelandu: kratka istorija udruženja muslimana Novog Zelanda.“ Recenzirao je širok spektar knjiga o temi islam u „Islam i kršćansko-muslimanski odnosi“ i u „The Muslim World Book Review“. Drury je napisao više novinskih i akademskih članaka o historiji i islamu. Jedan je od osnivača grupe „Waikato islamske studije“ i nekoliko godina je uređivao online reviju te grupe. Bio je na poziciji službenika za komunikacije u Federaciji islamskih udruženja Novog Zelanda između 1999. i 2002. godine. Bio je FIANZ-ov halal supervizor za južno ostrvo između 2002. i 2003. godine.
E-Mail: abdullah@xtra.co.nz

Abdullah Drury is a PhD candidate with Victoria University of Wellington and a University of Waikato MPhil graduate, researching the history of the New Zealand Muslim community. He also holds a BA in History and a Master of Arts with First Class Honours in History from the University of Waikato. He has served as Guest Lecturer on behalf of the University of Waikato's Religious Studies Programme's undergraduate course Islam & the West. He is the author of „Islam in New Zealand: A Short History of the New Zealand Muslim Association.“ He reviewed a wide range of books on the subject of Islam in „Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations“ and „The Muslim World Book Review“. Drury has written multiple newspaper and academic articles on history and Islam. He is also a founding member of the Waikato Islamic Studies group and edited the online Review for several years. He held the position of Communications Officer for the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand between 1999 and 2002 and served as the FIANZ's South Island Halal Supervisor between 2002 and 2003.
E-Mail: abdullah@xtra.co.nz



1951.

MS Goya
New Zealand



In Memory of

Bajram Murati

Died 27 Jul 2013

First Names: Bajram

Also known as: Brian

Last Name: Murati

Country: Australia

Funeral Home: Gentle Touch Funerals -
Mudgeeraba - QLD - Australia

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Abdullah DRURY

DOBRODUŠNI ALBANAC: BAJRAM MURATI I ZAŠTITNICI ISLAMA

• prvi dio •

A GENIAL ALBANIAN: BAJRAM MURATI AND THE WATCHDOGS OF ISLAM

• first part •

Abstract

This article analyses the biography of Bajram Murati (1930-2013), an Albanian refugee to New Zealand, and the contentions over symbolic spaces and meaning within the New Zealand Muslim community over the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. At the centre of the analysis stand the ongoing negotiations between Murati, as director-general of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress, and other Muslim community representatives over leadership. Such an examination reveals much about the wider immigrant experience and the nuanced evolution of Islam inside a secular society of Anglo-European Christian heritage. The author contextualizes the cultural and social setting of his life, highlighting both his commercial interests outside the religious organisations and his extensive discussions on faith issues. As should become obvious, the notion of a simple Albanian-Muslim rivalry with Asian-immigrants does not suffice to explain in depth the complex mechanisms at work. Altogether intra-Muslim communal competition, the reshaping of Islamic identities and solidarities across the country, and variegated political discourse have generated differences and loyalties that go well beyond one-dimensional ethnic conditionalities.

Key words: *Bajram Murati, New Zealand, Muslim Community, Albanian immigrants, Islam, Christianity.*

A GENIAL ALBANIAN: BAJRAM MURATI AND THE WATCHDOGS OF ISLAM

Introduction

This paper will attempt to illuminate the nature of some of the communal factionalism that affected the Auckland Muslim population over the 1970s and 1980s by focusing on the biography of an Albanian refugee named Bajram Murati, director-general of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress. For some, he is a very controversial and divisive character in New Zealand Muslim history. To those who remember and respect his legacy, the 'genial Albanian' was his sobriquet; to others, he was a dangerous *Fassaadi* (Arabic: disturber of the peace).^{▼1} Both of these views arise from his complex and unique cosmological and temporal ideas. Murati directed attention away from excessively verbose intellectual debates and vague philosophies, and towards the domain of practices and techniques. These views have flagged his biography as one of the most significant and curious figures in New Zealand Muslim history. He was most active in the 1970s, an era of radical freethinking in religious matters in the public domain, ripe with intellectual activity and theological debates of all types. The biography and career of Murati is a testimony to the enduring forces of economics and politics, and how such aspects intersect with ethnicity and faith to forge the idiosyncratic affairs of society.

^{▼1}Trevor Berry, 'Publican's Prize', *Auckland Star* (evening edition), 11 April 1970, p.35.



ILLUSTRATION - Christian view: Hendrik Goltzius, The Untangling of Chaos, or the Creation of the Four Elements, 1589, From the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art®. (Archive of Akšamija)

This essay constitutes an attempt to initiate an inquiry into a topic that has been repeatedly alluded to, but hitherto never thoroughly researched through this precise hermeneutical lens. It proffers new views on the history of New Zealand. I achieve this not only by examining the entangled, transnational aspects and facets of this past, but also by elucidating otherwise neglected sources: newspapers. The following article relies on the reading and analysis of media stories and interviews from the 1960s to the 1980s. (I invite the interested reader to peruse the bibliography and footnotes for further data.) Specifically, I examine the relationship between Murati's analytic stance towards the wider New Zealand Muslim community and the individualistic nature of his biography, rooted in Albanian history and Albanian notions of Islam.^{▼2} The argument is that the more dominant currents in Islamic theology and thought rely on such an analytical stance, that becomes most explicit in the case of defining (or not defining) its ontological models, whilst actually being the implied prerequisite in most examples of employing epistemological criteria. However, Murati articulated, and lived, a wide-ranging epistemology that did not need to be confined to the historical context of the civilization in which he resided.

Regardless of personal flaws and other impediments, notions of destiny and mission remained with Murati to the end, and pressure from others to alter his theology appear to have made no impression. His unique view of Islamic revisionism and revival may have seemed obsolete in a society slowly becoming more open to Muslim participation, nonetheless his life was an admirable effort to show refugees how to appreciate and realise themselves.

Above all, a biography of Murati is really a narrative about knowledge and time, and the relationship between the two. It is the story of an independent Muslim, a free-minded thinker who never ceased to wrestle with the difficulties and challenges of his era because the pursuit of purpose and meaning in the modern world demanded nothing less. Although he was determined to continue his activities with an almost pathological dedication, his failure to build links with other Muslims in New Zealand, did not help his cause. However, he was never entirely sure of being able to win over the critics to his side of any given argument or case, and to the very end of his life he remained decidedly on the defensive. This aspect or urge may provide a clue to his creative, entrepreneurial and intellectual approach, and may even be the primary factor in determining his character and role in history. After his death in 2013, so influential was the Muslim community opposition ranged against Murati in life, that he was virtually purged from the collective cultural consciousness.

