



Report of the Māori Affairs Committee

Petition of Te Pāti Māori: Change our official name to Aotearoa

August 2023

Contents

Recommendation.....	2
Request to change the country's official name to Aotearoa	2
Comments from Te Pāti Māori	2
Comments from submitters	3
Historical origins and use of the name Aotearoa.....	3
Historical origins and use of the name New Zealand	4
The meaning and importance of names.....	4
Level of public support for changing the country's official name	5
Recognition and revitalisation of te reo Māori	5
Process for changing the country's official name	5
Request to restore te reo Māori names for towns, cities, and places.....	6
Process for changing place names.....	6
Our response and conclusion.....	7
Appendix.....	8

Arena Williams
Chairperson

Petition of Te Pāti Māori

Recommendation

The Māori Affairs Committee has considered the petition of Te Pāti Māori—Change our official name to Aotearoa—and recommends that the House take note of its report.

Request to change the country's official name to Aotearoa

The petition was presented to the House on 3 June 2022. It requests:

That the House of Representatives change the country's official name to Aotearoa, and begin a process to identify and officially restore the Te Reo Māori names for all towns, cities and places by 2026, and note that 70,047 people have signed petitions to this effect.

We invited a number of individuals and organisations to submit their views on this petition. We received written submissions from Te Pāti Māori and seven other individuals and organisations, six of whom also met with us and provided oral evidence.

We note that the Petitions Committee considered similar petitions from Stuart Prossor and Danny Tahau Jobe in 2022.¹ Both of those petitions requested that the country's official name be changed to Aotearoa New Zealand.

Comments from Te Pāti Māori

Te Pāti Māori explained that its petition is about “reinstating the original names of this land and strengthening who we are as a nation”. It launched its petition exactly 49 years after Te Petihana Reo Māori—The Māori Language Petition was presented to Parliament. Te Petihana Reo Māori led to the Government introducing optional reo Māori classes in schools, and ultimately te reo Māori becoming an official language of New Zealand in 1987.² Te Pāti Māori told us that, in 1910, 90 percent of Māori could speak te reo Māori fluently, in comparison to only 26 percent in 1950. Now, according to Statistics New Zealand, 23 percent of Māori, and around 3 percent of the country's total population, speak te reo Māori fluently.³

Te Pāti Māori emphasised that in Article 3 of Te Tiriti o Waitangi—the Treaty of Waitangi, the Crown promised that Māori would have the Crown's protection and the same rights and privileges as British citizens. Te Pāti Māori asserts that the Crown is obligated to restore the status of te reo Māori and ensure it is recognised as the first language of this country. It stated that te reo Māori should be accessible everywhere—“on our televisions, on our radio stations, on road signs and maps” and in the names of places and the country.

¹ You can read the Petitions Committee's report here: [Petitions of Stuart Prossor: Change New Zealand's official name to 'Aotearoa New Zealand' and Danny Tahau Jobe: Aotearoa New Zealand, officially | New Zealand Parliament](#).

² [Te Petihana Reo Māori—The Māori Language Petition | New Zealand Parliament](#).

³ [Te reo Māori proficiency and support continues to grow | Stats NZ](#).

Comments from submitters

Historical origins and use of the name Aotearoa

Several submitters recounted different interpretations of the history, origins, and use of the name Aotearoa. Some submitters referenced the story of Hine Te Aparangi (also known as Kuramārōtini), travelling with her husband Kupe. Seeing clouds in the distance, she called out: “he ao, he ao, he ao tea roa”—“a cloud, a cloud, a long white cloud”. Dr Rawiri Taonui, an academic researching the history of the name Aotearoa, told us that this story derives from a manuscript written between 1886 and 1903 and it is probable that this is an authentic source.

