

# Te Kukunga Hou: The Clampdown Revisited

Richard Benton

A presentation given at “Kia kotahi te hoe, kia manawa piharau”, a symposium focused on the past, present, and future of reo Māori revitalisation and research, and celebrating 50 years of Te Wāhanga, NZCER.

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**TE WĀHANGA**  
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The title of this symposium is very appropriate—Kia kotahi te hoe, kia manawa piharau: if you've only got one paddle, you need the heart of the lamprey—a fish noted for its strength and endurance. That resilience has been needed to bring us to where we are now in a campaign to ensure that te reo Māori takes its rightful place in the life of its homeland, and will be needed equally in future if the progress made in the last five decades is to be sustained.

When I was approached to plan and set up the Māori research unit of NZCER, which soon became Te Wāhanga Kaupapa Māori and is now known as Te Wāhanga, the Council agreed with my proposal that its principal concern should be on the place of the Māori language in New Zealand education and society.

This did not come out of the blue. The unit itself was the idea of the director at the time, John Watson, and the Council, which included Bill Parker, a veteran Māori broadcaster and senior lecturer at Victoria University, and Jock McEwen, the former head of the Department of Māori Affairs, among others with a commitment to furthering Māori language and culture within the education system. For myself, it probably went back to my listening to my grandmother's records of Deane Waretini and Ana Hato before I started school—I still remember the opening words of one of the songs, "Te taniwha", even though at the time I had no idea of what they meant.

Te taniwha i te moana  
Maranga mai ki runga  
Hei hoa whawhai e  
Mo nga taika e.<sup>1</sup>

Later, when I was in standard 3 or 4, I discovered that a Māori friend's father not only could speak Māori but also had a book written in the language (it was *Te Pukapuka o Moromona*—although they were Catholic they came from Paki Paki which also had a strong Mormon community). So here we were in New Zealand, with its own language which even had books printed on it, but which hardly anyone spoke—we really did seem to be a "land of self-styled exiles" as my American-born father scoffed, because in those days so many New Zealand-born people still called England "home". I knew that our relatives in Ireland had been trying to revive Irish Gaelic—and my grandfather had not been allowed to speak English, the Devil's language, in his Highland Scottish grandmother's house, so the idea of endangered languages and doing something about them was not new to me.

I went to the library and borrowed Williams' *First Lessons*: I got as far as "Ko—specific particle" which engraved itself in my memory—but the book was a bit tough for a 10-year-old, and I did not encounter it again until I enrolled in Māori 1 at Auckland University in 1958, the first year that it was accepted as meeting the "language other than English" requirements for the BA degree.

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<sup>1</sup> Taniwha in the ocean / Rise up to the surface / As a companion-in-arms / For the tigers. Recording Parlophone (Australia) 1929, A 2803 (A 405-1). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt4bR992xBc>

This brought me into contact with the late Prof Bruce Biggs, with whom I was to develop a strong friendship and collegial relationship over the years. Bruce introduced me to linguistics as relevant to the formal study of Māori, and was aware of my growing interest in bilingual education. The next few years included periods of unauthorised promotion of Māori at Bay of Islands College, legitimately teaching Māori at Te Kao and Motatau Māori district high schools—really trying to teach students how to pass exams: they knew far more Māori than I did—and mentorship and support from some very knowledgeable kaumātua from those districts.

This was followed by a fellowship from the Māori Education Foundation, which really launched me on my research career. I visited every Māori School in the North Island (a separate Māori school system still existed in those days), supposedly investigating the English spoken by Māori school children. There was an obsessive concern about the standard of English spoken by Māori children at the time, alongside attempts by prominent early childhood education advocates to persuade the comparatively few parents who habitually spoke Māori at home to speak English to their children instead. I was actually more interested in finding out where Māori was still spoken, and collected a lot of data about that on the side through interviewing many of the children in the schools that I visited.

