

New Zealand Māori leaders sound alarm over 'dangerous' policy shifts

'Dangerous' and 'retrograde': Māori leaders sound alarm over policy shifts in New Zealand

Monday 5 August 2024, by [CORLETT Eva](#), [TAHANA Jamie](#) (Date first published: 29 July 2024).

Experts say policy changes that include scrapping Māori-led programs will harm communities and put New Zealand's 'great reputation' at risk

Leading Māori figures from across [New Zealand](#) have sounded the alarm over the government's changes to policies that affect Māori, after analysis by the Guardian highlighted the far-reaching scope of the proposals.

The policy shifts proposed by the rightwing coalition have been described by experts as "chilling" and "dangerous" and have created a "deeply fractured" relationship between [Māori](#) and the crown, or ruling authorities.

[The Guardian examined planned changes and policies already initiated](#) in six key sectors. In these areas, the centre-right National party and its minor coalition partners - the libertarian Act and populist NZ First parties - plan changes to more than a dozen policies that directly affect Māori, or will affect them more than any other ethnicity. Policy changes and proposed shifts include scrapping the Māori Health Authority, changes to language use and reviewing the way the [Treaty of Waitangi](#) - New Zealand's founding document - is interpreted and used.

Margaret Mutu, professor of Māori studies at Auckland University, has called the attempt to redefine the treaty principles the "worst assault on Māori I've seen in my 40-year career". Natalie Coates, co-president of the Māori Law Society, said the government was undertaking a "systematic legislative attack" on Māori that would leave a "deep wound".

Prime minister Christopher Luxon declined the Guardian's request for an interview. The Act party referred the Guardian to the minister for Māori affairs, Tama Potaka, who was not available. NZ First did not respond to requests for comment.

But in speeches and media appearances, Luxon and government ministers have said services should be provided on the [basis of need, not race](#) and the government intends to ["deliver outcomes for everybody"](#) - outcomes it believes were damaged during the previous Labour government's six-year term.

The Guardian analysed planned changes and policies already initiated in health, treaty and language, justice, social and housing, environment and education. The information [displayed in this interactive](#) provides a first-of-its-kind analysis of why the government is shifting policy and how the changes will affect Māori.

"Even if this is a one-term government, it is going to take a long time to recover the ground that is

lost," said Dr Rawiri Taonui, writer and former Indigenous studies lecturer.

An unequal society

Māori have higher mortality rates and lower life expectancy than non-Māori, while young Māori report the [highest levels of psychological distress](#) compared with any other group. Māori are overrepresented at every stage in the criminal justice system and make up over half of the prison population despite being 20% of the total population. Māori receive a lower average income than non-Māori, and are less likely to own their own homes.

Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, co-leader of the Māori party which has six seats in parliament, said it is "clearly a priority" for the government to "ensure that Māori remain at the bottom of the social order."

Coates argues the shifts will further entrench existing inequality.

"Most of the programs that have been put in place for Māori attempt to rebalance negative statistics," she said.

Māori anger at moves to unravel decades of progress isn't just on the streets. It's in the courts
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"When you have clear attacks on Māori, it undermines the general faith that Māori have in the crown, or in a crown that is not going to repeat the same mistakes over and over again," Coates said, adding the relationship between Māori and crown has become "deeply fractured" since the government came to power.

Taonui said a lot of progress has been made between Māori and the crown in the last few decades, and a key reason is that Māori have been given resources to lead changes "necessary to bring us back on par with the rest of the population".

But he said that is not a priority for this government, which is set on "re-mainstreaming" Māori programs.

The government's first budget, delivered in May, saw new funds allocated towards Māori immersion early childhood learning and Māori cultural festival, Te Matatini, while other programs received the same level of funding as previous years.

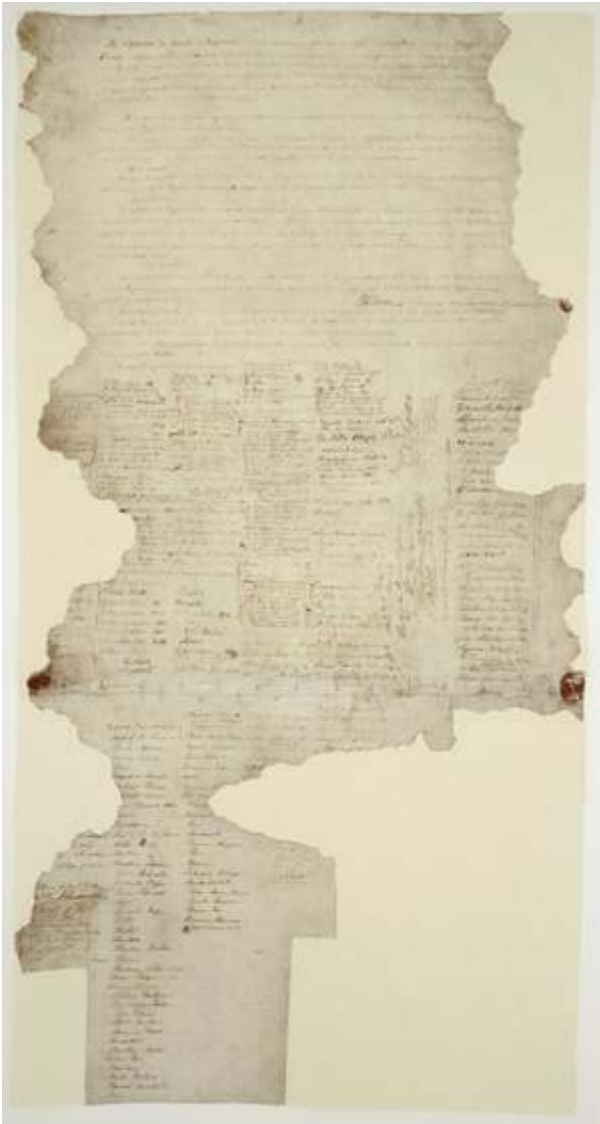
Yet broadly Māori initiatives were defunded or scaled back. It included scrapping Māori-based approaches to reducing agricultural emissions, \$60m cut from Māori housing programs and a 45% cut to the Māori new year public holiday.

