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Submission on the Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill

Dear Select Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to make a submission.

Common Grace Aotearoa strongly opposes the Local Government (Electoral Legislation and Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Bill.

We see Te Tiriti as a covenant

As Christians we see Te Tiriti o Waitangi as a covenant - a sacred promise of relationship - that continues through each generation. We believe God takes covenants seriously, therefore as people seeking to follow God, we take seriously our role in honouring Te Tiriti and calling on the Crown to do so.

We are inspired by and grateful for the work of [Matike Mai Aotearoa](#), the vision for constitutional transformation by 2040 that sees the promise of Te Tiriti embodied 200 years after the document was signed, and we commit to working towards that vision.

As a tangata Tiriti organisation, we want to serve and empower Christians of all backgrounds across Aotearoa to reform the 'te kāwanatanga sphere', those areas of the current government systems and structures that serve the whole population in these lands. At the same time, we want to find ways to support the growth of the 'rangatiratanga sphere', the spaces where Māori have full political authority over their own affairs, and the joint/relational sphere where we make decisions together.

Re-introducing barriers to Māori wards is a breach of Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The Crown has guaranteed tino rangatiratanga to Māori in Article 2 of Te Tiriti. Māori wards are one step towards this rangatiratanga being recognised in a joint, relational sphere, by giving Māori the right to be represented and to participate in decision-making in local government.

The removal of barriers to Māori wards saw a massive increase in Māori representation at local government, going from three councils with Māori wards to 49 councils that either have them, or plan to have them at the 2025 local elections.

In some areas, this is critical to ensure a Māori voice at the table, and to overcome the sustained legacy of colonisation and power imbalances created through land confiscation and alienation. For example, New Plymouth District council has had just two elected Māori councilors in 100 years. Not because Māori weren't standing for local government, but because the power imbalance following the New Zealand Settlements Act of 1862 and other acts of colonisation put the electoral power balance in the hands of colonial settlers. Now, with a Māori ward, there are currently two councilors who identify as Māori on New Plymouth District Council.

Alternative mechanisms for Māori participation in local government are not the same as having a dedicated seat at the decision-making table. Further, these alternative mechanisms have historically seen Māori voices ignored when inconvenient.

Re-introducing public polls puts further barriers in the way of this representation. It will make it almost impossible in some areas for councils to establish these wards.

The Waitangi Tribunal's Urgent Inquiry Report into Māori Wards and Constituencies found that "the poll provisions are inequitable and discriminatory and a barrier for Māori representation in local government. Reinstating them will make establishing, or reestablishing, Māori wards or constituencies insurmountable. The proposed legislation is also likely to raise human rights issues under The New Zealand Bill of Rights Act 1990".

We urge the Select Committee to take heed to the Tribunal's findings.

The process of proposing this Bill also breaches Te Tiriti o Waitangi

The Crown did not consult Māori on this bill, in fact has even introduced the bill after the Waitangi Tribunal ruled that this bill is a breach of Te Tiriti. Providing four business days for submissions appears to be a deliberate move to limit public (including Māori) input.

The whole community will suffer from divisive debate and lessened Māori input

We are deeply concerned that re-introducing polls will create division in communities and arouse harmful racist rhetoric.

We are also concerned that reintroducing polls, and inevitably reducing the number of Māori wards will also deprive the community as a whole of Māori input. We need diverse wisdom around our council tables including matauranga Māori and perspectives from iwi and hapū.

We all want a democracy where good decisions are made by our representatives, where communities get to help shape the things we love and care for, like the health of our whānau, or our local river.

Good decisions happen when they are based on the expertise and experiences of people with a stake in the outcome of that decision. Iwi Māori have distinct interests in many aspects of a local area, such as the river - they have cared for and had a unique relationship to a river for hundreds of years. Guaranteed Māori representation in local decision-making about such things strengthens the decision-making process, and therefore the strength of our democracy.

Other ways of structuring local representation to ensure a diversity of voices and perspective such as rural and urban wards, or region-wide councilors have been used by local government entities for many years, and do not have to justify their existence by public referendum. It is discriminatory and unfair for Māori wards to have to go through this barrier.

We urge you to throw out this bill.

We would like to make an oral submission.

Kind regards,

Kate Day and Alex Johnston

Co-Directors,
Common Grace Aotearoa