I worked as the charge hand in the bottle store of the Duke of Marlborough Hotel in Russell (Kororāreka) while finishing the report on my research, which, among other things, advocated using Māori alongside English, and bilingual schools in areas where Māori was still widely spoken. This was a time when teaching of Māori was expanding at secondary schools (it had already reached Northland and Kaitia Colleges, but not the Bay of Islands), but only a few pioneers like Hirini Mead (who had published a useful introduction to the language, *Let's Speak Māori*, in 1957, based on what he had been doing at Waimarama school in Hawke's Bay), were teaching or using the language at primary school.

From the bottle store I was seconded to Bairds Road primary school (in Ōtara) and the Department of Education to prepare a curriculum for teaching English to newly arrived children from the Cook Islands, Niue, and Samoa. I was still advocating the use of Māori as a medium of instruction, and Bruce Biggs told me that no one would take any notice of me until I went overseas and came back with a PhD. The opportunity to do this came thanks to my mother, who saw scholarships to the East-West Center advertised in the *Herald*, and drew this to my attention. I had returned to the bottle store at this stage, and she may have been worried that I would end up as a beachcomber like many other inhabitants of Russell in that era!

I was one of three New Zealand applicants awarded a scholarship that year and arrived back 6 years later at the end of 1971 with an MA, PhD, wife, 2-year-old son, and experience of working with Micronesian and Philippine languages, educational administration and helping establish a programme in social science education for high school teachers, and a carte blanche to plan and execute a research programme which, among any many other things, would investigate the current state of knowledge and use of the Māori language in families and communities, and provide a basis for efforts to assure that the language and its associated culture became and remained an integral and relevant part of the nation's social and cultural life. We didn't waste time—in 1972 the unit was staffed with a second research officer, a secretary, and a research assistant; a research fellow was soon added, and in 1973 we began the fieldwork in Whangaroa.

The operation had been carefully planned. John Watson had put me in touch with Prof Bernard Spolsky, a New Zealander who was Professor of Linguistics and Education at the University of New

Mexico, and had directed the famous Navajo Reading Study, which revolutionised education on the Navajo Reservation. He in turn put me in touch with Joshua Fishman and Ofelia Garcia, who had with others conducted an intensive sociolinguistic survey of a Puerto Rican community occupying four blocks in New York City. This provided an excellent model for our proposed study, although there was a slight difference—they were collecting information from a few hundred people in four city blocks, whereas we wanted to interview thousands in an area of 114,000 km<sup>2</sup>. This is where our Research Fellow came in—my late wife Nena had participated as an interviewer and later regional director of a nationwide anthropological study of family and kinship in the Philippines, and her experience proved invaluable in organising the logistics and planning and supervising the fieldwork as well as collating and analysing the data.

We had spent about a year working out the detail—the form and content of the interview schedule, recruiting potential interviewers (mostly Māori teachers' college and university students recommended by colleagues), deciding where we would do fieldwork (based on the proportion and number of Māori residents as revealed by the census), drawing at random from the Māori electoral rolls for people to interview in urban areas (the Māori rolls were the only publicly available lists of people who declared themselves to be of Māori descent). Each of the people in urban areas got a personal letter which I signed by hand—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them over the next 4 or 5 years; we received replies from many recipients, welcoming the survey. I remember one from Amiria Stirling lamenting the “reo kererū” many young people were speaking in place of te reo tukua mai i ngā tīpuna. In rural areas we contacted people through schools, Māori organisations, churches, and personal networks.

We started in Whangaroa because it was familiar territory—our secretary, the late Ani Hona Bosch, had been born there—and the county (New Zealand was divided into cities, towns, and counties in those days) was the smallest in the country, with a high proportion of people of Māori descent. It also gave us a chance to test our interview schedule and planned modus operandi in the field.

