

**To:**

Committee Secretariat  
Committee Secretariat  
Justice Committee  
Parliament Buildings  
Wellington



## Submission on the English Language Bill

**Submitted by: Te Tira Whakamātaki**

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Te Tira Whakamātaki **does not** wish to make an oral submission before the Justice Committee and is available at the Committee's convenience. We welcome the opportunity to speak to these matters directly.

## 1. Executive Summary

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1. Te Tira Whakamātaki opposes the English Language Bill.
2. The Bill is framed as a clarification of legal status. It is not. In practice, it formalises the dominance of a language that is already overwhelmingly dominant across all domains of public life in Aotearoa New Zealand
3. The English language is not under threat. It does not require protection, revitalisation, or legislative reinforcement. The Bill does not respond to a demonstrated policy problem, nor does it address any identified gap in law or practice.
4. Instead, **the Bill introduces risk.**
5. It risks reinforcing the structural dominance of English at a time when te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language continue to require active protection. It risks shifting institutional behaviour toward English-first approaches. It risks undermining decades of work to restore te reo Māori as a living, everyday language of this country.
6. The Bill also represents a misallocation of public resources. Legislative development requires sustained public service resourcing across policy, legal drafting, and parliamentary processes over extended periods. Advancing legislation without a clear functional benefit during a period of economic, environmental, and social strain raises serious questions about prioritisation and public value.
7. At a time when core public systems are under strain, introducing legislation that delivers no functional benefit risks eroding public confidence in the legislative process itself.
8. For Te Tira Whakamātaki, language policy is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the Crown's obligations of active protection over taonga. Te reo Māori is a taonga that was systematically suppressed through state systems and remains in a process of revitalisation. New Zealand Sign Language similarly requires ongoing protection to ensure accessibility and equity. English does not sit in this category.

9. The Bill therefore inverts the logic of language protection. Instead of prioritising languages that require support, it seeks to formalise the position of the language that already holds overwhelming power.
10. Accordingly, we recommend that **the Bill be rejected**.

## 2. About Te Tira Whakamātaki

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11. Te Tira Whakamātaki is a kaupapa Māori organisation working at the intersection of policy, environmental stewardship, and community resilience. Our work is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and focused on protecting taonga, strengthening community wellbeing, and advancing equitable systems.
12. We work alongside whānau, hapū, and iwi across Aotearoa New Zealand through initiatives including Mātaki: The Māori Biosecurity Network and Hono: The Māori Emergency Management Network. Our work reflects a systems approach, recognising that policy decisions shape real outcomes for communities, environments, and future generations.
13. We are not just observers of this system; we are embedded within it. The design of policy and legislation directly affects our ability to support communities and uphold our responsibilities as kaitiaki.

## 3. What the Bill Does

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14. The Bill seeks to formally recognise English as an official language of New Zealand in legislation.
15. English is already the dominant language across government, law, education, commerce, and public life. The Bill does not introduce new functional capabilities. It does not resolve operational issues. It does not improve access to services.
16. Its primary effect is symbolic. Symbolic legislation does not sit outside the legal system. It shapes interpretation, influences administrative behaviour, and signals which values are to be prioritised across government.
17. In this case, the signal is clear: reinforcement of the dominant language, rather than protection of those at risk.

#### **4. There is No Policy Problem**

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18. The central question for any piece of legislation is simple: what problem does it solve? In this case, no clear problem has been identified.
19. English is spoken and understood by the vast majority of the population. It is the primary language of state institutions. It is the default language of public communication. There is no evidence of systemic confusion, legal uncertainty, or service failure arising from the absence of formal legislative recognition of English.
20. This Bill is therefore a solution in search of a problem.

#### **5. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Language Protection**

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21. For Te Tira Whakamātaki, Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the foundation of language policy in Aotearoa. Article 2 guarantees Māori tino rangatiratanga over taonga. Te reo Māori is a taonga. Its protection is not optional. It is a constitutional obligation.
22. The courts and Waitangi Tribunal have consistently affirmed that active protection requires prioritisation of threatened taonga, not neutral treatment.
23. Te reo Māori was actively suppressed through state systems. Generations were punished for speaking their own language. Its current status reflects decades of struggle, advocacy, and revitalisation efforts led by Māori.
24. New Zealand Sign Language has similarly been marginalised and requires ongoing support to ensure accessibility and equity. The official recognition of these languages exists to protect and restore them.
25. English, by contrast, was imposed through colonisation and institutional dominance. Its position today is secure.
26. The Bill does not strengthen the Crown's ability to meet its Treaty obligations. It risks weakening them by reinforcing the dominance of English within systems that are still working to rebalance linguistic equity.

#### **6. Structural and Practical Risks**

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27. While the Bill is presented as neutral, its effects are not. Formalising English as an official language risks:
  - Reinforcing existing institutional preferences for English.

- Encouraging English-first approaches in public services and communications.
  - Reducing momentum for the normalisation of te reo Māori.
28. For example, agencies may default to English-only communications where bilingual provision is currently emerging, on the basis that English now carries explicit statutory recognition.
29. Language status shapes behaviour. It influences resourcing decisions, policy design, and organisational priorities. The cumulative effect of these shifts is a step backward for language equity in Aotearoa.

## **7. Misuse of Public Resources**

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30. Legislation is not cost-neutral.
31. The process of developing and passing a Bill includes policy development, Cabinet processes, drafting, select committee engagement, and implementation. These costs are substantial, often in the millions per Bill, and require sustained public investment. Such expenditure does not seem prudent at this time.
32. Public resources are finite. Their use must be grounded in clear need and public value. This Bill does not meet that standard.

## **8. Opportunity Cost**

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33. The prioritisation of this Bill must be considered in the context of wider national challenges. Communities across Aotearoa are facing rising cost of living, housing insecurity, under-resourced public services, climate-related disasters, and environmental degradation.
34. The question is not whether Parliament can pass this Bill, but why it is choosing to do so ahead of legislation that would materially improve people's lives. Legislative time and public investment directed toward this Bill are resources not directed toward addressing these issues.
35. This is not a neutral choice. It reflects a prioritisation that is misaligned with the lived realities of many New Zealanders.

## 9. Recommendations

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36. Te Tira Whakamātaki recommends that the Committee:
1. Reject the English Language Bill.
  2. Prioritise legislative and policy efforts that address urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges.
  3. Strengthen support for te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language as taonga requiring active protection.
  4. If the Committee does not recommend withdrawal, include an explicit non-derogation clause confirming that nothing in this Act limits or undermines the status, revitalisation, or resourcing of te reo Māori or New Zealand Sign Language.

## 10. Conclusions

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37. The English Language Bill is unnecessary, costly, and misaligned with the needs of Aotearoa New Zealand.
38. It does not address a real problem, improve outcomes, or strengthen democracy or Te Tiriti obligations.
39. Instead, it risks reinforcing existing inequities and diverting attention and resources from issues that require urgent action.
40. For Te Tira Whakamātaki, this Bill is not a technical clarification. It is a statement about priorities.
41. If symbolic recognition of languages is to be legislated, priority should instead be given to strengthening te reo Māori and New Zealand Sign Language in domains where they remain under-represented.
42. At a time when Aotearoa faces significant challenges, this Bill does not meet the threshold of necessity, value, or alignment with Te Tiriti o Waitangi
43. **We urge the Committee to reject it.**

Ngā mihi nui

Chloe Southgate, Melanie Mark-Shadbolt, Micheal Heimlick