

27 March 2026

**Submission** to Committee Secretariat of the Justice Committee on the **English Language Bill**.

We, as a Catholic Justice and Peace Commission of Auckland, welcome the call for public submissions on the **English Language Bill**, as it coincides with the numerous, demanding, and arduous discussions and dialogue we have undertaken as an international body of native and indigenous peoples of faith during our recent International Conference on Catholic Indigenous (ICCI) in Tamaki Makaurau, Auckland. We are concerned, and deeply disappointed, that the very protections of our native Indigenous language, the taonga status, and Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations of Te Reo Māori, will be jeopardised by this ill-proposed and unnecessary Bill.

We wish to record our strong opposition to the English Language Bill. We do not offer amendments for the Bill in its current form, rather for reasons highlighted in our submission, we request the Bill's complete withdrawal.

**Bill Examination**

Rather than directly answering the three questions this Bill poses, we have scrutinised and reformed those three questions through the application of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). Our reworked questions and answers read:

- Is the English language endangered in Aotearoa New Zealand? No.
- Does English need protection? No.
- Does the Bill and its amendments uplift those who need support? No.
- Does the Bill risk harming Te Reo Māori? Yes, symbolically and structurally.
- Does the Bill align with Te Tiriti / Treaty obligations? No.
- Does it put political convenience and coalition agreements above the rights and dignity of a minority? Yes.

Therefore, through CST we understand that this Bill does not seek to protect and uphold a language that is endangered, as English is not under threat, but instead seeks to

- Strengthen the already strong (majority)
- Weaken the vulnerable taonga of Te Reo Māori
- Undermine solidarity
- Contradict subsidiarity
- Move away from Te Tiriti / Treaty partnership
- And purposefully exclude known ESL (English as a second language) minorities in Aotearoa New Zealand such as Pasifika, Chinese, and Indian communities.

## Risking Human Dignity

We emphasised, to an international audience at our ICCI Conference, the unique quality and respect of Te Reo Māori as an expression of personal and collective identity, historically, currently, and being preserved and revitalised for future generations. Te Reo Māori carries the spiritual, cultural, and historical identity of Tangata Whenua. Any policy that diminishes its presence risks diminishing the dignity of Māori people.<sup>1</sup>

## Risking the Common Good

English already dominates government, health, education, media, and public life. Elevating it further does not advance the common good. Instead, it risks disadvantaging the language that most needs support for equitable flourishing.<sup>2</sup>

## Risking Solidarity

Te Reo Māori language revitalisation efforts continue to rely on strong social commitment and support. CST requires us to stand with the communities whose taonga is at risk. This Bill does not demonstrate solidarity, rather, it undermines Māori aspirations, determinations, and validity.<sup>3</sup>

## Risking Subsidiarity

Policies affecting Māori language should be shaped **with Māori**, not imposed through political bargaining. The current Bill appears driven by coalition commitments rather than by consultation or community want or need.<sup>4</sup>

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### Supporting CST:

<sup>1</sup> “The dignity of every human person... is the foundation of all the Church’s social teaching.” Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace. (2006). *Compendium of the social doctrine of the church*. Burns & Oates. Ch 4, n. 160.

[https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html#The%20help%20that%20the%20Church%20offers%20to%20modern%20man](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html#The%20help%20that%20the%20Church%20offers%20to%20modern%20man)

<sup>2</sup> “The common good... concerns the overall welfare of society and not the advantage of any group.” Pope Paul VI. (1965, November 7). *GAUDIUM ET SPES - Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. Vatican II: The Holy See. n. 26.

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>3</sup> “Solidarity is not a feeling of vague compassion but a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the good of all.” John Paul II. (1987, December 30). *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. n. 38.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html)

<sup>4</sup> “A community of a higher order should not interfere with the internal life of a community of a lower order... but should support it.” Pope Pius XI. (1931, May 15). *Quadragesimo Anno*.

[https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html). n. 79.

## **Upholding Stewardship of Taonga**

Te Tiriti calls us into right relationship and commits us to protect the taonga of Māori, including Te Reo Māori. By acknowledging the historical suppression of Te Reo Māori and recognising and upholding the needed status of Te Reo Māori as a taonga, CST in Aotearoa New Zealand obliges the Church to advocate for the language's flourishing and future.

## **Rationale**

Declaring English an official language adds nothing necessary to the Constitution of Aotearoa New Zealand but risks actual and symbolic harm to Te Reo Māori, and to the Nation's foundational bicultural and bi-linguistic identity. Our faithfulness to the Gospel and to Te Tiriti principles directs us to reject this Bill and continue the work of strengthening Te Reo Māori for the flourishing and common good of all.

