

New Zealand: Aotearoa: Controversial bill to strip Māori people's rights backfires

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Aotearoa New Zealand's parliament was brought to a halt on November 14 during the first reading of a controversial and divisive bill that aims to undermine the rights of Māori people.

The Treaty Principles Bill seeks to “redefine” the principles of Aotearoa's founding document, the *Treaty of Waitangi* (*te Tiriti o Waitangi*). It has been tabled by the libertarian ACT Party which — along with NZ First — form part of the ruling coalition government, led by the National Party.

ACT leader David Seymour claims the current application of the Treaty is “contrary to the principle of equal rights” and leads to policies divided by race.

However, Māori leaders and activists, historians, *te reo Māori* (Māori language) translators, politicians — including former prime ministers — and legal experts strongly oppose the bill.

The Waitangi Tribunal — a permanent commission of inquiry that oversees treaty matters — issued a highly critical [report](#). It said that the bill “does not reflect the texts or meaning of the Treaty/*te Tiriti*”, and the proposed principals are designed to “end the distinct status of Māori as the indigenous people of this country”.

It warned that the bill “will foster division and damage social cohesion, with significant prejudicial impacts on Māori”.

At the bill's first reading debate since its introduction on November 7, MPs spoke in favour and against before it was put to a vote.

Green party co-leader Chloe Swarbrick said: “If you wear the mask for a little while, it becomes your face ... if you vote for this bill, this is who you are and this is how you will be remembered.”

Labour MP Willie Jackson called Seymour “a liar” and accused him of fuelling “hatred and misinformation”. He refused to apologise and was ejected from the chamber.

However, it was Te Pati Māori (Māori Party) MP Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke who gave the most impassioned protest by leading a *haka* (ceremonial dance) in the house.

After confirming in *te reo Māori* her party's six votes against the bill, Maipi-Clarke stood and tore up a copy of it before starting the *Ka Mate haka* (which celebrates victory over adversity, or life over death). Fellow party members and other MPs, as well as some in the public gallery, joined in.

House speaker Gerry Brownlee suspended the sitting shortly afterwards. When MPs returned, they voted to suspend Maipi-Clarke for 24 hours for leading the protest and Brownlee “named” her for misconduct.

After she was elected as the member for the Hauraki-Waikato electorate last year, Maipi-Clarke gained attention for performing a [haka](#) in her maiden speech to parliament. At 22 years old, she is Aotearoa's second-youngest MP in history.

The bill eventually passed the first reading, backed by the coalition partners. Te Pati Māori, the Greens and Labour opposed it.

The bill will now go to a six-month committee for public submissions, after which recommendations will be made, before the bill goes back to parliament.

It is unlikely to proceed beyond that with ACT's coalition partners stating from the outset they would not support it at its second reading.

National has never supported the proposal, but was bound by the terms of its coalition agreement with ACT to support the bill up to the select committee stage.

National Prime Minister Christopher Luxon stated publicly: "You do not go negate, with a single stroke of a pen, 184 years of debate and discussion, with a bill that I think is very simplistic."

Luxon's view highlights the performative nature of the bill's introduction to parliament. While highly unlikely to succeed, ACT is pushing to galvanise a right-wing base. ACT only received 9% of the vote last year but has a disproportionate influence on politics because of its coalition with National.

Aotearoa's citizens, and most of all Māori, are paying the price for National's desperation to form a government.

Meanwhile, tens of thousands of people are currently travelling the length of te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island) in a *hīkoi* (peaceful march) to challenge the bill. It is one of the largest protest activations the country has ever seen.

The march, dubbed *Hīkoi mō Te Tiriti* (Hīkoi for the Treaty), started in the far north at Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga) on November 11 and is working its way towards Poneke (the capital, Wellington) over nine days and 1000 kilometres.

People from all walks of life have joined the *hīkoi*, which is led by the Māori activist movement Toitu te Tiriti (Honour the Treaty).

The *NZ Herald* reported that "many of the supporters on the *hīkoi* don't consider themselves political activists. They are mums and dads, *rangatahi* (young people), professionals, Pākehā, and *Tauīwi* (other non-Māori ethnicities)."

The government tried to stifle the impact of the *hīkoi* by moving the bill's first reading forward by two weeks. Initially, it was to be introduced to parliament on November 18, one day before the *hīkoi* ends.

In his speech during the first reading debate, Te Pati Māori co-leader Rawiri Waititi made a rallying call for Māori to rise up against the bill: "Te Tiriti was an arrangement to unify. This bill serves to divide. Te iwi Māori don't expect this House to liberate us. We must be our own liberation."

He ended by referencing the *hīkoi*, which will conclude outside Parliament on November 19, audaciously telling Seymour: "See you next Tuesday".

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