We set up our headquarters at Matauri Bay school—the principal kindly supplied some paints and a paintbrush for our 4-year-old son Liam to use while we discussed the first day's work. Although it was a grey August afternoon, Liam's painting, the first he had done using paints instead of crayons, was remarkably cheerful. If you look carefully you can see where it was splashed by a raindrop when we carried it back to the car afterwards. In the event, our procedures and interview schedule held up well, but we did have to alter one question—we had asked if the person being interviewed had been punished or ill-treated at school for speaking Māori. The Māori text used the word tūkino, which often elicited a reply along the lines of “Kāhore—kua wepua mātou e te mahita nā te mea i hara mātou i te ture o te kura.” So we altered the question to ask simply what was the teacher's attitude if you spoke Māori in class or the school grounds—which of course would have been better in the first place. A rather high percentage had been punished in some way, but at least one entrepreneurial Whangaroa boy had found a good source of income—he established a blackberry bank, and sold ready-dug clumps to those who had been told to dig blackberry as a punishment.







Although the fieldwork went well (we had the occasional flat tyre to change,<sup>2</sup> but generally things went pretty smoothly). Funding became a problem as the work progressed. The Council tried to get extra funding to support the detailed analysis of the data and the writing, production, and distribution of reports on the local situation to the communities we had visited. We had to be like the canoeist with a single paddle and the lamprey for several years, and were very fortunate that the director and the Council had good connections with various charitable organisations, and I was able to develop links with a few more, so over a period of several years with the help of another army of students and a few volunteers, we

were able to produce and distribute 142 reports to individual communities which we had visited, and a few general reports as well. In the meantime, we spearheaded the establishment of bilingual schools and produced materials and research to support the burgeoning revitalisation effort, and especially Māori-medium education of all kinds which was, for a while, growing exponentially, while also lobbying for the recognition of Māori as an official language for New Zealand. In 1991 I was able to spend 9 months in Hawaii working on the whole dataset and writing a summary report, *The Māori language: Dying or reviving?* which was published first in Hawaii and reprinted by NZCER in 1997.<sup>3</sup>

All in all, in the 20 years from the start of the survey, Te Wāhanga Māori probably had at least 150 people—including on one occasion Ngahiwi Apanui's band Aotearoa—helping us as interns, fieldworkers, or volunteers in the work of the unit, so that when I say “we” did this or that, I really mean “we”. It was a collective effort by all these people, with the support of the Council of NZCER and many outside agencies and individuals.

I took early retirement from NZCER at the end of 1995, but was persuaded by the late Sir Robert Mahuta to move to the Waikato shortly afterwards. Since then, I have lived on the banks of the Waikato River, where another resident of Kororāreka, Rewa (known in the Waikato as Mānu) patrolled for a while in the 1820s (he provided my great-great-grandfather with a section on which to build his house in Kororāreka in 1838). A lot has happened in te ao Māori and Aotearoa where te reo Māori is concerned involving NZCER and generally since 1995, but I will leave it to other speakers at the symposium to talk about that. Instead, I'll turn to a few of the pressing issues likely to affect the Māori language and those who value it in the years ahead.

2 Like many of his co-workers, the fieldworker changing the tyre in the illustration is now a prominent Māori leader; his friends will no doubt recognise him.

3 <https://www.nzcer.org.nz/research/publications/maori-language-dying-or-reviving>

In 1988 I wrote a short commentary, published under the rather bland title “Education: Will the reforms work?”<sup>4</sup> The original title was “Working for the Clampdown”, taken from the song by The Clash. About a third of the way through the song asserts optimistically,

No man born with a living soul  
Can be working for the clampdown

But later notes soberly, with harsh realism,

You grow up and you calm down  
You’re working for the clampdown.

It seems to me that this song and its warning is highly relevant for any supporter of Māori language revitalisation at the present time.

It is very clear that as of today the answer to the question “The Māori language: Dying or reviving?” is clearly “reviving”—and here is where the danger lies. It has two sources. The threat that te reo growing in strength, influence, and use now poses to those who think it should be forgotten about or relegated to the museum and the library, the neo-colonialists who still regard the southern half of an island off the coast of France as home, along with the many who have been persuaded that the language which originated there is the only one worth speaking in the modern world. The second source of danger is hubris, the assumption that things are going so well now that the momentum will be sufficient to overcome any obstacles. If the past is anything to go by, this is a dangerous illusion.

