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Aotearoa: The week it all erupted

written by Jamie Tahana
November 18, 2024

Supporters of the hīkoi rally at the Bridge of Remembrance in Christchurch, New Zealand.

[Editor's note: Aotearoa is the Māori-language name for New Zealand.]

There is a common thread that runs through all of this week's events for whānau

Māori — from the final words of the last surviving Māori Battalion veteran, to the abuse in care apology, to the hīkoi for Te Tiriti and the introduction of the bill that seeks to undermine it. Jamie Tahana explains.

Sometimes significant events seem to erupt like a geyser. A deluge in which an entire year seems to happen in just a few days. Bubbling away beneath the surface, these events build over time before blowing at once in a vent of awesome fury. This week was certainly one of them.

It started in the steaming village of Ōhinemutu, its waters simmering on the shores of Lake Rotorua, where thousands gathered to farewell Tā Robert "Bom" Gillies, the last surviving member of the Māori Battalion, who died at 99. Shy and reluctant, he'd stepped into prominence in his later years as the final rangatira of that great battalion, laying a wero for both the Crown and Māori to carry the mauri of what they stood for.

As he departed, he would have passed the flags and placards fluttering in the hands of those gathered in the morning mist at Te Rerenga Wairua, huddled together to take their first steps down State Highway One.

From the country's northernmost tip, the hīkoi followed a well-trodden path to Parliament. Thousands of people — both Māori and Pākehā, young and old — joined that initial crowd in defence of Te Tiriti.

Day after day, clips and pictures showed town and city streets filled with the red, white and black of tino rangatiratanga. In Auckland, they flooded across the Harbour Bridge waving their signs: "Toitū Te Tiriti", "Whaka Round and Find Out".

Then came word that Ricky Mitai, the esteemed rangatira tāne of Ōpōtiki Mai Tawhiti, had died. Only 36, he was already a leader, a passionate advocate for te reo and tikanga Māori, whose early loss was keenly felt. Hundreds took a side trip to his

tangi in the eastern Bay of Plenty, as the hīkoi continued to work its way down Te Ika a Māui and up Te Waipounamu.

In Rotorua, Tā Bom's hometown, tamariki carried his portrait at the head of a phalanx of 10,000 people. Horses clopped down the wide boulevard of Fenton Street alongside bare-chested warriors who, chests high and movements staunch, formed a defensive wall, taiaha in hand.

The ongoing hīkoi was a response and challenge to what was finally tabled on Thursday. Parliament fired up as Act leader David Seymour introduced his Treaty Principles Bill, the source of so much angst this past year, but also the source of much of the kotahitanga seen by many Māori, who rallied against an attempt to redefine the country's founding document and its promises.

A bill the Waitangi Tribunal said would, if passed, "be the worst, most comprehensive breach of the Treaty/te Tiriti in modern times." A bill that was developed in a way that "deliberately excluded any consultation with the Māori Treaty/te Tiriti partner."

Hana-Rawhiti Maipi-Clarke, 22, in announcing Te Pāti Māori's six votes against the bill, started a rendition of the Ngāti Toa haka *Ka Mate* that had opposition parties and the public gallery on their feet. The bewildered speaker, Gerry Brownlee, briefly suspended the House, later censuring Maipi-Clarke as he described her conduct as "appallingly disrespectful" and "grossly disorderly".

In Wellington, politicians and the press gallery were distracted debating decorum while the hīkoi marched on. Ngāti Toa, however, said it was an entirely appropriate use of haka. Helmut Modlik said the bill had put Māori self-determination at risk —*"ka mate, ka mate"* — and Māori were reclaiming that — *"ka ora, ka ora"*.

A former National prime minister, Jenny Shipley, said "the voices of this week were

completely and utterly appropriate." The current prime minister, Christopher Luxon, was not there, again insisting National will not support the bill beyond a first reading, calling it "simplistic".

In the House, his MPs spoke against the bill before voting for it. The government might struggle to honour one agreement, the Treaty, but at least it held strong in honouring another, the coalition agreement. A former National attorney-general, Christopher Finlayson, spoke out to say the bill would greatly damage the party's relationship with Māori.

But the cat is already out of the bag, the damage already done. The Treaty Principles Bill may be a lame duck without National and New Zealand First's continued support, but te iwi Māori have already stirred in a way not seen in at least 20 years.

The Clark Labour government and its ministers are forever stained by the Foreshore and Seabed Act of 2004 and the Tūhoe terror raids. It would be a miracle for the Luxon government to not be similarly stained by the furore of '24.

And let us not forget the omnibus of other laws that have specifically targeted Māori and Te Tiriti in the past year. The Treaty Principles Bill may be dead on arrival, but the principles are still being examined and possibly written out of existing legislation. The government has already started its targeting of the Waitangi Tribunal, while criticising the courts over Te Tiriti.

Te Hīkoi mō Te Tiriti: Hīkoi marchers walk up Bastion Point towards Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei marae on day three, November 13, 2024, Tāmaki Makaurau.

The hīkoi in Auckland.

The Hīkoi mō te Tiriti passes through Wainui Road, Gisborne this week.

Sadly, the introduction of the bill had been brought forward by a week, and Thursday's pantomime overshadowed an event at parliament that was decades in the making. On Tuesday, thousands of morehu came together to hear the words it's taken successive governments generations to say: Sorry.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care's final reports, released earlier this year, make for harrowing reading. An estimated 200,000 people endured abuse in state- and faith-based care between 1950 and 2019 which, in many cases, amounted to torture. The vast majority of these victims were Māori.