^{▼2} For more, see: Anton Logoreci, *The Albanians, Europe's Forgotten Survivors* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977); Miranda Vickers, *The Albanians: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999).



Overview: the Muslim Community of New Zealand

According to the March 2018 census there are over 60,000 Muslims in New Zealand: the majority are of Asian ethnicity and over half of whom live in Auckland. Only a small number are of European ethnicity or Albanian nationality. However, for over six decades, within various Islamic organisations, Albanian Muslim immigrants and refugees have made a significant contribution.^{▼3} In July 1950, the first formal Islamic entity was created – the ‘New Zealand Muslim Association’ (NZMA) – in Auckland. At the time, there were only around 200 Muslims in the entire country (almost all Asian or Indian).^{▼4} In April 1959 the Association purchased a residential property for use as an Islamic Centre in central Auckland and in the following year, Maulana Ahmed Said Musa Patel (1937-2009) from India arrived to serve as the first *Mullah* in New Zealand.^{▼5} Other Muslim organisations were established in Christchurch and Wellington over 1964 and 1977. In April 1979, Mazhar Krasniqi (1931–2019), was elected inaugural president of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), the first national Muslim body.^{▼6} Due to substantial alterations to the immigration laws in 1987, the size of the Muslim community in New Zealand has expanded exponentially over the past three decades.^{▼7} Overall, this minority confessional group is remarkably diverse in character, ethnicity and geography. This creates challenges in making exact generalisations regarding the activities, associations, interactions and relationships of such a diffuse population.

^{▼3} See: Sabit R. Abdylil, *Bijtë e shqipes në tokën e reve të bardha* (Auckland: Universal Print & Management, 2010).

^{▼4} *New Zealand Population Census 1951, Volume III – Religious Profession*, (Wellington, 1953), p. 9; Abdullah Drury, *Islam in New Zealand: The First Mosque* (Christchurch, 2006), p. 6.

^{▼5} Drury, *Islam in New Zealand*, pp. 13-19.

^{▼6} Ainsley Thomson, ‘Mazhar Krasniqi’, *New Zealand Herald*, 31 December 2002, p. A6; Zohoor Mohammad Khan, ‘Mazhar Shukri Krasniqi’, *One Hundred Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2006), pp. 157-160; Sabit R. Abdylil, *Bijtë e shqipes në tokën e reve të bardha*, pp. 67-70.

^{▼7} *New Zealand Official Yearbook*, 2010, p. 106.

There have been two significant waves of Albanian migrants to settle in New Zealand. In 1951, the first cohort arrived on board the MS Goya through the IRO (International Refugee Organisation, a precursor to the UNHCR) as refugees from Socialism.^{▼8} Murati and Krasniqi (see above) arrived on this vessel. During the late 1990s, the second important group came from Kosova. In between these dates there was a steady dribble of individuals and families. William Shepard of the University of Canterbury reports that most European Muslim immigrants were 'quicker to adopt Kiwi ways, more inclined to marry into the Kiwi community, and more likely to attenuate its Muslim identity.'^{▼9}



ILLUSTRATION - Disembarkation and registration of migrants from the ship MS Goya in 1951. Portrait of twenty-one-year-old Murati.
 ILUSTRACIJA - Iskrcavanje i registracija migranata sa broda MS Goya 1951. godine. Portret dvadesetjednogodišnjeg Muratija.

▼8 Peter Plowman, *Australian Migrant Ships 1946 - 1977* (Dural, N.S.W.: Rosenberg Publishing, 2006), p.36.

▼9 William Shepard, 'The Islamic Contribution: Muslims in New Zealand', *Religion in New Zealand Society*, (Palmerston North, New Zealand: Dunmore Press, 1985), p. 182.

We do not need to explore the Jungian synchronicity or maladaptive behavioural patterns in detail, but in whatever guise or level, the low and high points in the life of a community leader immersed in the murky shadows of politicking and is diametrically opposed to a righteous and morally strict individual. Historically, the establishment and operation of business enterprises has seldom been the most glamorous or cerebral of occupations. However Murati's story is told and preserved in a remarkable series of newspaper articles and in-depth interviews. These capture his words, the very voice of Murati from his personal sweep of sentences, choice of anecdotes, to his chosen vocabulary and axiomatic presuppositions. Since Murati imbued so much of his personal efforts into his career, he appears to have perceived any and all setbacks (real or imagined) as serious personal slights. Was Bajram Murati the Frank Spencer of New Zealand Islam, skating under a moving articulated lorry on the motorway? As an Albanian Muslim who had clearly meditated on the agonistic character of life in other contexts, he introduced this aspect as a key component of his argument about the role of religion. The complex but nuanced interplay and counterplay of body and mind was the primary agonistic locus; however another struggle for the idea of truth was occurred here beyond the basic truth value of propositional statements.

What sort of man was he? What gave him this power of character? How did he actually affect and influence the New Zealand Muslim community? We will never understand the refugee from Communism if we do not realise that for him ideas possessed actual spiritual and physical reality on a par with human passions and emotions.



ILLUSTRATION - Orewa Beach, Auckland, 1950s-1960s. - Public transport towards Auckland. © National Publicity Studios.
ILUSTRACIJA - Plaža Orewa, Auckland, 1950/1960. godine - Javni transport u pravcu Aucklanda. © National Publicity Studios.

Murati – a Biographical Background

bajram Murati was born on 2 August 1930 in Vlorë, a large seaport in southern Albania. His father, Sherif Murat Haxhimuhaj, was from Podgorica in neighbouring Montenegro. At a time when kinship ties were lifelines for building careers in the country, Murati was born into a well-established family; his father was a scion of one of the prominent regional houses and had travelled much as a young man. Even if he didn't receive any direct religious education, during his youth he was exposed to an environment blessed by many intelligent philosophers, thinkers, poets, writers and politicians, both Christian and Muslim. For Albanians, in contrast to most New Zealanders, WWII ended in a disaster of truly apocalyptic proportions – in the literal sense. In November 1944 the Communist Party violently seized power in Albania and by the end of the month Sherif Haxhimuhaj was publicly executed in Shkodër, in the north of the country. Two months later in January 1945, Murat Isuf Haxhimuhaj, aged 85, the grandfather of Bajram Murati, was executed in Shkodër and buried hurriedly. It was a critical and inciting incident in the life of Bajram. The murders were three months after his fourteenth birthday. Murati has realised in his youth that power was not just an abstract thought or simply agonistic knowledge but also imaginative, not merely substantive but relational; as a phenomena, it existed only in relation to how it is regarded and yielded, which meant that serious thinkers need to move away from mechanistic models predicated on a purely material bases.

