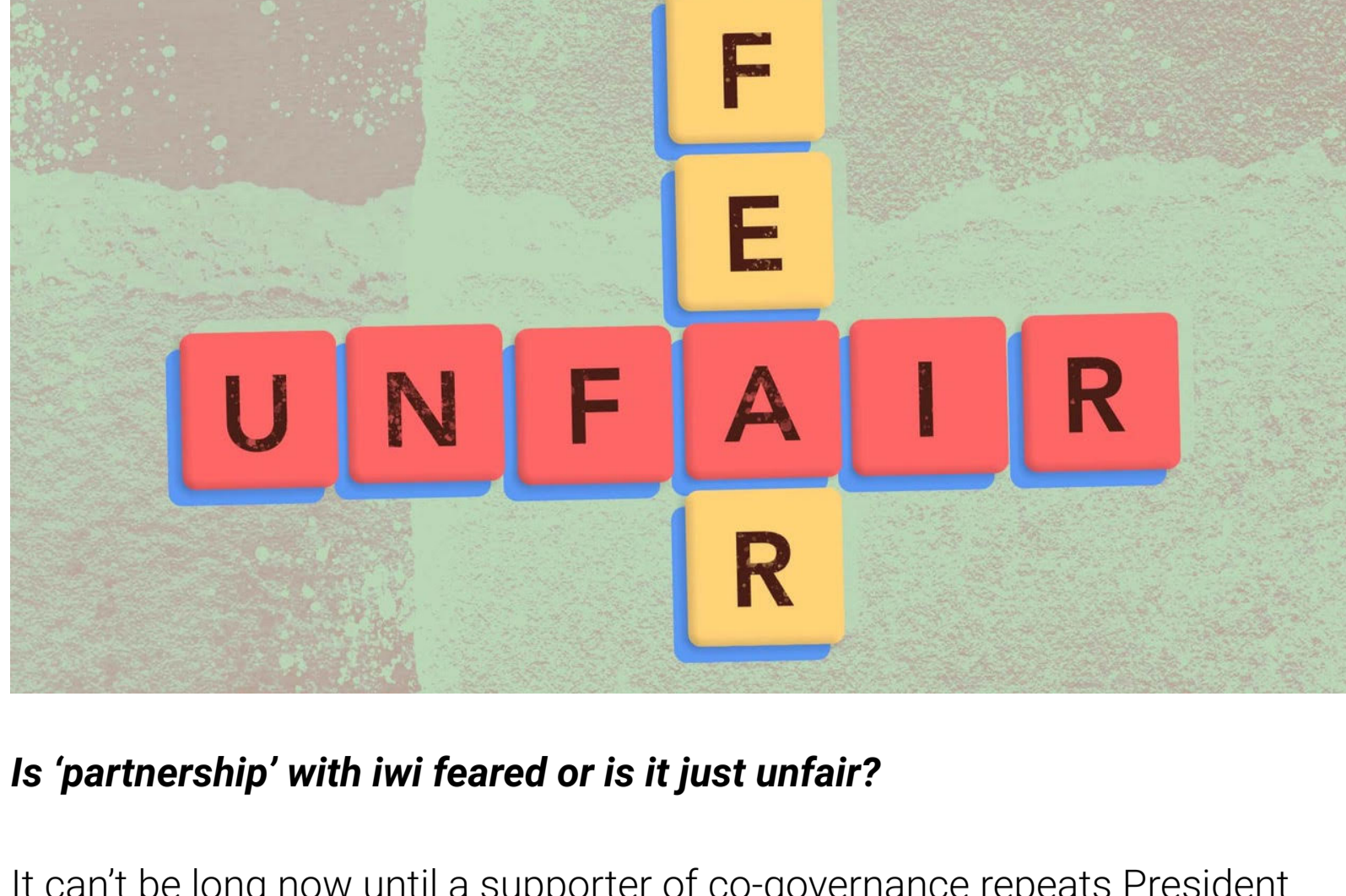


## Hipkins insists there's 'nothing to fear' in co-governance

Graham Adams, Contributing Writer

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### *Is 'partnership' with iwi feared or is it just unfair?*

It can't be long now until a supporter of co-governance repeats President Roosevelt's famous exhortation at his first inauguration during the Great Depression: "We have nothing to fear except fear itself!"