Even now, despite Kura Kaupapa, bilingual schools, well-attended Māori classes in Wānanga, marae, schools, and elsewhere, the language is still spoken with varying degrees of fluency by only 25% or so of the Māori population and only 4 or 5% of the national population. According to UNESCO criteria a minority language is in danger if another language (like English) is known by all its speakers, and even one family in that ethnic group no longer speaks it. From a statistical point of view, at least 71% of the population must speak a language before there is a 50% chance that two individuals will be able to speak it with each other in a random encounter. Ruatoki was one of the few communities which had maintained this level of use of te reo Māori in the 1970s. There may be a few more now, but in most places revival at a whole-community level is still an aspiration rather than a reality. And of course, the best way to ensure that a language will survive is to use it.

A language can be lost in the twinkling of an eye. When I lived in Te Kao in the early 1960s, there was one family that prided itself speaking English at home; the rest of the community spoke English only to strangers—walking across the school playground you would hear only Māori spoken by the youngest and the oldest. When I visited Ruatahuna School in 1963, you had to use Māori if you wanted to speak to the new entrant children—the school had a specially employed Junior Assistant teacher to help the younger children make the transition to English.

Yet 10 or 12 years later, when our survey teams visited these places, English had become the preferred language of most children and many families. I found this hard to comprehend, and talked to the fifth formers and friends in Te Kao, and to some kaumātua in Ruatahuna about this. In both places the radical change seems to have been precipitated by large numbers of English-speaking children from families returning after living elsewhere changing the dynamic of

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<sup>4</sup> *Accent* 3.8

the school playgrounds, with a flow-on effect to language use within the family. Older members continued to use the language with each other, but English became the “language of wider communication”. The same kind of thing has happened in thousands of places all over the world. A language secure today can become endangered tomorrow.

This is what makes the current Government’s policy of cutting back on the use of te reo Māori in signage and communication with the public a seriously retrograde step where language revitalisation is concerned. In their report to the Treasury on language revitalisation policy in 1998, which remains highly relevant today, the overseas consultants Francois Grin (based in Switzerland) and Francois Vaillancourt (from Canada) identified signage is one of the cheapest and most cost-effective ways for promoting language revitalisation.<sup>5</sup>

Signage at first is primarily symbolic—if there is a preferential use of the revitalising language (placement first, then larger fonts, or both), that indicates that the sign-maker is serious about the revitalisation effort. At first most people simply see the preferred language—but as efforts to increase people’s familiarity with the language through schools and other agencies continue, signs will increasingly be read and understood. This creates both an opportunity to use the language, and helps to make it a normal part of the linguistic landscape. The same applies to the use of languages on stationery, its use in salutations and greetings, and of course the provision of services and information in the language for its speakers. The success of a revitalisation effort in the long run is dependent on developing the capacity to use the language, the desire and willingness to use it, and the opportunities to use it. Instructions to departments to stop the preferential use of the language in signage and in reference to agencies, and the curtailing of the routine use of the language in communication, are a direct contradiction of these principles.

We can use announcements to staff of Waka Kotahi, the New Zealand Transport Agency, as an example of what to be concerned about. This agency has a short Māori name, easy to pronounce, and prominently featured on its stationery and signage—indeed a model for official support for language revitalisation:



However, a memorandum to staff of the Agency on 30 November 2023<sup>6</sup> endorsed

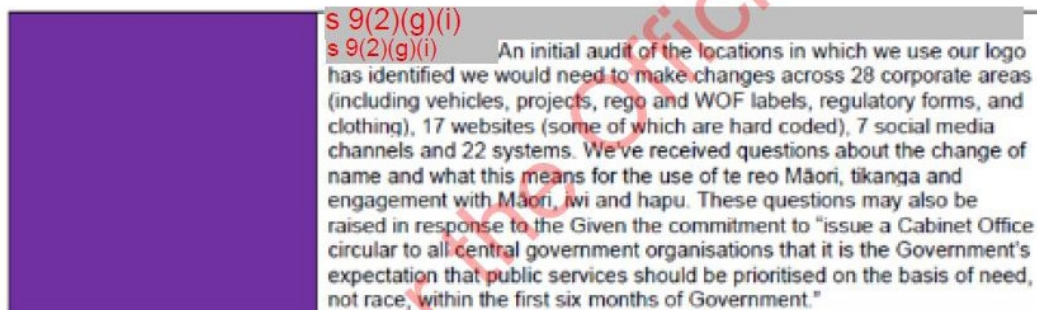
a staged implementation to changing our primary name to English following direction from our Minister, and our style guide being updated, with a view [to] minimising the cost of change. Our primary name will be the NZ Transport Agency/Waka Kotahi with abbreviations being NZTA or the transport agency.