In a 1979 newspaper interview, Murati explained his upbringing. “At 14 years of age I decided to escape to Greece. Two years later I was on board a ship as an assisted immigrant bound for New Zealand.” He explained that the men were introduced to the entire country through Southland. “When we left the ship, a Government official gave us 10 schillings each and sent us out to work on farms. From my first wage packet I took one pound and put it in the Post Office. That one pound is still there today, and when I retire I shall send it and all the interest back to the Government.”^{▼10} In a 1981 interview, Murati described himself arriving as a penniless 16 year old:

I couldn't speak English and I was quite alone. [. . .] I was taken with 40 others to a camp at Pahiatua and given 10s. We stayed there two weeks to try to learn your language then I was sent to Invercargill to work on a farm. But that didn't work out – I wasn't a farmer. I came to Auckland and got a job in a knitting mill but I never had any money. I remember one Sunday night I came home, utterly broke, and I decided then that was no way to live. I had to pull myself together, to make a decent life for myself.

^{▼10} 'Mini Disneyland a dream denied', *North Shore Times*, 25 September 1979, p.5.

His oratory is lofty and finely-phrased, rather than forensically technical or full of compressed, pedantic classical quotations that hinge on minutiae. When Murati arrived in Auckland it had been under Anglo-Saxon governance for over one hundred years and had become a distinctive cultural and economic centre: a place of frenetic activity, intense debate and sororate marriages. Murati possessed many ambitions and retiring to the countryside to live a quiet life of solitude was not one of them, so the move to Auckland was one of the most significant periods of his life and would provide the catalyst for much of his subsequent economic success and community leadership experience. Evidently the Albanian asked for overtime at the mill and saved every penny until he had £250 which he used as a deposit on a bed-and-breakfast place at 27 College Hill, aged 19 years.^{▼11} Curiously the Wises Post Office Directory for 1962 identified this building as the 'Murati Apartments' and listed Bajram Murati as a fish merchant at 10 Bellevue Ave in Mt Eden.^{▼12}



ILLUSTRATION - Current offer in the sale of fish, Mt. Eden 60s.
ILUSTRACIJA - Aktualna ponuda u prodaji ribe, Mt. Eden 60-tih.

^{▼11} Graeme Kennedy, 'The Casino dream man who has had enough', *Auckland Star* (evening edition), 19 September 1981, p.6.

^{▼12} *Wise's Post Office Directory*, Volume 1, Auckland City 1962-1963, p.281.

MOSQUE

MUSLIMS IN N.Z. HOPE FOR AID TO BUILD A MOSQUE

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — The difficulty of establishing a mosque in New Zealand will be brought to the notice of the World Muslim Congress regional conference which begins here on Friday.

New Zealand's only delegate to the conference, Mr. Bajram Murati, 30, said this today after he arrived here by air.

Mr. Murati said: "There are 500 Muslims in New Zealand but they are living all over the country.

"This in itself presents a problem for setting up a mosque but the main stumbling block is lack of money."

He would be asking the conference for help in setting up a mosque.

Lack of books

Mr. Murati said: "Another point that I will be raising is the difficulty we have in getting Muslim religious books."

A big problem that faced New Zealand Muslims was the fact that there were no religious officials.

"We only have two religious teachers for the 500 Muslims in the country," he said.

Mr. Murati is a political refugee from Albania who migrated to New Zealand in 1951 after fleeing to Greece from Albania in 1949.

This afternoon a five-man delegation arrived from Formosa to attend the conference, which will be opened by the Prime Minister, Tengku Abdul Rahman.



ILLUSTRATION - Bajram Murati at the *International Islamic Conference* in Kuala Lumpur. © Press, February 1, 1964.

It is not clear exactly when Murati started to take an interest in Muslim community affairs but in February 1964 he was reported in the newspapers across New Zealand, attending an international Islamic conference in Kuala Lumpur. How he got there and who invited him remains a mystery, but the article is especially significant because it was his first public pronouncement on this earth and an important reflection of his religious testament. The Christchurch Press noted: 'A New Zealand Muslim has called for a modernisation of the teaching of Islam. Mr Bajram Murati, originally from Albania, is representing New Zealand at a South-East Asian Muslim conference here. The 30-year old property dealer told reporters the only medium for instruction in Islam remained Arabic.

Unless there is a change in this method, our religion will not prosper," he said. "We are at a standstill. We must catch up with the times." Islam should be spread by intelligent multi-lingual missionaries, and there should be wide translations of the Koran. ▼¹³

It is a remarkably bold statement and a lovely image, an artful piece of theatre – there can be no doubt that Murati's conceit here is a rather brilliant one. As a Muslim, Murati believed that *Yawm al-qiyamah*, the end day, was imminent and thus he had a solemn and urgent religious task to perform – to ensure as many folk as possible avoided hellfire. He wanted to help them fulfil the requirements of Allah and was therefore, on occasion, slightly forceful and blunt in his presentation of Islam and its attendant precepts. His views were socially inclusive but his message to fellow Muslims was blunt. Sociologically, the disposition and temperament of deep religious belief is such that normative reasoning about the means and ends, the pathways and risks, are often of secondary consideration, and usually pale when contrasted to the notion of an omnipresent, omnipotent and limitless deity capable of delivering miraculous consequences. Naturally, BM was a rational thinker, possessing a steady grasp on communal dynamics and veracity, but he perceived Allah in this confessional light – albeit with an eye on hard temporal realities.

Two days later another article pronounced that “a New Zealand Muslim leader” wanted the services of an English-speaking Imam, or Muslim teacher, to spread the faith of Islam in the Dominion. He informed the regional conference of the world Muslim congress that “although we now have an Imam in New Zealand he does not speak English. So it is almost impossible for him to teach our children, or to spread the gospel of Islam throughout New Zealand.” He stated that Muslim religious books were absent and the country did not have a proper mosque. “I can assure you that when we do have a mosque it will bring a better understanding of the Islamic religion to the people of New Zealand whose only religion now is Christianity.” ▼¹⁴ They had to be delivered from the risk of eternal damnation, one way or another. Glibness aside, Murati in fact makes a significant point here.

▼¹³ 'Islam Teaching Retarded', *Press*, 1 February 1964, p.15.