## **Upholding Te Tiriti / Treaty Obligations: A Timeline**

### **Waitangi Treaty Principles that apply directly to language:**

#### **a. Partnership**

The Crown must consult Māori **in good faith**, especially on matters affecting taonga such as Te Reo Māori.

#### **b. Active Protection**

A core Treaty obligation.

When a taonga is endangered (as Te Reo Māori is), the Crown must enhance and support, not weaken, opportunities for its growth.

#### **c. Redress**

The Crown must remedy past harms including state-driven suppression of Te Reo Māori in schools and institutions.

### **Waitangi Tribunal Te Reo Māori Claim (WAI 11 1986)**

Key rulings on language rights under Te Tiriti o Waitangi in the foundational legal decision established the protection of Te Reo Māori as taonga (treasure) under Article 2 of the Treaty. It further instituted that the Crown has an active duty to protect Te Reo Māori. Protection that must be effective, not symbolic or passive. That the active duty of protection is ongoing, positive, fully exercised, and reasonably practicable. Protecting Te Reo Māori includes ensuring its survival, revitalisation, and availability for use in public institutions.

This ruling directly led to the **Māori Language Act 1987**, which made Te Reo Māori an official language of Aotearoa New Zealand.

### **Broadcasting Assets Case. NZ Court of Appeal (1994)**

*(New Zealand Māori Council v Attorney-General)*

This is the leading judicial authority on the Crown's duty to actively protect Māori taonga. Key findings again found The Crown has a Treaty duty to take "reasonable steps" to actively protect Māori language. The duty requires the Crown to avoid actions that would harm Te Reo Māori, take proactive steps to strengthen, and ensure Māori language transmission is supported.

### **Waitangi Tribunal: *Te Reo Māori Report Addenda and Subsequent Jurisprudence***

Following WAI 11 1986, multiple Tribunal reports reaffirm the Crown must prioritise revitalisation of Te Reo Māori as it is an **endangered** taonga, and importantly, that the state must support Te Reo Māori in education, broadcasting, public services, and government communication.

### **Ko Aotearoa Tēnei (WAI 262, 2011)**

The Tribunal again affirmed that Māori culture, identity, and language are taonga. That the Crown must partner with Māori in decisions affecting Māori culture and identity (solidarity and subsidiarity). Crown actions should not diminish Māori cultural expression. Policy must uphold Māori self-determination (Tino Rangatiratanga) in relation to cultural taonga.

### **Further Negative Implications**

This Bill seems to form part of a wider political climate reducing Māori visibility in public life.<sup>5</sup> We push against this shift as it contradicts the Church's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a covenant requiring protection of Māori taonga. One of our first questions when reading this Bill was why now? Why not at the time of signing Te Tiriti o Waitangi or during one of the many Tribunal reviews thereafter. Why the sudden created urgency to make English an official language?

What we understand of English as a language:

- English has functioned as the unquestioned language of colonial power, there was no need to legislate it before, and that need does not exist now.
- The UK itself has **never legislated an official language**. Aotearoa New Zealand inherited this constitutional practice.
- Colonial policy in the 19th century focused on **assimilating Māori into English**, not protecting English.
- The idea of official-language legislation is mostly a 20th-century phenomenon tied to minority language rights movements. English has never been a minority or endangered language.

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<sup>5</sup> Bennett. L. (2026, March 4). *Why there's a push to make English an official language in New Zealand*. Abc.net.au. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2026-03-05/new-zealand-first-pushes-to-make-english-an-official-language/106410158>

- English dominance was enforced through **schools, courts, and administration**, making formal recognition unnecessary.

The claim that Te Reo Māori causes “confusion” risks framing Māori identity as problematic. A concept that CST outright rejects. Nor do we believe that the use of Te Reo Māori in public services has caused or is causing undue confusion, particularly in health and transport contexts as English translation has always been a provided subtext.<sup>6</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

We close our submission with words quoted by our former Pope Francis:

***“The mother tongue is a bastion against ideological and cultural colonialization, and against a dominant way of thinking, which destroys diversity.”<sup>7</sup>***

Aotearoa New Zealand was once renowned for progressive policies and diversity. By deprioritising Māori self-determination and partnership, as this Bill will do if passed, further encourages and necessitates Māori activism and advocacy, which is a visible and active sign that although our progressive tradition has been weakened by a rightward shift it is not gone, and has certainly not been silenced. This Bill is not only ill-proposed it is potentially damaging to social cohesion.

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<sup>6</sup> Dexter, G. (2026, February 19). *Bill to make English an official language of NZ introduced to Parliament*. RNZ. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/587369/bill-to-make-english-an-official-language-of-nz-introduced-to-parliament>

<sup>7</sup> Reis, Sr BM fsp. (2018, February 21). *Pope Francis: Native languages are a defense against ideological dictatorship*. Vatican News. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2018-02/international-mother-language-day-unesco-pope-francis.html>