The assertion that non-Māori have "nothing to fear" from Māori being given disproportionate power in New Zealand is such a reflexive staple of left-wing discourse it has become a cliché. Unfortunately for the left, this line is hardly soothing to many voters — it only makes them wonder if they should take a much closer interest in the government's stealthy co-governance agenda.

Prime Minister Chris Hipkins routinely uses the "no fear" factor to deflect criticism. In the weekend, at a meeting on a South Auckland marae, he said: "I say as a non-Māori that other non-Māori have nothing to fear from the establishment of a Māori health authority." And it wasn't the only time he used the phrase that day.

In fact, it's a drum he has beaten consistently since he became Prime Minister in late January. Bizarrely, he has even used it when discussing bilingual road signs, which are designed to promote te reo by giving it the same public prominence as English. He told AM host Ryan Bridge in May:

"Many other countries have bilingual street signs — there's nothing to be afraid of having bilingual street signs."

He reiterated the point later in the interview: "I don't think we've got anything to fear by having te reo Māori on street signs."

That's as ludicrous as reassuring voters that there is nothing to be afraid of GST being taken off fresh fruit and vegetables. Hipkins' approach is designed solely to frame the debate in emotional rather than rational terms.

It's very hard to imagine, of course, that any critics actually fear bilingual road signs. It's more likely they might see them as pointless given the tiny proportion of people (including Māori) who understand te reo; and dangerous inasmuch as Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport has admitted that the extra comprehension time spent scanning the signs may reduce drivers' safety (especially when unfamiliar words in Māori are placed first, as will certainly be the case).

Telling critics they have nothing to fear is not an argument; it's a condescending ploy to cast opponents as irrational and anxious. It will come as little surprise that Jacinda Ardern — who often preferred to emote about issues than analyse them — frequently used "nothing to fear" as a defence.

When John Campbell raised the question of co-governance with her in an exit interview in April, she asked disingenuously: "Why be afraid of having Māori at the table? Why be afraid of that?"

The reality is that Māori have long been at the table in modern New Zealand politics, not least having had a guaranteed presence in Parliament since 1867 through the establishment of the Māori seats. The burning question now is whether Māori should be given places only as the result of due democratic process or also from a particular interpretation of the Treaty mandating an equal partnership.

Opponents of co-governance aren't leery of having any number of Māori in decision-making roles if they are democratically elected. No one, for instance, criticises the number of Māori MPs in Parliament, despite their totals in 2017 and 2020 comfortably exceeding the percentage of Māori in the population.

The truth is that opponents would object to any group — whether Rotarians, Anglican bishops, farmers or former All Blacks — sitting "at the table" with voting rights if they hadn't been put there through the democratic exercise of "one person, one vote of equal value".

What makes the lullaby line of "nothing to fear" particularly manipulative and underhand is that government ministers use it to avoid debating the main thrust of the criticisms. They avoid acknowledging that most opponents have a strong and principled objection to the radical interpretation of the Treaty that has led to unelected iwi representatives holding immense power in areas including Three Waters and the RMA reforms. They are also reluctant to acknowledge that most opponents' objections spring from a deep sense of fairness rather than fear. Instead, the Prime Minister and his Cabinet oscillate between implying that critics are racist or fearful.

Tellingly, both Ardern and Hipkins have avoided defending democracy publicly. Asked by Jack Tame last July on TVNZ's Q&A whether Māori had disproportionate voting power in forming the Regional Representative Groups that oversee strategy in Three Waters, Ardern dismissed the suggestion it was undemocratic as "simplistic".

In March on Q&A, Hipkins denied that co-governance is a threat to democracy. He told Tame: "I believe there is nothing undemocratic about co-governance" — which is extraordinary for a Prime Minister whose government has overseen law changes in which 16 per cent of the population are being given power equal to the other 84 per cent in a swathe of areas including planning laws, water management, health and education.