▼¹⁴ 'Imam, Mosque Wanted For New Zealand', *Press*, 3 February 1964, p.13.

It is unclear precisely what kind of religious activity Murati had in mind. Did he want a mullah who could compose literary texts or develop an Islamic philosophy of life tuned to the realities of New Zealand society? Or was he dreaming of some kind of ratiocination and revaluation of theological values? These newspaper articles do not reveal his creative-religious aspirations in any detail, and it seems unlikely to me that he had fully formulated them clearly in his own mind at this stage. His theme was an ontology of a vast domain that was not merely theoretical but experienced and utilitarian. However, Murati knew for a certainty that he needed to evolve from the type of mediocre sectarian community leader who talked about others, into a primary character about whom others talk and write. It is also clear that travel gave Murati a feeling for the diverse culture and geography of the world outside Albania and New Zealand. He immersed himself in alien traditions and languages first hand, asked pertinent questions and learnt much.

It is noteworthy that he appears to have never mastered Arabic or classical Arabic, and thus his knowledge of the Quran was second-hand and filtered; he does not seem to have studied with the Ulema resident in New Zealand or the South Pacific at all. He does not appear to have attended lectures or participated in any debates within the Muslim community (for example, over the validity of the Milad celebrations). He may have disagreed with much that was taught or preached in the public domain but does not seem to have been interested in accepting or refuting popular ideas of other theologians, philosophers or religious leaders. He accepted that others possessed truth but was uninterested in detailed debates about spirituality. (This is not to ignore the fact that his own writing and pronouncements were extremely influenced by popular Muslim intellectual and philosophical presuppositions, theories and so forth.) He does appear to have understood immediately and totally that the Quran is best understood to be a discursive commentary on the ongoing affairs and experiences of the prophet Muhammed and his entourage over 23 years, and was never intended as a systemic treatise on ethics, morality or legislation (although certainly, devout Muslims will comprehend the text to be the definitive, literal and final revelation to mankind by Allah.)

Why was a successful businessman like Murati motivated to pursue religious activities? Historically and philosophically, the world and the self may have possessed vast or even tragic proportions, but Murati chose to experiment with the non-tragic side of life, knowledge and optimism employing a kind of strategic fearlessness. It was a contradiction that was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Clearly, he hoped to determine how far it could be taken, and what would happen if he acted or articulated several possible lines of thought; in all probability, the thrill of the intellectual chase would never be sated. Murati dedicated himself to a regimen of hardening his gaze against excessive emotion or pathos, fortifying his will to clarity and sobriety against the singular allure of crass materialism.

In 1967 newspapers across New Zealand reported – usually on the front page – that a local Muslim community leader, Bajram Murati, had sent a cablegram to President Nasser of Egypt expressing full support of Arab military action in the Middle East. Identified as a spokesman for the New Zealand Muslim Association (NZMA), Murati announced that the message was sent after a meeting of members of the

association in Auckland. Apparently, the cablegram read: “The New Zealand Moslem Association fully supports the Arab cause, morally and materially if need be. Please convey our feeling to all the heads and people of the Arab world.”^{▼15} These remarks are an observation of what Murati expected from community leadership: they had to go beyond simply parroting propositional truths and should approach issues in a manner both existential, pragmatic and public. It would be fair to say that ethics, justice and morality were a lifelong obsession for the refugee, especially after his experiences during and after World War Two in Albania. For Murati, it seems that an Islamic concept possessed 'truth' if it demonstrated and / or illustrated a sufficiently imaginative and stimulating power to oppose injustice and tyranny. Only this idea could confer dignity upon life. Across myriad societies, polities and cultures, ethics and morality were regarded as systems that went beyond simple notions of differentiating good and evil, and reached to the core issues of distinguishing truth from falsehood. As he contemplated these subjects and themes, and began to articulate his views in the media, he began to realise that the basic human condition was actually their relationship to God. Man – the *dividuum* in traditional Western philosophical precepts – can and must relate to both himself and the Almighty. The private citizen was not a harmonious entity but a discordant one. The life of the individual, and the thus the life of social cultures as a whole, therefore revolved around a series of self-examinations.



ILLUSTRATION - Bajram Murati, had sent a cablegram to President Nasser. (Archive of Akšamija)
 ILUSTRACIJA - Bajram Murati, poslao je telegram egipatskom predsjedniku Nasseru. (Arhiv Akšamija)

^{▼15} “Cable to Nasser”, *Press*, 12 June 1967, p.1; See also: “N.Z. Moslems Support Arab Cause”, *New Zealand Herald*, 12 June 1967, p.1; “N.Z. Moslems Pledge Support”, *Otago Daily Times*, 12 June 1967, p.5.

Two months later in August, Murati purchased the New Criterion Hotel on Albert Street in central Auckland. Family say he never spoke about his past and that they felt he was always looking over his shoulder, thinking of the long arm of the Albanian secret police. Apparently, this is why they lived in a hotel initially, giving him and his family some degree of security. When he built the home on the Hibiscus Coast, it was surround by an eight foot high wall and the premises possessed only one entrance. He applied to convert the hotel premises into a regular public bar or tavern, transitioning from a focus on accommodation to a focus on the sale of alcohol, but this was declined by the Licensing Control Commission. In April 1970, despite being a football soccer player with no connections to rugby league, he created the "Brian Murati Award" for local rugby league officials and was described by the newspapers as a 'genial Albanian'.^{▼16} Early in 1972 he sold the Hotel to Fletcher Development Co. Ltd. Something of a maverick, Murati was not an easy man to understand.



ILLUSTRATION - In April 1970, Bajram Murati initiated and established the "Brian Murati" award for members of the local rugby league in Auckland. (Archive of Akšamija)

ILUSTRACIJA - Bajram Murati je aprila 1970. godine inicirao i ustanovio nagradu "Brian Murati" za članove lokalne ragbi lige u Auckland. (Arhiv Akšamija)

^{▼16} Trevor Berry, 'Publican's Prize', *Auckland Star* (evening edition), 11 April 1970, p.35.