5 See F. Grin and F. Vaillancourt (1988). *Language Revitalisation Policy: An Analytical Survey. Theoretical Framework, Policy Experience and Application to Te Reo Māori*. Report to the Treasury, Wellington, Chapters 8, 11, & 12. <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/publications/wp/language-revitalisation-policy-analytical-survey-theoretical-framework-policy-experience-and-application-te-reo-maori-wp-98-06>

6 ELT Paper: *Implications of new Government Commitments* (in confidence) Meeting date: 30/11/2023. Obtained under the Official Information Act.



It was noted that Waka Kotahi had been cited in media statements as an example of an agency that would change in conformity with a Government directive to “Ensure that all public service have their primary name in English, except for those specifically related to Māori”<sup>7</sup>



The changes needed were extensive, covering 28 “corporate areas”, from vehicles to clothing, forms, websites and social media, among others. It was noted that questions had been raised “about the change of name and what this means for the use of te reo Māori, tikanga and engagement with Māori, iwi and hapū”. These questions were not answered in the memorandum, but they were indirectly linked to the Government’s expectation “that public services should be prioritised on the basis of need, not race ...”. The implication here that the use of an official language is somehow a sign of racial preference is indeed disquieting.

It could also be argued that these policies are a direct challenge to Te Ture mō Te Reo Māori 2016 | The Māori Language Act 2016. The Act states at the onset that it is designed to affirm the status of the Māori language and promote its revitalisation:

- s. 3. (2) Ko te aronga o tēnei Ture—
  - (a) he whakaū i te mana o te reo Māori hei—
    - (i) reo taketake mō Niu Tīreni;
    - (ii) taonga hoki mā ngā iwi me ngāi Māori;
    - (iii) reo hoki ka kaingākauria e te motu;
    - (iv) reo whai mana ā-ture hoki mō Niu Tīreni;
  - (b) he tuku āwhina hoki hei tautoko, hei whakarauora hoki i te reo Māori.

- s. 3. (2) The purpose of this Act is—
  - (a) to affirm the status of the Māori language as—
    - (i) the indigenous language of New Zealand; and
    - (ii) a taonga of iwi and Māori; and
    - (iii) a language valued by the nation; and
    - (iv) an official language of New Zealand; and
  - (b) to provide means to support and revitalise the Māori language.

and directs government agencies to use the Māori language in the promotion of public services and the provision of information:

<sup>7</sup> ELT Paper: *Implications of new Government Commitments* (in confidence) Meeting date: 30/11/2023. Obtained under the Official Information Act. The quotations which follow are from the same set of documents.

### 9 Guidance for departments of State

(1) As far as is reasonably practicable, a department of State should, when exercising its powers and performing its functions, be guided by the following principles:

- (a) iwi and Māori should be consulted on matters relating to the Māori language (including, for example, the promotion of the use of the language):
- (b) the Māori language should be used in the promotion to the public of government services and in the provision of information to the public:
- (c) government services and information should be made accessible to iwi and Māori through the use of appropriate means (including the use of the Māori language).

but then cleverly provides (with a real underhand blow in the Māori text<sup>8</sup>):

(2) Kāore tēnei ārahitanga e tuku atu ki te tangata i tētahi mana ā-ture e whai niho ai i roto i tētahi kōti ā-ture.

(2) This guidance does not confer on any person any legal right that is enforceable in a court of law.

This escape clause will presumably be a refuge for the Government in any challenge to the new policies.

