

Media statement from the Waitangi Tribunal on the te reo Māori chapter of Wai 262.

19 October 2010

The Waitangi Tribunal has found that te reo Māori (the Māori language) is approaching a crisis point and that urgent and far reaching change is required to save it.

The findings are in the chapter on te reo Māori to be included in the report on Wai 262, the claim concerning indigenous flora and fauna and Māori cultural intellectual property.

In the Wai 262 hearings the Tribunal looked into specific issues around the wellbeing of tribal dialects and the protection of te reo from inappropriate use. However, both the Crown and claimants raised more general evidence about the state of te reo as context, and as the Tribunal formulated its report it became clear that the language overall is in worrying decline. The Tribunal thus broadened the focus of its chapter to the wellbeing of te reo Māori generally.

Since the agreed focus of the inquiry had been on the narrower set of issues, the Tribunal says that its findings and recommendations ought properly to be regarded as provisional.

The Tribunal had intended to release the Wai 262 report in its entirety, but decided to release its findings on te reo Māori early so that they may be considered by a Ministerial review of the Māori language sector and strategy, which is currently under way.

The Tribunal found:

Te reo Māori is approaching a crisis point. Diminishing proportions of younger speakers mean that the older native speakers passing away are simply not being replaced. Since 1993, the proportion of Māori children in early childhood education attending kōhanga reo has dropped from just under half to under a quarter. At school, the proportion of Māori children participating in Māori-medium education has dropped from a high point of 18.6 per cent in 1999 to 15.2 per cent in 2009. The total number of schoolchildren in Māori-medium learning has dropped each successive year since 2004. If the peak proportions of the 1990s had been maintained there would today be 9,600 more Māori children attending kōhanga reo and an extra 5,700 Māori schoolchildren learning via the medium of te reo. At the 2006 census there were 8,000 fewer Māori conversational speakers of te reo than there would have been had the 2001 proportion been maintained.

The Tribunal said it had identified a number of shortcomings when assessing the Crown's performance in regard to te reo Māori over the last 25 years.

- *We have not seen evidence of true partnership between Māori and the Crown. The 2003 Māori Language Strategy, we believe, is a well-meaning but essentially standard and pre-consulted Crown policy that does nothing to motivate Māori at the grassroots.*
- *Not enough has been done to implement the 1986 Tribunal recommendation that speakers be enabled to use te reo in any dealings with the courts, Government departments and other public bodies. Even in the courts, the use of the language remains heavily circumscribed.*
- *There have been repeated failures of policy. The most profound was the failure to train enough teachers to meet the predictable demand for Māori-medium education demonstrated by the surge in kōhanga reo enrolments in the 1980s. So strong was this demand that, in the early 1990s, it had no apparent ceiling. But it soon became choked by the lack of teacher supply, and the language suffers the consequences to this day.*

- *The Māori Language Strategy is another failure of policy. It is too abstract and was constructed within the parameters of a bureaucratic comfort zone. There have also been genuine problems with its implementation due to a lack of leadership and commitment amongst the responsible Crown agencies.*
- *Given the failures of policy, so must it follow that the resources made available to te reo have been inadequate. The level of resources should follow directly from the identification of the right policies.*

The Wai 262 Tribunal stated that Māori have their own obligations, which they have largely met as the revitalisation effort since the 1970s has been predominantly due to Māori community effort.

While Māori today must guard against complacency and whakamā, the reo 'movement' has been weakened more by the governmental failure to give it adequate oxygen and support than by any Māori rejection of their language.

The Tribunal explained that it was with a sense of urgency that it made its recommendations for reforms:

We make no apology for the fact that our proposals are far-reaching. Simply, the gravity of the situation calls for proportionate action.

As a result of its findings, the Tribunal has made four fundamental recommendations:

- *Te Taura Whiri (the Māori Language Commission) should become the lead Māori language sector agency. This will address the problems caused by the lack of ownership and leadership.*
- *Te Taura Whiri should function as a Crown-Māori partnership through the equal appointment of Crown and Māori appointees to its board. This reflects our concern that te reo revival will not work if responsibility for setting the direction is not shared with Māori.*
- *Te Taura Whiri will also need increased powers. This will ensure that public bodies are compelled to contribute to te reo's revival and key agencies are held properly accountable for the strategies they adopt. For instance, targets for the training of te reo teachers must be met, education curricula involving te reo must be approved, and public bodies in districts with a sufficient number and/or proportion of te reo speakers and schools with a certain proportion of Māori students must submit Māori language plans for approval.*
- *These regional public bodies and schools must also consult iwi in the preparation of their plans. In this way, iwi will come to have a central role in the revitalisation of te reo in their own areas. This should encourage efforts to promote the language at the grassroots.*

The Tribunal acknowledged that its proposals may be seen as challenging and even resisted.

In reality, however, they would only bring New Zealand into line with language policies applied in comparable countries overseas. Given the significant spend on te reo policies now, they will not necessarily come at great extra cost. Reprioritisation could well address most new expenditure.

ENDS

Please note:

Media are welcome to quote from this statement, the full Report or its summary but no further comment will be given as the Tribunal speaks through its findings.