The Height of His Game

In the 1970s Bajram Murati emerged as a serious community leader, in both Muslim and non-Muslim circles. He developed an opposition to the policies of fellow Albanian Mazhar Krasniqi in the NZMA and established his own Islamic agency. His was a high order morality. (Perhaps, briefly, the best way of characterising higher order morality is to consider that an individual who is moral has the capacity for physical aggression, or even violence, but is also capable of controlling and regulating that aspect of his persona in a civilised and constructive manner.) He joined a faint chorus of disapproval alleging cupidity, partisanship and infidelity to Islamic practices in the NZMA. However, to some extent, his was a Pyrrhic victory, the primary cost being the discrediting of his reputation as a modest Muslim and a leader of men. By the 1980s, his cause somewhat lost, he would live out the rest of his days in carefully composed dignity but relative obscurity. Whatever opinions were expressed of Murati he remains larger than life in many respects: an unforgettable and *sangfroid* character who spoke his mind, followed his passions, and loved both his family and community.



ILLUSTRATION - Bajram Murati founded his own Islamic agency in New Zealand. (Archive of Akšamija)
ILUSTRACIJA - Bajram Murati je osnovao vlastitu islamsku agenciju u Novom Zelandu. (Arhiv Akšamija)

At some point between 1971 and 1973, Murati built a house in the Auckland suburb of Orewa and called it the “Villa Barakat” (‘house of blessings’ in a curious mixture of Latin and Arabic). Around the same time, he purchased a holiday resort at nearby Puriri beach.

At some point between 1971 and 1973, Murati built a house in the Auckland suburb of Orewa and called it the “Villa Barakat” (‘house of blessings’ in a curious mixture of Latin and Arabic). Around the same time, he purchased a holiday resort at nearby Puriri beach.

In July 1973 Murati briefly entered the world of yachting. He cheerfully initiated the “Brian Murati Trophy” (designed by David Barker) with a \$250 cash prize. Newspapers reported: ‘better known as “mine host” at the Windsor Park Hotel at Mairangi Bay’ Murati had already donated \$1000 to the Auckland Sailing Club. The Club secretary P.L. Quinn said: ‘Mr Murati, who presents a weekly award to the Auckland Rugby League, is interested in fostering the interests of youth. ▼¹⁷



ILLUSTRATION - Windsor Park Hotel, in Mairangi Bay.
ILUSTRACIJA - Hotel Windsor Park, u zaljevu Mairangi.

▼¹⁷ ‘\$1000 Yachting Trophy for one-of-a-kind’ *New Zealand Herald*, 11 October 1973, p.10.

A year later, firmly based in Orewa, the plucky Albanian contested the Auckland mayoral elections. The newspaper reported: 'Mr Brian Murati has sealed his wife and family off from the violence of Auckland. One of five candidates for the mayoralty, Mr Murati has promised to adopt a strong law-and-order platform.'^{▼18} The newspaper photograph featured him at his home with his wife and children, bearing a surprisingly wolfish grin that suggested a slightly dark soul. (The article went on to describe his remarkable residence: apparently he had dug the foundations for the Moorish style house himself. Located on a 4250sq foot plot, the property possessed eight foot walls and wrought iron gates. Most of the floor of the house was covered in turquoise carpet.) It was also understood that Sundays was family day and that no business was ever conducted on that day. Throughout his life he was a man of broad tastes and culture: his favourite cars were Holdens, his favourite film was 'Zorba the Greek', his preferred music was Neil Diamond, whilst his favourite song was 'Never on a Sunday' by Connie Francis. In another newspaper article, the candidate for the Auckland mayoralty (described as a 'hard-headed hotel owner') talked about expansion plans for his 23 acre holiday resort property on the Hibiscus Coast, 'only half a mile from his glamorous Moorish home.' Murati's proposal involved 'flooding about 25 acres of a 150-acre park. Dotted in the artificial oceans he sees clusters of islands, the home of birds, animals and Disney-like attractions for all the family.' He was unable to state where or when exactly, and insisted the project – wonderfully nicknamed 'Murati-land' – preceded his bid for the Auckland mayoralty. This time the newspaper featured the Albanian beside a lone donkey resident in his park.^{▼19} Perhaps ironically, in person Murati was not exactly a chiselled example of Mediterranean masculine vigour, more resembling a happily retired Presbyterian cleric than a Greco-Roman sculpture. His pose, looking directly at the camera with a gentle smile, exude confidence, intimacy and immediacy, or at least as much confidence as one could expect in the presence of a live donkey. Other contenders for the job were not so conscientious. In the following month, Murati publicly criticised the present Mayor, suggesting his support from the Citizens and Ratepayers Association undermined the independence of the post.^{▼20} That put a knot in his tail and he later claimed to have experienced a heart attack from the pressure of the election. He retired from the contest before the formal vote in October 1974.^{▼21} Over such issues, it is perhaps unnecessary to linger, and discretion and charity will induce the reader to draw a polite veil.

Almost a decade later, in a Metro magazine interview, Murati observed retrospectively:

^{▼18} 'Relief in their Orewa seclusion', *Sunday Herald*, 25 August 1974, p.60.

^{▼19} 'Disneyland no dream', *Sunday Herald*, 1 September 1974, p.64.

^{▼20} 'About face by Mayor says Murati', *Auckland Star*, 2 September 1974, p.25.

^{▼21} Graeme Kennedy, 'The Casino dream man who has had enough', *Auckland Star* (evening edition), 19 September 1981, p.6.

I would have approached the people frequently through the news media. I would have appealed to them for support in cleaning up the city. Auckland is the most frightening city in the world. It is the dirtiest city in the world. The law is too lenient. ▼²²

Here is a typical example of his lacerating style of polemic. These details assert the individuality of the interlocutor and convince the reader that we are observing his true ideas in his own words. It is laced with a peculiar type of subtle and withering sarcasm. It is clever and cutting. It is difficult not to conclude that Murati would, indeed, have made an excellent Mayor of Auckland.

On Murati's part, it was an oratorical masterpiece, but only one of many recorded in the newspapers over the years. In fact, the articulations made by Murati in the newspapers can be approached as an especially efflorescent instance of the implementation of an implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) positive epistemology. As such, the assertion of this essay is that such an approach would not simply provide elucidations on such complex theological proclivities, but rather shed potentially valuable hermeneutical light on his words, functioning as a utilitarian thread running through it. Consequently, the focal points here consist of queries regarding knowledge and its disclosure, the function of language and religion, and so forth. Murati was clearly very competent and professional in all his dealings, and it is evident that he found great personal reward in helping others; he was visibly keen to facilitate the benevolent development of the talents of other folk, providing employment and economic opportunity for many individuals to pursue their careers and succeed.