Many submitters emphasised the importance of drawing on Māori oral history and traditions. Dr Rawiri Taonui told us that when researching original and historic place names used by Māori prior to British colonisation, it is important to use sources from before 1892. He said that from 1892 onwards, Māori oral traditions were influenced and mixed with Pākehā oral traditions to create an “Europeanised Māori history”. Similarly, Hohepa Thompson, said:

We used our waiata, mōteatea, karakia, pūrākau⁴ as mechanisms to pass knowledge. We use carvings and weavings to explain stories. It is important to note that just because it wasn’t written in a book, this does not give it any less relevance or significance.

Dr Rawiri Taonui told us that his research has found 50–60 authentic pre-1890 sources that use Aotearoa as a name for the whole country. They include some sources from the South Island and Polynesia. Dr Rawiri Taonui explained that from the mid-1880s until about 1900, Aotearoa was more frequently used to refer to just the North Island. During this period, the Kīngitanga movement⁵ emphasised the importance of separate Māori political representation from both the North and South islands. Te Peeke o Aotearoa, the Kīngitanga Bank, was established during this time and intended primarily for use by North Island Māori. From 1900 onwards, Dr Rawiri Taonui said that it was common, once again, for Aotearoa to be used to refer to the whole country.

We note that other historians have argued that the name Aotearoa was not used to refer to the South Island. Instead, some people suggest that the name Aotearoa me Te Wai Pounamu was more commonly used for both islands.⁶ One submitter, Hobson’s Pledge, told us that there is no historical confirmation that Aotearoa was used by Māori as the name for the whole country until years after Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed in 1840. It told us that historians writing prior to 1850, such as Samuel Marsden, Henry Williams, Augustus Earle, and others, did not include any reference to the name Aotearoa.

We appreciate that a place can have several names, and that names can hold a multitude of different meanings for different people. Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori—Māori Language Commission (Te Taura Whiri) said: “This is the beauty of language, right? When we’re using the language, we’re able to adapt and change and I think there’s much to be gained from

⁴ Waiata (songs), mōteatea (chants), karakia (prayers), pūrākau (myths and legends).

⁵ You can read more about the Kīngitanga movement here: [Kīngitanga—the Māori King movement | Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand](#).

⁶ [Ngāi Tahu leader: Let’s not rush name change | RNZ News](#).

that”. Te Manatū Taonga—the Ministry for Culture and Heritage (Te Manatū Taonga) stated that Aotearoa has been the most widely accepted reo Māori name for this country since the late 19th century. We recognise that it is important to consider and understand the historical use and origins of any name that is used to represent this country.

Historical origins and use of the name New Zealand

According to popular history, when Abel Tasman sighted this country in 1642, he referred to it as Staten Landt because he believed it might have been connected to Staten Landt, a small island close to Cape Horn.⁷ This was later disproved and the official cartographer to the Dutch East India Company, Joan Blaeu, decided to refer to the country as Nieuw Zeeland, after Zeeland, a province in the Netherlands. We understand that this was anglicised to New Zealand by James Cook.

One submitter, Hohepa Thompson, questioned the use of a word with Dutch origins to refer to this country:

The question I think many have to ask themselves is what is the relevance of the name New Zealand? Have they been to Zeeland? Do they know the history of what happened at Mohua when Abel Tasman came to our shores?

Some submitters noted that transliterations of the name New Zealand (such as Nu Tirene, Nu Tirani, Nu Tirenī, Niu Tīrene)⁸ were also historically used to refer to the country. The name Nu Tirenī is used in He Whakaputanga o te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tirenī—the Declaration of Independence of the United Tribes of New Zealand and Nu Tirani is used in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Hobson’s Pledge told us that if a reo Māori name was used for this country, their view is that it should be Nu Tirani, consistent with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, Hobson’s Pledge noted that it does not advocate this change.

The meaning and importance of names

All of the submitters referred to the meaning and importance of place names. Te Taura Whiri said that place names act as a vessel to reflect “people’s critical awareness of the importance of place, and the importance of their identity connected to that place”. The New Zealand Geographic Board—Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa made similar comments, that names often connect people to a sense of place or identity. We agree, and think that the name of this country should reflect and represent the whenua, people, and identity of this nation.