Journalists and political commentators also often sidestep the undemocratic nature of co-governance and instead cast opposition as being based on fear. Last week, Martyn Bradbury, the editor of the left-wing Daily Blog, accused anti-co-governance campaigner Julian Batchelor of inflaming "naked bigotry", and opined: "This election has the potential to unleash an anger generated by fear towards Māori, the likes [of which] we haven't seen in a long time."

In February, TVNZ's political editor, Jessica Mutch McKay, interviewed National's Local Government spokesman, Simon Watts, about his party's views on Three Waters. Among a raft of criticisms, National firmly opposes the co-governance aspects embedded in the Three Waters structure — and it is a major reason why it has promised to quickly repeal the legislation if it forms a government after October 14. Mutch McKay asked Watts: "What scares you about co-governance?" — and then: "What makes you nervous about it?"

The loaded questions implying white people are "fearful" of race-based policy are in part a nod to alleged "white fragility" in relation to other ethnicities. That is to say, the motivation for white people criticising any policy or law seen to be unfairly favouring particular ethnicities can be explained on the grounds that they feel threatened and soon become defensive or angry.

The claim that New Zealanders have nothing to fear from co-governance is such a reflexive assertion by those defending it that it sometimes leads to ludicrous juxtapositions. In a column published in the NZ Herald earlier this month on Three Waters, Waikato-Tainui grandee Tuku Morgan, wrote: "Non-Māori have absolutely nothing to fear — the notion of shared responsibility of our national resources is hardwired into the fabric of our nation." Yet in the same column he threatened court action if legislation was introduced that reduced iwi control of water.

Morgan concluded: "Iwi and Māori will be involved in water reform make no mistake about that. It will not be determined by fringe elements in our communities who are more interested in political grandstanding... It is critical [that] iwi and Māori are at the forefront reflecting the aspirations of all New Zealanders."

The idea that Māori know what's best for "all New Zealanders" — and therefore non-Māori have nothing to fear from co-governance in water management or in any other area — is extraordinarily presumptuous and dislocated from most voters' views.

Nanaia Mahuta, when she was Local Government minister, took a similar approach to Three Waters as that of Tuku Morgan. When questioned in Parliament last year by Act MP Simon Court on why only Māori had the right to issue powerful Te Mana o te Wai statements, Mahuta's reply indicated that everyone — including farmers and anyone else with a direct interest in water — would benefit because iwi are always concerned with the common good (including that of future generations).

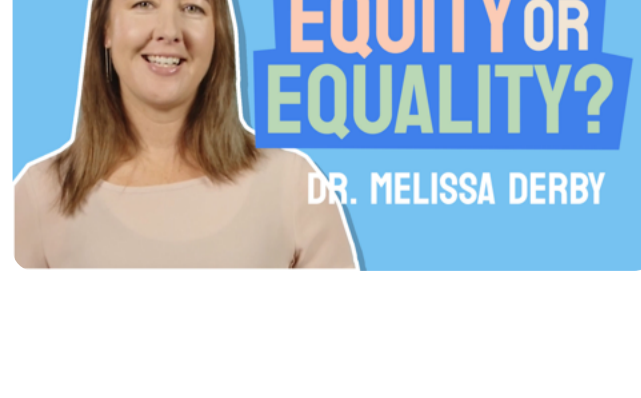
Like Morgan, Mahuta expects us to believe that iwi are wiser custodians of water than any other citizens and what is good for Māori is good for everyone.

That notion is not going to be an easy sell for Labour, the Greens or Te Pāti Māori in the weeks running up to the election. In fact, the principal parties on the left may soon discover the hard way just how proud New Zealanders are of the nation's record of equal suffrage — and how much they value retaining democracy of the "one person, one vote of equal value" variety.

*Graham Adams is a freelance editor, journalist and columnist. He lives on Auckland's North Shore. To receive pieces like this in your inbox subscribe to our newsletter.*



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