It is not clear when Bajram Murati parted ways with the NZMA. The tides of history are indeed often fickle and capricious. One suspects he was drop-kicked sometime after the 1967 Nasser telegram. On 14 January 1975 Murati and Mohammed Iqbal from Sri Lanka created the 'New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress' (hereafter NZC/MWC). William Shepard was informed that a Yugoslav Muslim named 'Muhammed Fard' was also a member but this has never been independently confirmed nor has the identity of this bloke been clarified. ▼²³ The pairing up was unobvious and in our era, like some point in ancient Arabian mythology, nobody seems to know how it happened exactly; none of the available paperwork explains their introduction or relationship but it appears to have been quasi-functional. (Several years later, in a 1983 newspaper interview, Murati described the NZC/MWC as the 'watchdogs of Islam'.) ▼²⁴ In July 1975 they made the front page of the main Auckland newspaper, the New Zealand Herald, with their spectacular public proposal to build a \$3 million mosque in Freeman's Bay funded by the headquarters of the World

▼²² "The Immigrants: Brian Murati", *Metro*, Number 16, October 1982, p.46.

▼²³ Abdullah Drury, *Islam in New Zealand: The First Mosque* (Christchurch, 2006), p. 21.

▼²⁴ Warren Berryman, 'Insensitivities created halal meat difficulties', *National Business Review* (19 December 1983), p.13.

Muslim Congress in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The interview is intriguing in its presentation and conclusion, as it counters multiple points by potential opponents, elucidates the Islamic character of the endeavour, and attempts to reconcile modernity and Islam. Murati stressed that design would fit into existing New Zealand architecture and then elaborated the exceptions such as traditional Islamic building features, a 50 foot dome, a 60 foot minaret, a 200 space carpark, a library of Arabic and English books on Islam. The plan was an opulent triumph of mathematical ingenuity as much as it was of aesthetics and beauty. 'The director-general of the New Zealand Council, Mr B. Murati, said the cultural centre could be used for recreation and education purposes.' The architect, J.C. Sinclair emphasized that simplicity would be a key feature of the facility and Al-Haj Muhammad Iqbal, the secretary-general of the Council, stated that a block of 45 apartments would provide residence for overseas students and help pay maintenance costs. 'The mosque is to be named Auckland Mosque New Zealand and if Mr Murati and Mr Iqbal have their way it will be the first of a chain of mosques throughout the country.'²⁵ The New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress had the zeitgeist behind it (a mosque was built by another Islamic agency a few years later in a different suburb), the question was how to eventuate this zeal and these goals. In short, the plan was lethal on paper but possessed far too many revolving cogs and working parts to actually work, and nothing came of the scheme; the Congress was no Schmalkaldic League. One cannot comment much on this newspaper interview: what it really necessitates is silence and reflection.

On 8 May 1976, a Saudi delegation led by Dr Abdullah Al-Zaid from the University of Medina visited Auckland in response to appeals for assistance in uniting the Muslims of the city. He met with representatives of the four main Islamic groups, including the NZC/MWC at the Intercontinental Hotel and appointed a 'Caretaker Committee' to administer the assets and resources of all the factions until legal unification could be attained. It is unclear whether Murati attended but his deputy Mohamed Iqbal was placed on the Committee.²⁶ As long as they maintained an imperium in imperio inside the NZMA, it was utterly impossible for any proper leadership to function efficiently and they effectively remained quite independent. Murati never clearly stated what his opposition to the NZMA merger actually was with any surgical precision. One can only conjecture. He had bared the innermost workings of his soul as never before to another coterie of human beings, sensing an unparalleled profundity of mutual comprehension and goodwill between them. Together they had touched the core of his aims, objectives and talents, and he felt that they understood him completely. It seems to me that the truly unbearable realisation for the Albanian refugee was the fact that they understood him totally (or did they?) and then, with their boundless energy, vitality and numbers, he simply moved on to other characters and did not remain overly impressed with all that he had to offer as a community leader. He was relegated to be a stage in their broader communal development, rather than

²⁵ "Mosque to Cost \$3 Million", *New Zealand Herald*, 24 July 1975, p.1.

²⁶ Martin Bishop, 'A History of the Muslim Community in New Zealand to 1980', a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of M.A. in history at the University of Waikato (Waikato University, 1997), p.33.

a culminating terminus. I suspect this deeply wounded him both emotionally and intellectually, personally. Perhaps he even felt abused and exploited, offended and betrayed? In his worldview, all of these perceived affronts, disdain, and insults stemmed from a tedious world of cerebral mediocrity (and he was not overly wrong in his assessment here.) A few months later, in June, Dr Inamullah Khan, secretary-general of the World Muslim Congress and a close friend and collaborator with Bajram Murati, visited the Auckland Muslim community. He spoke out against Apartheid and Zionism, and stated that he would try to raise money overseas to finance the proposed Freeman's Bay mosque.²⁷ His were challenging and visceral words in person reported on the front page of a main newspaper.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Dr. Abdullah al-Zaid's meeting with representatives of four major Islamic groups, including the NZC/MWC, was held at the Intercontinental Hotel, Auckland May 8, 1976. (Archive of Akšamija)

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Sastanak dr. Abdullaha al-Zaida sa predstavnicima četiri glavne islamske grupe, uključujući i NZC/MWC, održan je u Hotelu Intercontinental, Auckland 8. maja 1976. (Arhiv Akšamija)

²⁷ 'Moslem Please on Racism', *New Zealand Herald* (17 June 1976), p.1.

A few days before the start of Ramadan in August 1976, two carpets arrived from Iran as an offering from the Shah to the Muslim community in New Zealand. Measuring four metres by 5.21 metres and weighing approximately 130 kilos each, the hand-woven carpets from the Kerman district featured a dark blue panel with contrasting borders of red, pink, green, blue and gold detail. A year after his earlier public plan to build a \$3 million mosque in Freeman's Bay, Murati pounced on this opportunity like a cat on an expensive vase and as Director-General of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress he expeditiously escorted the items from the airport immediately. In the newspapers, he was quoted: 'This is a surprise gift which is most gratefully received. We hope that there will be a time when the shah will come and pray in our mosque.'^{▼28} The items were further described by Murati as 'priceless' and it was agreed to place them on display to the general public immediately at the Queen Street headquarters of the Bank of New South Wales. Afterwards they were insured for \$100,000 and stored in the strong room vault of the head office of New Zealand Insurance. There is an almost brash sort of braggadocios air to the director-general of the New Zealand Council of the World Muslim Congress in this image. However, other members of the New Zealand Muslim community felt the carpets were intended for the Islamic Centre in Auckland, operated by the NZMA. This was a grave step indeed and Murati faced reprimands and rebukes for decades from his friends and colleagues for his meddling.^{▼29} Criticism was a constant companion of Murati's biography. Although it was not in his character to bemoan issues publicly, Murati must have resented what he perceived to be an uninformed and derisive commentary. Although sincere in his motives, Murati still incurred the ire and wrath of some of his countrymen and other Muslims, especially over his involvement in the Iranian carpet drama.