Te Pāti Māori told us that: “the status quo is no longer consistent with who we are as a nation”. It emphasised that changing the name of the country to Aotearoa would strengthen national identity. One submitter, Hobson’s Pledge, disagreed and said it thought that changing the country’s name could cause conflict. It cited examples of countries that had experienced conflict following a name change, such as Myanmar and Zimbabwe.

⁷ [Abel Tasman | Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand](#).

⁸ There are various different forms of spelling recorded. This is not an exhaustive list.

Level of public support for changing the country's official name

Te Pāti Māori told us that: “People are hungry for change”. Hobson’s Pledge directed our attention to a 2021 Curia Market Research survey of one thousand people that it had commissioned.⁹ This survey found that 48.8 percent of participants opposed changing the country’s name to Aotearoa (28.1 percent were supportive), and 41.5 percent opposed changing the country’s name to Aotearoa New Zealand (35.3 percent were supportive). A 2023 Newshub-Reid Research poll found that 52 percent of participants thought the country’s name should be New Zealand, 36.2 percent thought it should be Aotearoa New Zealand, and 9.6 percent were in favour of Aotearoa.¹⁰

Recognition and revitalisation of te reo Māori

Te Pāti Māori, Te Taura Whiri, and the National Urban Māori Authority emphasised that changing the country’s name to Aotearoa is important for recognising and revitalising te reo Māori. Te Taura Whiri said that an important part of language revitalisation is normalising the use of that language. Changing the country’s name to Aotearoa could help promote use of te reo Māori by all New Zealanders, in all parts of society. It told us that, through the increased use of te reo Māori, New Zealand sees “a generation who have now had access to language in their school, who have grown up in a world where te reo Māori is no longer a language of shame, but a language that identifies us as a nation”.

Te Taura Whiri also told us that its research indicates increased support for widespread use of te reo Māori. It commissioned a Colmar Brunton poll in 2021 that found that 83 percent of participants agreed that te reo Māori is an important part of the national culture. The same poll also found that 73 percent of participants agreed that speaking te reo Māori is something to be proud of. The 2021 General Social Survey reported that: 62 percent of participants agreed that te reo Māori should be a core subject in primary schools, 57 percent agreed that the Government should support increasing the everyday use of te reo Māori, and 56 percent supported the idea that signage should be in both English and te reo Māori.¹¹

Process for changing the country's official name

The New Zealand Geographic Board—Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa (Pou Taunaha) is the country’s official place naming authority. Pou Taunaha told us that, under the New Zealand Geographic Board (Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa) Act 2008, it does not have jurisdiction to assign a name to, or alter the name of, the country as a whole.¹² We understand that changing the name of the country would require statutory change. We note that one option could be to hold a referendum to gauge public support for changing the country’s name.

In a previous submission to the Petitions Committee, Te Manatū Taonga stated that:

No single Act of Parliament or authority makes ‘New Zealand’ an official name. Rather, it is the consistent use of ‘New Zealand’ in constitutional

⁹ [Country Name Poll | Curia Market Research](#).

¹⁰ [What should country's official name be? | Newshub](#).

¹¹ You can learn more about the General Social Survey here: [About the General Social Survey | Stats NZ](#). You can view data collected as part of the General Social Survey 2021 here: [General Social Survey 2021 | Stats NZ DataInfo+](#).

¹² [New Zealand Geographic Board \(Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa\) Act 2008 | New Zealand Legislation](#).

documents such as Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the British Parliament's New Zealand Constitution Act 1852 that has created its official status.

Request to restore te reo Māori names for towns, cities, and places

Te Pāti Māori also requested in its petition that a process be started to restore te reo Māori names for all towns, cities, and places. Several submitters expressed their support for this request. Hobson's Pledge said it believes that changing the names of towns and cities would be "an affront to the efforts" of the people who have created the "infrastructure, buildings, parks and communities that now identify with those names".

