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The Front Page: Is it time to change New Zealand to Aotearoa?

By [Damien Venuto](#)

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Debate is growing about whether it might be time for the name of New Zealand to change. Photo / Getty Images

The name New Zealand has its origins in a mistake made by Dutch explorers more than 500 years ago.

When Abel Tasman first encountered New Zealand, he thought it was in fact an island off the coast of South America and dubbed it Staten Land.

Cartographers were by 1643 made aware of the fact that Tasman had actually encountered a different stretch of land and promptly renamed it Nova Zeelandia after the Dutch province of Zeeland.

This year, for Māori Language Week, the [Front Page](#) podcast posed the question of whether a name derived from a Dutch province 500 years ago is appropriate for this country today.

Te Pāti Māori president John Tamihere says the country is starting to have a significant debate about who we are and where we exist.

"Back in 1973, 95 per cent of all New Zealand product was exported to Great Britain," says Tamihere.

"When the UK joined the European Union, we started our own story of the reclamation of our sovereignty and what that might look like. Everything changed dramatically. We had to find new trading partners. And China is now our largest trading partner, not the UK. We are evolving as a nation and you've got to look at this thing in context."

Tamihere says that the people of New Zealand wouldn't be the first in the world to reclaim the name of their country.

"If you look at the break-up of the Commonwealth, you have countries like Rhodesia that are no longer named after Cecil Rhodes. They're named in their own language. And I think that's where we're heading."

While there has been historical debate between Māori iwi across the North and South Islands, Tamihere says Aotearoa is "now widely accepted up and down the country as the term that defines what Pākehā continue to call New Zealand".

"Changing the name to Aotearoa is what a lot of Māori want. And the fact that some Kiwis want to stay determined as being New Zealanders, well that's part of their story."

P. [More 70,000 people signed a petition released in August asking for New Zealand to be renamed Aotearoa.](#)

But not everyone in New Zealand is on the same page.

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A Colmar Brunton poll last year found just 9 per cent of the country were willing to fully replace New Zealand with Aotearoa and 11 per cent supported Aotearoa New Zealand.

Tamihere says he understands the trepidation some might have about this debate taking place right now.

"When you are in the process of redefining the constant story of your nationhood, a lot of people might think that calling it Aotearoa is about taking something away from them," says Tamihere.

"When you boil it all down, you can still call yourself a New Zealander if you want to. I want us to be called Aotearoa and I've got a right to do that.

"The question I always put to people, where it's Three Waters, co-governance or whatever is: what am I actually taking from you? Why are you so bitter and upset about this when I'm not taking anything from you?"

The issues of Three Waters and co-governance are currently major political talking points, but even the decision by Whittaker's to use te reo Māori on a chocolate bar recently sparked controversy.

Tamihere says he isn't surprised that these issues can spark such strong emotional reactions.

"It's a generational thing and it's also a worldwide phenomenon where imperialist groups, which colonised countries, feel as if they're losing their dominance. And that might upset them.

"I can't speak for them ... All I know is that we have rights and entitlements to assert a new era, a new world and a new nationhood. And whether they like it or not, their mokopuna will have a different view from them. This country will be defined by those under 45 very shortly."

Asked whether he thought he would see the name of New Zealand change in his lifetime, Tamihere couldn't help but chuckle.

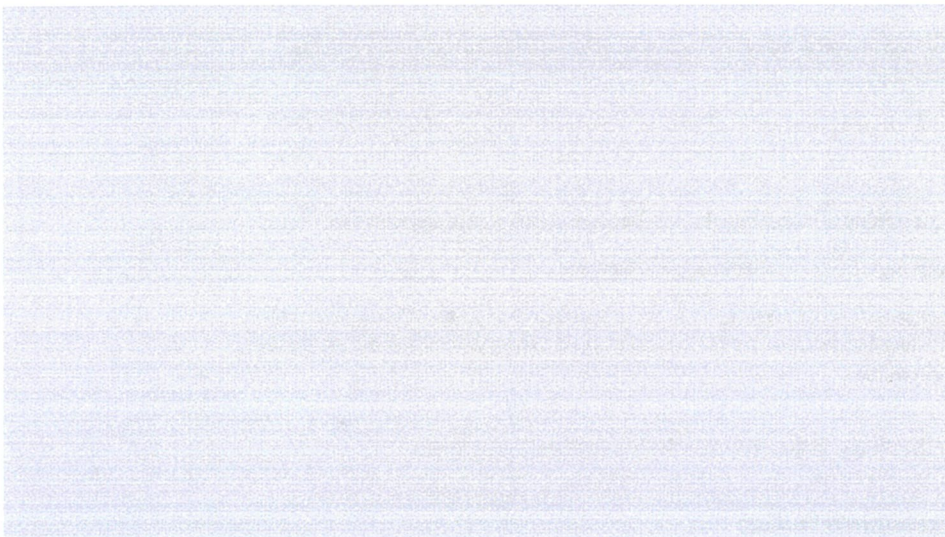
"Well, it depends on long the good Lord is going to give me on this earth ... In the short term, it'll be a bit of a struggle. But here's the thing, those who claim mana to a previous era, we're all passing away. Our mokopuna are coming through and they are defining themselves as Kiwis and there is far more understanding and acceptance of differences.

"It's just a matter of time. In my time? I don't know. But I never thought I'd see Māori TV, Māori radio or indeed the Māori Language Act in 1987 ... When you look at it, we've made marvellous progress as a nation in a very busy time amid humanity's energetic evolutions that have happened in the last 50 years."

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