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The Waitangi Tribunal at 50 Years: A Personal Reflection

I was 16 years old when Dame Whina Cooper in 1975 led the famous Māori Land March from Te Hāpua in the Far North to Parliament in Wellington. The hikoi protested the dispossession of Māori land after 1840, which had resulted in 63 million acres being removed from the tino rangatiratanga of iwi and hapū. That is **95 per cent** of the country's land area.

This historical record shows this dispossession was led by the Crown through practices such as dishonoured land deeds, armed invasion and confiscation (raupatu), and the activities of the Native Land Court. These practices breached the Crown's solemn duty to honour Queen Victoria's confirmation and guarantee of tino rangatiratanga in Article 2 of te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Fifty years later, **82 per cent** of the claims made by Māori for this colonising violence have had, or are having, their historical issues fully addressed by official inquiry. Thus, our nation is close to achieving a post-colonisation reconciliation that is unmatched elsewhere in the world.

How has this extraordinary outcome been achieved in just five decades?

In 2023 and 2024, I had the opportunity to explore this question. Partners for a New Economy is a global philanthropic organisation. It generously provided a grant to study how principles of the Treaty of Waitangi might be applied to the Crown's annual budget process. The project was hosted by the Ngāi Tahu Research Centre at the University of Canterbury, in collaboration with Dr Matthew Scobie and Professor John Reid.

Based on our research, my answer to this question can be simply stated.

Aotearoa New Zealand is close to achieving reconciliation of the land dispossessions made during colonisation because the Waitangi Tribunal has made wise recommendations based on its practical application of the principles of te Tiriti o Waitangi.

The Waitangi Tribunal was created by the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975, passed unanimously by Parliament in that year I turned 16. The language of 'practical application' and 'principles of the Treaty' come from the preamble of the Act, responsibly implemented by the Tribunal.

On the Act's 50th anniversary, the Waitangi Tribunal's wise and practical applications of te Tiriti principles deserve to be celebrated and proclaimed. Our project contributes to the celebration by describing sixteen principles our research found in Waitangi Tribunal reports. The following page lists these principles, grouped under four headings related to the preamble and Articles of te Tiriti o Waitangi. A full copy of our report is available here.

Principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

Preamble	
Exchange	Māori and the Crown honour the tuku or gift exchange made in te Tiriti.
Partnership	Māori and the Crown act in an enduring relationship akin to a partnership.
Good Faith	Māori and the Crown act towards each other in utmost good faith.
Mutual Benefit	Māori and the Crown cooperate to create mutual benefits.
Article 1	
Kāwanatanga	Māori accept the Crown's kāwanatanga and good government.
Reciprocity	The Crown's authority is qualified by its reciprocal Tiriti obligations.
Redress	The Crown provides redress for breaches of its Tiriti obligations.
Informed Decisions	The Crown makes decisions that are informed by Māori experience.
Article 2	
Tino Rangatiratanga	Māori exercise tino rangatiratanga and self-determination.
Active Protection	The Crown actively protects the exercise of tino rangatiratanga by Māori.
Right to Development	The Crown supports Māori economic development.
Full Participation	The Crown ensures the full participation of Māori in society.
Article 3	
Mana Motuhake	Māori citizens exercise mana motuhake and succeed in society as Māori.
Options	The Crown provides options so all citizens can make authentic choices.
Equal Treatment	The Crown treats equally all citizens in similar circumstances.
Equity	The Crown ensures equitable outcomes for Māori and all citizens.

Source: Dalziel, Paul, Matthew Scobie and John Reid (2025). *Principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi: An Economics Perspective*. NTRC Research Paper. University of Canterbury: Ngāi Tahu Research Centre. Available for free download here.