Pou Taunaha told us about the status of names of the 18 cities and 145 towns in this country:

- 6 cities have official Māori names¹³
- 12 cities have non-Māori names; only two of these names are official (Wellington and Lower Hutt)¹⁴
- 87 towns have Māori names: 75 are official names and 12 are not official
- 58 towns have non-Māori names: 19 are official names and 29 are not official.¹⁵

Process for changing place names

Pou Taunaha talked to us about the process for assigning new or altering existing place names, as set out in the New Zealand Geographic Board (Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa) Act. It noted that it does not have a statutory function to restore te reo Māori place names, but it has done so in some cases.

Pou Taunaha told us that it receives and considers proposals for new place names or changes to existing names. It said that proposals must meet its minimum requirements and good place-naming standards before they are accepted. Before inviting public submissions, Pou Taunaha said it prefers to have already gained support from relevant iwi and councils for populated places.

The Act prescribes a public engagement process for name-change proposals. Pou Taunaha noted that it often goes beyond these requirements: engaging on social media, producing media releases, informing relevant members of Parliament, and placing notifications on government consultation websites. Public feedback is considered by Pou Taunaha before it reaches a final decision. If the proposal receives objections that Pou Taunaha does not agree with, the decision must be determined by the Minister for Land Information.

¹³ These cities are Manukau, Porirua, Rotorua, Tauranga, Whanganui (Wanganui is another official name for the same city), and Whangārei.

¹⁴ The unofficial city names are Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, Hamilton, Hastings, Invercargill, Napier, Nelson, New Plymouth, and Palmerston North.

¹⁵ You can search for the unofficial and official town names on the New Zealand Gazetteer: [New Zealand Gazetteer | Toitū Te Whenua](#).

Pou Taunaha told us that it uses four approaches when considering restoring a reo Māori name for a place that already has a non-Māori name:

- outright replacement of the non-Māori name
- use of a “dual” name where two names must be used together, such as Aoraki/Mount Cook
- use of “alternative” names, such as Te Waipounamu or South Island
- addition of the Māori name to the New Zealand Gazetteer as a collected Māori place name linked to the official non-Māori name.

Pou Taunaha added that this last approach means that the Māori name would not have official status, but allows for the name and its story to be shared in an official source. It said that using alternative names can sometimes aid in the transition from a well-established non-Māori name to a Māori name.

When a decision has been reached and made official, the place name is published in the New Zealand Gazetteer.¹⁶ Official place names must be used on official documents, including road signs, websites, and maps.

Pou Taunaha also told us that it provides advice when place names are being considered as part of Treaty settlement processes. It said that when a name for a populated place is being considered as part of a Treaty settlement, it usually recommends that the proposal be referred for its consideration. This allows for public engagement to occur.

Our response and conclusion

We thank Te Pāti Māori for its petition. We are of a shared view around the constitutional importance of this issue. We recommend that the Māori Affairs Committee of the 54th Parliament consider nominating this topic for a special debate in the House.

¹⁶ [New Zealand Gazetteer | Toitū Te Whenua](#).

Appendix

Committee procedure

The petition was referred to us on 20 October 2022. We met between 7 December 2022 and 16 August 2023 to consider it. We received written submissions from the petitioner and Toitū Te Whenua—Land Information New Zealand, and heard oral evidence from Dr Rawiri Taonui, Hobson’s Pledge, Hohepa Tamihana, the National Urban Māori Authority, Ngā Pou Taunaha o Aotearoa—New Zealand Geographic Board, and Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori—Māori Language Commission.

Committee members

Arena Williams (Chairperson)
Tāmami Coffey
Paul Eagle
Harete Hipango
Tama Potaka
Hon Aupito William Sio
Teanau Tuiono
Rawiri Waititi

Helen White participated in some of our work on this petition.

Evidence received

The documents we received as evidence in relation to this petition are available [on the Parliament website](#).

Recordings of our hearings can be accessed online at the following links:

- [Hearing of evidence, 8 March 2023 \(1:06:33\)](#).
- [Hearing of evidence, 15 March 2023 \(1:13:27\)](#).
- [Hearing of evidence, 29 March 2023](#).