"This is a budget that delivers for Māori because when a New Zealander turns up to an emergency room or a school, they don't turn up thinking about their ethnicity," finance minister Nicola Willis said at the time of the budget, adding it prioritised tax relief, and law and order.

Taonui disagreed, fearing the government's changes risk damaging Māori health and wellbeing.

"The policy direction, the budget cuts, the job losses, the rollbacks on the treaty and the rhetoric about being equal and therefore the same, is going to set us back a generation."

Treaty rights threatened



The Waitangi sheet of the Treaty of Waitangi, signed between the British crown and Māori chiefs in 1840. Photograph: Public Domain

Since the government came to power nine months ago, there has been a swelling of resistance to perceived attacks and fears over the unravelling of Māori rights. Tension between the Māori and the crown flared over summer, including a [rare nationwide meeting](#) called by the Māori king, mass protests and the most [heated](#) national day celebration at Waitangi in decades.

Few policies have angered Māori as much as those relating to [the Treaty of Waitangi](#), which was signed in 1840 by Māori chiefs and the crown, and upholds Māori rights. As part of its coalition agreement with the National party, Act wants to introduce legislation to redefine the principles that have flowed from the treaty.

The principles, developed in the 1980s after decades of protests and legal challenges, are largely defined as partnership, protection and participation. They have played heavily into the reconciliation process of the past 30 years.

Act wants the principles to include all New Zealanders, believing the current principles give people

different rights based on birth. Many Māori leaders say such changes would amount to a [modern-day confiscation of treaty rights](#) and prioritise those who already hold power.

“What this redefinition ... means is ... that Māori will assimilate - we would give up entirely being Māori. This is a reversion to the white New Zealand policy that was formal government policy up until the 1960s,” Mutu said.

In health, experts criticise several policy shifts, including the reversal of a world-leading smoking ban, arguing it will harm Indigenous communities.

Associate dean Māori of public health at the University of Otago, Bridget Robson, said disestablishing the Māori Health Authority without a plan to ensure equitable health outcomes “will increase cynicism amongst Māori and have a chilling effect along with all the other anti-Māori policies”.

Meanwhile, a handful of policies risk hurting the revitalisation of Māori language, according to some experts. This includes the coalition’s policy to ensure most public service departments have their primary name in English.

The coalition’s “tough on crime” approach has alarmed many in the justice sector, who fear the policies will increase the high number of Māori in prison. Khylee Quince, dean of law at Auckland University of Technology, said plans to increase prison capacity and tougher sentencing measures will disproportionately affect Māori, describing the policies as “retrograde”.

The removal of a policy that helped ensure Māori children remained connected to their ancestry while under state care - of which [Māori make up more than half](#) - has concerned non-government social services.

Zoe Hawke, chief executive of Māori social service agency E Tipu E Rea, worries the government’s shift on efforts to keep Māori children connected to their family will create a new “stolen generation”.

Last week, the government confirmed its plans to make it harder for Māori to make [customary claims](#) to coastal and marine areas, and pushed ahead with a bill that could [reduce the number of Māori](#) representatives in local government.

The Māori party’s Ngarewa-Packer said “what is concerning is not only the number of Māori rights being extinguished, but the rate at which the government is erasing them”.

Risking the future

In June, against the backdrop of the government’s policy shifts, Māori celebrated a major milestone - the Māori population in New Zealand hit [one million people](#). The census data showed the demographic was also younger on average and growing rapidly - a shift that could reshape New Zealand society in just a few decades.

Prominent Māori businessman Sir Ian Taylor feels great hope in the new generations who are embracing Māori language, culture and identity. In particular, he is encouraged by young people’s growing desire to protect the environment.

Māori have a strong [affinity with the natural world](#). Traditional concepts, spirituality and knowledge

still shape the relationship to - and protection of - the environment, while food gathering is regarded as a [crucial cultural practice](#).

But Sir Ian worries some of the coalition policies will damage the land his grandchildren will grow up in, including the [contentious fast-track bill](#) that seeks to override environmental protections in favour of major infrastructure projects and [rollbacks to commitments on climate change](#).

“Everything is about our moko - our grandchildren - and we need to be able to look our grandchildren in the eyes and say, ‘we got this’.”

The coalition’s approach to the environment runs counter to Māori values and concepts, he said, referencing Papatūānuku, a mother Earth figure from which all living things originate and remain connected.

The shift against Indigenous values, and the risk that poses to New Zealand’s global reputation, is “dangerous”, Sir Ian said.

“We currently have a great reputation [but] moving down the path we are moving down with this coalition ... we will destroy it.”

Eva Corlett

Jamie Tahana

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