The odious history of abuse in care is a national disgrace where, over decades, children were stripped from their whānau and identities and placed into institutions or foster homes where they were physically, mentally and sexually abused while the state did nothing to help. Instead, it often moved to bury the evidence and protect itself.

Over the years, I've done a few stories — nothing compared to the incredible work of the likes of Aaron Smale and others — but I've spent time with survivors, and sat through some of the Royal Commission hearings, in marae, on Zoom during Covid, and in the sterile makeshift courtroom above an Irish bar in Newmarket.

The testimony and stories are painful, from people whose entire lives were torn to shreds before they'd even started.

There were stories of people who, as babies, were taken from whānau, split from siblings, and placed with strangers. Others were held in state or church institutions where they endured physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Young people who were locked in solitary confinement for weeks, in boys' and girls' homes that were nothing more than gang recruitment centres. Tamariki Māori who were shipped to

remote farms and made to work as slave labour; who were rendered invisible.

When they tried to tell someone, they were only met with the callous indifference of bureaucracy. When they tried to run away, they were picked up by the police and returned to the centres that tortured them, and punished even more harshly.

At the long-abandoned site of the Kohitere Boys' Home, on the windswept plains near Levin, there remains the skeleton of a concrete building, set away and obscured by trees. It was known as "the block" by those who were there. Inside were concrete cells, where young boys would spend 23 hours a day in solitary confinement. No bed sheets, no toys, no natural light. Nothing to do but sit and stew.

Just as violence was meted out to erase te reo in schools, state care was a tool of assimilation in the 20th century.

The Royal Commission heard from many people whose Māori names were taken away because they were too hard for Pākehā to pronounce. At one boys' home, a child was struck around the head for saying "kia ora". Others were belittled for being Māori, discouraged from any cultural practice, denied knowledge of their ancestry, and written off for any education because of who they were.

The only education they got was an induction into a world of crime, a preparatory course for prison. It was the experience of Dr Rawiri Waretini-Karena, whom I spoke to in 2022, when he recalled arriving in prison in the 1980s. "You go out into the yard for the first time and you actually know about 80 percent of the people there [from the boys' home]." Another ran away from an abusive foster home, stole several bottles of liquor, then drank himself into a stupor in the urupa. It was the only way he could speak to his dead mother. No one else would listen.

It always requires a certain courage to speak the unspeakable. To have the courage

and the fortitude to fight the machinery of the state and its army of servants, just for the truth to finally be acknowledged.

The men and women who spoke of the sexual, physical and emotional abuse they suffered refused to back down for decades as the state refused to listen, hold an inquiry, or admit that it was systemic. They fought for decades to hear a prime minister admit that the state committed these heinous acts.

Luxon's apology on Tuesday was powerful, and I have no doubt he was sincere in his apology. But the dignity and mana with which ngā morehu have carried (and continue to carry) themselves should never be forgotten.

However, they're also right to be sceptical. There is still no appropriate redress system, and some fear they will die before it finally happens.

Too often for the Crown, sorry seems to be the easiest word, and the risk that this apology rings hollow is huge.

In 2021, Jacinda Ardern apologised for the racist, bipartisan Dawn Raids of the 1970s, which targeted tangata Moana. (Many Māori were targeted by police too, assumed to be Pacific Islanders by officers who were racially profiling.) But the very morning of the apology, immigration officers were conducting raids at dawn.

For more than 30 years now, iwi and hapū have also been hearing the Crown say sorry for its breaches of Te Tiriti, for failing to act in partnership, for its acts of stripping land, lives, culture and power, and for promising to restore its honour as it finally acts as a Treaty partner.

This week has shown those apologies might be hollow, too.

Because an apology is made good not through words, but action. And, so far, the signs have not been promising, as the survivors also made clear on Tuesday. "We've

heard those words from the state before, and they are meaningless because they have not resulted in change or progress," Keith Wiffin told *Newsroom*.

Across decades, officialdom has obfuscated, fabricated and blocked any redress to this history of shame in a series of moves that, with the light of day, look morally reprehensible. The Solicitor General, Una Jagose, who in previous roles at Crown Law played a part in aggressively stymying survivors' legal claims, gave a tepid apology littered with qualifications. She was heckled and jeered by survivors, but still insists she's the right person for the job.

The government has also promised to ensure this never happens again while at the same time stripping the legal provisions that ensure Oranga Tamaraki upholds Te Tiriti and keeps tamaraki connected to their whakapapa. It has also announced plans to expand the number of youth detention facilities, and re-introduced boot camps.

It promises things will be different this time, though. As the survivors said this week, they're sceptical of that.

The thread that runs through all of this week's events for Māori is the context and history of colonisation and its continuing consequences. It's the assumption and presumption that the Crown can usurp its Treaty promises, impose its values and institutions, and make unilateral decisions for whānau, iwi and hapū, often with damaging and devastating consequences.

In parliament this week, we saw survivors of abuse in care say "no more", just as we also saw thousands take to the street to also say "no more".

Not long before he passed, Bom Gillies wrote a brief of evidence for the Waitangi Tribunal's ongoing veterans' inquiry.

"I had served for a country that had not, and still does not, respect me as a Māori," he wrote. "I look back and I ask: 'Was it worth it'? The cream of our race lie overseas

while we continue to struggle against the Crown to this very day.”

Jamie Tahana (Ngāti Pikiao/Ngāti Makino/Tapuika) is a journalist and broadcaster who has worked in both Aotearoa and the Pacific. He grew up between his Dutch mother in the Hutt, Wellington, and his Te Arawa dad in Rotorua, going on to qualify with a master’s degree at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University. He was Māori News Editor at RNZ until May 2023, and is now working in London.

Source: E-Tangata