ILLUSTRATION - Islamic Centre in Auckland operated by the NZMA.
ILUSTRACIJA - Islamski centar u Aucklandu kojim upravlja NZMA.

^{▼28} 'Gifts For Mosque From The Shah', *New Zealand Herald*, 25 August 1976, p.1.

^{▼29} See: Hanif Quazi, *Hybrid of Peace – Pioneered in New Zealand* (Levin: 2019), p.203.

In 1977 a portrait photograph of Bajram Murati leaning on his Holden Statesman, in the driveway of his Moorish house, was created by artist Clive Stone in Auckland. Imaginatively entitled 'The Hibiscus Coast Project, Residents: Brian Murati, Orewa', the piece is a 187X230 mm silver gelatin print image of the man standing in front of his car, presumably on his front lawn. In 2015, it was gifted to the Auckland Art Gallery. By this stage in his life, he had outlived his own father and secured the goodwill of the general public he lived with.

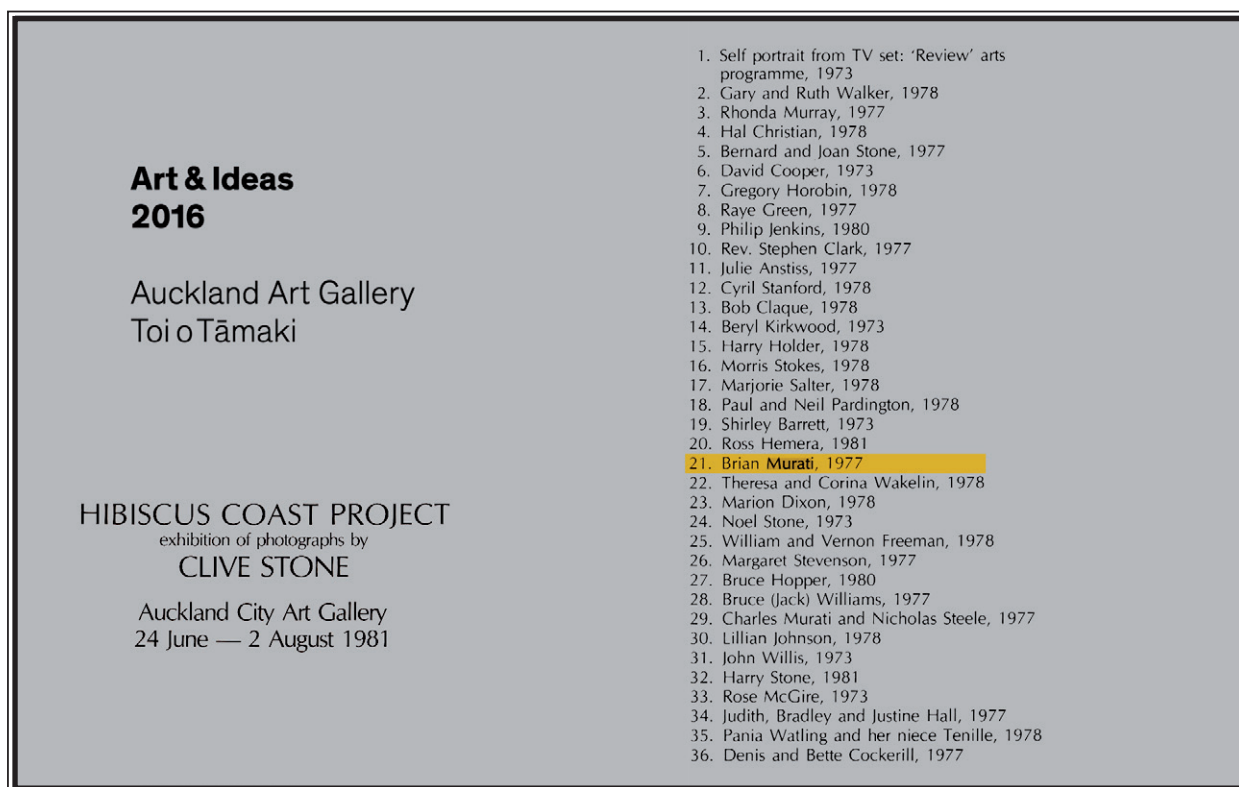


ILLUSTRATION - *Hibiscus Coast Project* by Clive Stone at the Auckland City Art Gallery and Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.
ILUSTRACIJA - *Projekt Hibiscus Coast* Clivea Stonea u Auckland City Art Gallery i Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki.

In May 1978, Murati announced plans for a massive new project – a 60 metre high casino, complete with a 200-bed international standard hotel on Centreway Road in Orewa. There was a snag to this nifty idea and one local newspaper reported tersely: 'The scale of the development made it environmentally suspect.' The Rodney County Council planning officer J. F. Cameron expressed reservations and raised issues concerning the present Gaming Act, even though the Albanian suggested a percentage of the profits would go their way.^{▼30} However the Hibiscus Coast Community Council decided to support the

▼30 'Orewa Casino Planned For Hotel Of 14 Storeys', *New Zealand Herald*, 16 May 1978, p.1.

application by Auckland hotelier Murati.^{▼31} The Minister of Tourism, Mr Lapwood, said the government would not support the project and ultimately, the Attorney-General, Mr Wilkinson, who was the MP for Rodney, discussed the proposition with the Minister of Internal Affairs, Mr Highet, who confirmed the government would not permit a casino.^{▼32} Reading this data decades later, it is difficult not to feel some sympathy with Murati. From the distance of time, there is a certain charm to the fervid bombast of Murati. It is delightful – elegant and vivid, if slightly quixotic. Whatever he has done in the past, elsewhere, the reader wants to side with the plucky but awkward Albanian against the slightly self-righteous and snooty County Council.

The New Zealand Legal Information Institute contains several interesting documents related to Bajram Murati that are worth exploring briefly as they illustrate something of the ordinary experiences and perspectives of small Muslim immigrant businessmen in Auckland during this era.

