



Te Reo Māori

“... ‘The received wisdom is that the revival of te reo over the last 25 years is nothing short of a miracle. There is an element of truth in that. But the notion is that te reo is making steady forward progress, particularly amongst the young, is manifestly false.’”

– Ko Aotearoa Tēnei: Taumata Tuarua, Chapter 5.

Ko Aotearoa Tēnei is the Waitangi Tribunal’s report into the claim known as Wai 262, which concerns the place of Māori culture, identity and traditional knowledge in contemporary New Zealand law, and government policy and practice.

Chapter 5 relates to te reo Māori. This factsheet provides a brief overview of that chapter.

Key points

The Māori language is important for Māori and is also an important part of New Zealand’s culture and identity.

The language is approaching a crisis point, with older native speakers passing away and not being replaced in sufficient numbers by younger speakers.

Responsibility for the revival of the language is shared between Māori and the Crown. The Crown’s support should include effective policies, appropriate resourcing, and steps towards the provision of public services in te reo as well as English.

What the Treaty requires for te reo Māori

The Treaty gives the Crown the right to govern, but in return requires the Crown to protect the tino rangatiratanga (full authority) of iwi and hapū in relation to their ‘taonga katoa’ (all that they treasure). The courts have characterised this

exchange of rights and obligations as a partnership.

The courts and the Tribunal have previously found that te reo Māori is a taonga and so is entitled to protection. This is accepted by the Crown.

Even if the Treaty did not oblige the Crown to support te reo Māori, there are other reasons for it to do so. One is that the Crown contributed to its decline, for example by suppressing it in schools. Another is that te reo Māori is a source of national pride and identity for all New Zealanders. Everybody wins when the Māori language thrives.

The state of te reo Māori

The claimants asked the Tribunal to consider the health of, and Crown support for, tribal dialects. The Tribunal found that it could not consider tribal dialects without considering the overall state of the language.

In a 1986 report the Tribunal had found that te reo Māori was seriously threatened. The Crown responded by making te reo Māori an official language and establishing the Māori Language Commission (later known as Te Taura Whiri i Te Reo Māori). The Crown has since funded the Māori Television Service and a network of Māori radio stations, established Te Māngai Pāho to fund Māori broadcasting, and supported Māori initiatives in Māori-medium education in kōhanga reo, kura kaupapa Māori, and wānanga.

In 2003, the first comprehensive government-wide Māori Language Strategy was adopted, setting goals that by 2028 te reo would be widely spoken by Māori and its value would be appreciated by all New Zealanders.

In spite of these initiatives, the proportion of Māori who speak te reo declined from the 1996 census to the 2006 census. This included a significant decline in the proportion of children aged under 10 speaking te reo.

Between 1993 and 2009, the number of children attending kōhanga reo declined from 14,514 to 9288, as the number of kōhanga reo declined from 809 to 464. Whereas half of all Māori children in pre-school had attended kōhanga reo in 1993, by 2009 this had declined to less than a quarter. Furthermore, children in kōhanga reo are now more likely to be learning te reo from second-language learners than from older native speakers. This means that the rich diversity of tribal dialect is not being passed on in kōhanga to the same extent as it once was.

The number of Māori children receiving Māori-medium education at schools has also declined since the 1990s, and the number learning te reo in tertiary institutions has also dropped since 2003.

The declining participation in Māori-medium education has not been caused by lack of demand from Māori parents, but by a shortfall in supply of quality teachers, which in turn was the result of a failure of imagination and planning in the education bureaucracy.

Had the peak participation of the 1990s been maintained, there would now be 9600 more Māori children attending kōhanga reo and 5700 more in Māori-medium schooling.

What the Tribunal has found

Te reo Māori is approaching a crisis point. Though it can be revived through programmes of Māori language education for children, this strategy is no longer working.

The Tribunal acknowledged that te reo is not the sole responsibility of the Crown: Māori have an equal if not more significant role in its survival and growth. This means Māori speaking te reo in their homes and communities, and choosing

Māori-medium education where it is available. But the Crown is obliged to support te reo Māori.

Indeed, there is no area of Crown–Māori relations that requires partnership more than the future of the Māori language. Te reo cannot be made secure by Māori efforts alone, nor Crown efforts alone. It will depend on the ability of both sides to co-operate, participate, and contribute.

On the Crown's part there must be a willingness to share a substantial measure of responsibility and control with its Treaty partner. The current Māori Language Strategy, by contrast, was developed by the Crown; Māori were consulted but were not involved in decision-making. The strategy also lacks ambition and specific targets.

The Crown must also provide programmes – including Māori-medium education – that are highly focused and effective, and appropriately resourced.

And it must abandon the mindset that it is Pākehā and English-speaking, and instead acknowledge that it represents Māori too. When Māori engage with the state they should be able to do so in te reo Māori if they choose.

The Tribunal has recommended reforms, centred around an expanded role and powers for Te Taura Whiri. Te Taura Whiri should take the lead role in the Crown's responsibility for Māori language revival. Its board should have equal representation from the Crown and Māori so it can function as a partnership.

Te Taura Whiri should have powers to require public sector agencies to produce Māori language plans, and to approve those plans. Regional public sector organisations should consult iwi when preparing their language plans. Te Taura Whiri should also have powers to set targets for training of te reo teachers, approve education curricula for te reo, and otherwise hold public sector agencies accountable for their responsibilities towards the language.

See *Ko Aotearoa Tēnei* chapter 5 for full details of the Tribunal's findings and recommendations.