The Act has other inherent contradictions—it sets out a list of principles in section 8(2) which include the following:

(2) E whai ake nei ngā mātāpono:

*Ko te reo Māori*

(a) ko te reo Māori te reo taketake o Niu Tirenī:

(b) he mana motuhake, he mana pūmau tō te reo Māori:

*Te reo Māori me te hapori o Niu Tirenī*

(k) he reo whai mana ā-ture nō Niu Tirenī te reo Māori:

(l) he whakahirahira te reo Māori ki te tuakiri o Niu Tirenī.

(2) The principles are as follows:

*Māori language*

(a) the Māori language is the indigenous language of New Zealand:

(b) the Māori language has inherent mana and is enduring:

*Māori language and New Zealand society*

(k) the Māori language is an official language of New Zealand:

(l) the Māori language is important to the identity of New Zealand.

The Māori text in this clause is much stronger than the English. In principle (b) it is not simply the language that is enduring, the *mana* of the language is enduring. Although the word *taketake* is parallel to “indigenous” in principle (a), and indeed is often used where English would use “indigenous”, it has in fact a far deeper meaning—fundamental, original, permanent. This subclause alone, and especially in conjunction with subclauses (b), (k), and (l) would justify putting the Māori text (and name) first on official stationery and signage, and in taking other measures to promote the language—for example, the incentive payments for speakers of the language as a way of ensuring the agency has the capacity to deliver services in *te reo*, and its staff have the

8 The Māori text reads literally “This guidance does not give anyone a legal right which has teeth in a law court.”

opportunities and incentives to develop and use their skills. Section 12 of the Act provides that the provisions of the Act are to be interpreted in line with the purpose (s. 3(2)) and principles (s. 8), and that in case of conflict, the Māori text will prevail over the English; perhaps there is scope here for overriding the escape clause in section 9.

### **12 Interpretation of Act generally**

(1) The Māori and English versions of this Act are to be interpreted in a manner that best furthers the purpose of the Act and the principles set out in section 8.

(2) The Māori and English versions of this Act are of equal authority, but in the event of a conflict in meaning between the 2 versions, the Māori version prevails.

I would like to end here on two notes. Firstly, both as individuals and members of groups we need to work for a return to the spirit of the Māori Language Act 2016—that Māori is *te reo taketake o Niu Tirenī*, and is important to the identity of New Zealand. The Māori text uses “*Niu Tirenī*” in these contexts, removing any doubt that these words apply to affiliates of the Atlas network and members of Hobson’s Choice as much as they do to Māori language activists. To quote from the final paragraph of my “Clampdown” article:

The alternative (a real possibility, at a time when people are frightened for their jobs and increasingly suspicious of each other’s motives) is to begin, or continue, “working for the clampdown”: the suppression of diverging views, and of those who voiced them, under the guise of “accountability”; the replacement of vision and inspiration by conformity and coercion.

As The Clash put it:

You start wearing blue and brown  
You’re working for the clampdown.  
So you’ve got someone to boss around  
It makes you feel big now

