Pax Christi Aotearoa Oral Submission on Māori Wards Bill

5 June 2024

Ngā mihi nui ki a koutou katoa

Allow us to introduce ourselves. I am Sister Bridget Crisp, and my colleague, Dr. Susan Healy, is joining me. We are making this oral submission on behalf of Pax Christi Aotearoa New Zealand, an independent, faith-based justice and peace organisation affiliated with Pax Christi International.

Pax Christi was officially founded in France on March 13, 1945, in the last months before the end of World War II. In the early post-war period, Pax Christi’s leaders helped to bring together communities from both sides of the French-German border in order to rebuild relationships of friendship and peace.

As we have said in our written submission, Pax Christi Aotearoa, New Zealand, strongly opposes this Bill which, if passed, would lead to far fewer Māori wards.

We believe that the Māori wards make an important contribution to justice and peace in our local communities. They provide a forum for Māori to work with other elected Councillors for the good of their region. Māori voices are heard alongside others, making for understanding and more enduring decisions. The value of the Māori wards to decision-making for communities is demonstrated by the letter sent to the government by over fifty mayors and regional council chairpersons. It was a powerful collective voice of opposition to this bill.

As emphasized by these mayors and reiterated in Pax Christi’s written submission, the bill is discriminatory in that it is only in the case of Māori wards that a referendum is required. Councils can establish rural and other specific wards without recourse to a referendum. History shows that referenda on Māori Wards often lead to a great deal of racist rhetoric permeating communities. This is harmful to Māori and especially their rangatahi. It makes it harder for Māori wards to be established, thus deliberately muting their voice within local government.

Critically, there has been no consultation with hapū, iwi and established Māori bodies in the construction of this Bill. That in itself goes against Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

I now hand over to my colleague to speak.

Ngā mihi ki a koutou

My name is Susan Healy. For many years, I have written and taught in the field of race relations, with particular focus on Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

As Bridget said, Pax Christi Aotearoa is a member of an international peace organisation. One of our strengths is that we assess what is happening in this country from local, national and international perspectives. International experience of work for peace shows that institutions like Māori wards are vitally important to building understanding and peaceful relationships between and within communities. And, indeed, Peace is one of the most important things needed in our world today.

Dialogue as the means to peace is being emphasised again and again by the leaders of the Catholic Church (with whom Pax Christi is aligned), the World Council of Churches, the United Nations, UNESCO and many other like bodies. Dialogue means the coming together of communities with different histories, different cultures and different worldviews so that they can reconcile differences and *work* together at solutions that will benefit the good of all. “Peace and culture are irrevocably linked because culture is part of our identity, traditions and soul,” say UNESCO’s Léonie Evers.

The international consensus is that Dialogue should be much more than “feel good” conversations and token consultation. For enduring peace, there must be societal institutions that bring different cultural communities together as partners in decision making. This is what we have in those Councils that have Māori wards.

To move to diminish the number of Māori wards and undermine their importance is a move against dialogue and peace. If as a nation we wish to continue on the path of reconciliation and peace-making that has been in our country for the past fifty years, our leaders in national government should be encouraging the establishment of more Māori wards, not less.

There is a final point I want to make. In the item on Māori wards shown on TV1 last night, Mr Cameron Brewer claimed that already 40% of the present Government are Māori; he imputed that there is no need for dedicated arrangements to guarantee a Māori voice. This to misunderstand the nature of representative government. If I am a Māori and I am the MP for West Hamilton, then my first duty is to represent the views of my electorate. I am not there to ensure that Māori opinion, rights and interests are brought to the table. Representation from Māori communities is needed for that.

Pax Christi is committed to honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the *peace* agreement in which the Crown guaranteed to uphold Māori authority, rights and interests. If the Crown today is to stand with moral integrity, then it will withdraw this Bill which is pitted against one of the most important peace-making institutions in our country.

Kia ora tatou.