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Subject: Jepson seems to be “on a mission to get rid of as many things Māori as he possibly can within his term”.
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<https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/03-08-2023/the-fight-to-uphold-tikanga-continues-in-kaipara>

By **Tommy de Silva**

At the July 26 meeting of the Kaipara District Council, several Māori speakers stood to present on the importance of tikanga and Māori empowerment. One speaker was Mangawhai resident Caren Davis (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa). Davis challenged the mayor’s decision to have an English-only annual plan that would later be turned into a second bilingual plan using AI to translate English into te reo Māori. Ihapera Paniora (Te Roroa, Ngāti Whātua, Te Kuihi), Kaipara’s first Māori ward councillor, [labelled the mayor’s annual plan approach](#) “anti co-governance whitewashing”. Aotearoa Liberation League’s Pere Huriwai-Seger (Ngāphui, Ngāti Porou, Te Atī Awa) spoke against Julian Batchelor’s controversial Stop Co-Governance national tour, pleading for the council not to give Batchelor a platform.

Once they had finished presenting, mayor Craig Jepson introduced a surprise speaker. One he had personally approved just that morning, noting that adhering to the protocols regarding the deadline to sign up to speak “may be waived by the chairperson”. The speaker was Julian Batchelor. Having Batchelor speak on the same day as Huriwai-Seger’s presentation on why Kaipara shouldn’t welcome the Stop Co-Governance tour was “uncanny”, says Davis. The mayor said it was a matter of free speech, but Davis questions whether Jepson would make the same accommodations for others that he did for Batchelor.

The events of July 26 were the latest in a series of disagreements between Jepson and local Māori. Last year Jepson attempted to [ban karakia](#) at council hui, arguing the tikanga didn't fit within his [multicultural, respectful and secular](#) council. Eventually, he revoked the ban and permitted reflections (including karakia) at hui once more. Jepson later refused to open a hui with karakia, so Huriwai-Seger – seated in the public gallery – conducted the tikanga instead. The mayor yelled, “Sit down, please, you are out of order!” to the rangatahi. As Paniora [explained to RNZ](#), tikanga stands independent from local government procedures and must be maintained to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

At the council's June meeting, Davis [presented](#) in favour of karakia, supported by her nine-year-old [kōtiro](#). Davis says she spoke because Jepson seems to be “on a mission to get rid of as many things Māori as he possibly can within his term”. Yet her plea to respect tikanga was largely ignored. “It's really weird, Mum, they weren't even looking at or listening to you – the mayor was on his phone,” Davis says her kōtiro said at the time. At the July meeting, one councillor noted that some of their colleagues had ignored Davis's kōrero at both hui.

Other local Māori have also stood up for tikanga. Ihapera Paniora is a vocal critic of Jepson in the media and around the council table. She told [Stuff](#), “At the end of the day, he wants to rid the council of every facet of Māori culture, Māori language.” Former Te Pāti Māori president Dame Rangimārie Naida Glavish (Ngāti Whātua) led a hīkoi against Jepson last December, demanding [tikanga be upheld and calling for the mayor's resignation](#).

Jepson recently removed reo Māori from the council's annual plan, [explaining to the Advocate](#) it made it “easier to read”. Although Jepson declined The Spinoff's request for an interview, he did provide a statement. Ultimately, “to accommodate more reo Māori,” Jepson agreed to translate the English report into a bilingual one. The mayor explained it “will contain more reo Māori” than previous plans. To minimise costs, chief executive Jason Marris gave the task of translating the plan to AI, but Paniora told the Advocate that approach would lead to “a bastardisation of te reo Māori”.

Te reo Māori data expert Gianna Leoni (Ngāti Kuri, Ngāi Takoto and Te Aupōuri) explains that Pākehā AI “can't describe [whakaaro](#) and reo Māori in a culturally appropriate way.” Translating the annual plan would be particularly difficult because it uses formal and

technical jargon, requiring “capability in English, te reo and policy to translate well”, Leoni says. The mayoral office says AI translations would need to be reviewed by “Māori language experts” to ensure correct [kupu](#) and the localised dialect/spellings are used.

Jepson [said](#) local iwi approved of AI translations. He told The Spinoff “both my CE and myself have spoken with Te Roroa and with Te Uri o Hau.” Yet Huriwai-Seger contacted representatives from both rōpū, [who refuted the mayor’s claim](#). They say no formal consultation occurred.

Tangata whenua are trying to ensure tikanga is observed, including in Pākehā spaces like councils. “In a council where most protocols are English ones, having a tiny Māori protocol in place wouldn’t be much to ask for,” Davis says, adding that “Māori in Kaipara deserve to have a governing body that elevates things Māori, not just chucks them out as they see fit.”

Local Māori are frustrated by Jepson’s pattern of defying tikanga. And as a result Kaipara District Council is falling behind the times, Davis believes. “I feel like I’m living in a bad dream,” she says of the events of the past few weeks. “Which is a shame because this region is filled with talented, open-minded, diverse people and some amazing council staff who are working hard to make this beautiful district a great place to live.”