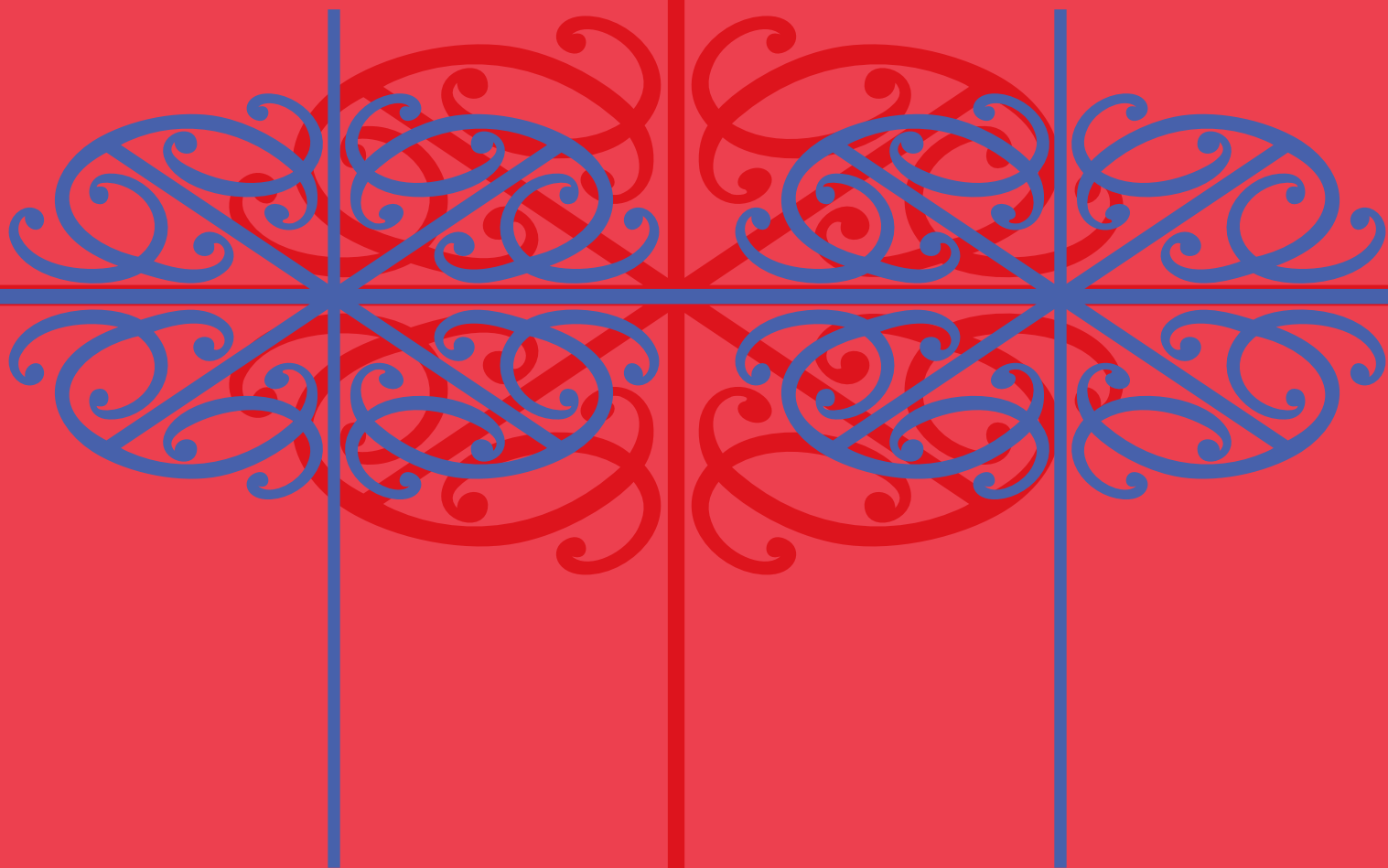
The second note, however, looks forward to a happier future, if we do not lose our commitment to resisting the clampdown. Those concerned about the future of *te reo Māori* must work to ensure that the values listed in the Māori Language Act become a reality for all who call Aotearoa New Zealand home. We must ensure that they are not simply the aspirations of a few, but are threads firmly woven into the social fabric of the country.

The first verse of the Taniwha song asked the heroes of the past—in our case people like Sir James Henare, his son Erima, Kingi Ihaka, Huirangi Waikerepuru, and the rest, along with the veterans still with us like Whatarangi Winiata, Timoti Karetu, and Hirini Mead to continue to inspire the younger generations who have taken up the cause. The second verse foretells a brighter future:

Taku hiahia e hoa ma  
Me huihui mai tātou e  
Mo te pō o te tau hōu  
Kia kori kia ngahau e.<sup>9</sup>

Kei reira, heoi anō tāku kōrero mo te wā nei.

<sup>9</sup> My wish, o friends / Is for us all to gather / On New Year’s Eve / To dance and celebrate. The text quoted is from H. T. Rikihana, *Waiata Māori* (Auckland: Kohia Teachers Centre, 1992). The last line on the Parlophone recording is “Haurangi, hūrōri e”—tipsy and wobbly, i.e. having a really good time. Toby Rikihana’s version is a more dignified expression of the same sentiments.



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