On 2 October 1978 the Licensing Control Commission of New Zealand heard a case related to the 1962 Sale of Liquor Act. R.S. Austin and F. W. Pringle of the Commission at the Tribunals Boardroom in the Southern Cross Building. The application concerned the Puriri Park holiday resort situated at Puriri Avenue, Orewa, a significant commercial and tourist centre for the Hibiscus Coast district of the Rodney County Council. The area included a beach and various other holiday resorts in Orewa and the Whangaparoa peninsula. Mr Murati was the owner and proprietor of the 23 acre park that contained 133 powered caravan sites plus ten self-contained tourist motel units, a swimming pool, skating rink, bird aviary, camp shop, amusement hall, toddlers play area and access to bush walks in Eaves Bush. He asserted that the location provided little in the manner of quality dining facilities for visitors however. Murati proposed spending his own money to expand his existing facility but believed he would need to sell alcohol to make the enterprise financially viable: a licence was required for the building at the northern end of the property that housed a lounge, restaurant bar and entertainment centre. A Mr Sinclair, a registered architect, also gave evidence supporting the application. The formal decision of the Control Commission – number 143/78 – was made a month later in Wellington, dated 8 November, and was against the application. They evidently considered the proposal more suitable to a restaurant license application. 'We do not consider that the premises comply with our minimum standards for tourist house licences.'^{▼33} Consequently, Murati opened a restaurant in November 1978 after following instructions for alterations suggested by the licensing commission.^{▼34} There was a rehearing of this

^{▼31} 'Plan for casino supported', *Auckland Star*, 16 May 1978, p.1.

^{▼32} 'No Tourist Licence For Resort', *New Zealand Herald*, 10 November 1978, p.4.

^{▼33} *NZLCC 143* (8 November 1978), p.3.

^{▼34} 'No License So Staff Lose Jobs', *New Zealand Herald*, 20 April 1979, p.8.

application at the same premises on 14 March 1979, this time Murati was represented by L.H. Southwick, Q.C., and several witnesses were summoned to support the case. The two Commission members remained unconvinced and declined the application, again, on 11 April 1979.▼³⁵ Following this ruling, newspapers reported that the restaurant manager and 35 staff were 'reluctantly asked' to leave their jobs by Murati. Local MP D.C. McKinnon said he would look into the Sale of Liquor Act. 'Murati said he had spent several hundred thousand dollars developing the park over the last seven years.'▼³⁶ On 28 July 1979, a further rehearing was held at the Tribunals Boardroom, 175 The Terrace, Wellington. P.J. Edwards appeared for the defendant, Bajram Murati. This time the Commission granted approval on condition that the premises have been completed in accordance with architectural plans submitted approved and in full compliance with the Commission's fire code here applicable, and any requirements of the Police.▼³⁷



ILLUSTRATION ~ Restaurant facility in Puriri Park Resort, a major shopping and tourist center of the Hibiscus Coast District.
ILUSTRACIJA ~ Objekt restorana u odmaralištu Puriri Park, značajnom trgovačkom i turističkom centru okruga Hibiscus Coast.

We have no record of what Murati really said, but this is how the legal authorities recounted the exchange for posterity.

In June 1981 Murati attended the Tokyo International Islamic Seminar organised by Al-Haj Professor Dr. Shawqi Futaki (1900-94) and the Japan Islamic Congress. Details are scarce but apparently it was a

▼³⁵ NZLCC 36 (11 April 1979), Decision No. 36/79.

▼³⁶ 'No License So Staff Lose Jobs', *New Zealand Herald*, 20 April 1979, p.8.

▼³⁷ *Puriri Park Restaurant [1979] NZLCC 96* (12 July 1979), Decision No. 96/79.

manifestation of pan-Pacific Islamic solidarity. That same month Murati faced minor legal action as he had no keep his books in order, regarding the hours worked by staff. The Arbitration Court of New Zealand heard the case on 17 June 1981 when Stephen Charles Webster, Inspector of Awards challenged / prosecuted (?) Murati / Puriri Park Holiday Resort. Murati attended in person and R.J. Henshaw served as Counsel for Plaintiff. Evidently, Murati had failed to show in his wages and time book the correct hours during which his two employees were working. The Court noted that the breaches were technical and a penalty of \$75 imposed with orders to pay expenses of witness. ▼³⁸

In mid-September 1981 Murati made the newspapers again when he publicly challenged a proposal by the local county council to restrict individuals living permanently in caravan parks and refuted their claims to be motivated by health concerns. The Albanian stressed the wide range of amenities at his park, plus the fact that there were already 25 long-term residents, and threatened legal action against the Rodney County Council. 'They cannot change the right of people to live how and where they want to live.' ▼³⁹

A few days later, in another newspaper altogether Murati talked about his upbringing in Albania in a lengthy personal interview. He talked about the violent persecution of his family there, and his mayoralty plans to make Auckland the 'best, tidiest, cleanest city in the world' in the 1970s. His words are a masterclass in genteel command and he offered an illustration that could hardly be more 1950s if it had been articulated by Senator Joseph McCarthy. He discussed the casino plans and the employment it would have generated, the revenue it would have created for the area, the services and provisions that would have been available. ▼⁴⁰

He relishes telling of how a guest surprised him at 3 a.m. one morning as he cleaned the toilets – dressed in his dinner suit. "The chap who was supposed to do it was ill," he explains, "So I mopped out the place when I got home after a party – it had to be done." ▼⁴¹

In an environment of ubiquitous and intense economic competition and rivalry, he acted responsibly and rationally by continuously striving to enhance the financial security, prosperity, stability and he conditions of his own family, his employees and friends; he ceaselessly sought opportunities to maximise their prospects and that is not trivial.

Continued in the next issue.

▼³⁸ Webster (Inspector of Awards and Agreements) v Murati t/as Puriri Park Holiday Resort [1981] NZArbCJud 60; [1981] ACJ 185 (17 June 1981).

▼³⁹ 'We Will Fight Says Park Man', *Rodney and Waitemata Times*, 15 September 1981, p.1, 3.

▼⁴⁰ Graeme Kennedy, 'The Casino dream man who has had enough', *Auckland Star* (evening edition), 19 September 1981, p.6.

▼⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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ILUSTRACIJA (desno) - Grupa emigranata u Aucklandu, 50-tih godina prošlog stoljeća. Bajram Murati sjedi prekrizanih ruku, drugi red, krajnje lijevo, iza gopodina u odjelu (Petrita) a pored dame.

ILLUSTRATION (right) - **A group of emigrants in Auckland 50s of the last century**. Bajram Murati is seated, second row, far left, behind the gentleman in the department (Petrit) and beside the lady, with hands folded.

