

CONFRONTING RACISM WITH JUSTICE AND UNITY – A YOUTH STATEMENT ON RACE RELATIONS IN AOTEAROA

Since 15 March 2019, our society has been having a long-overdue conversation about racism, prejudice and unity. Many voices have been heard. By and large, young people have not.

This statement represents the views of over 150 youth and young adults aged 15 to 30 from around Aotearoa who gathered to discuss race relations in Aotearoa at this year's series of Race Unity Hui, held between March and May 2019. They came from cities and rural towns, from Kerikeri to Riverton. They represented the full ethnic and religious diversity of Aotearoa. They brought with them their diverse perspectives as high school students, university students, young professionals, activists and community workers. The views they shared, summarised below, are a call to action for all New Zealanders.

1. EVERY NEW ZEALANDER MUST CONFRONT RACIAL PREJUDICE

Every individual in Aotearoa is responsible for confronting racial prejudice. Instead of attacking one another we need to examine our own prejudices, and help others to do the same. This is difficult work, requiring compassion, empathy, humility and courage.

2. EDUCATION CAN REINFORCE RACISM, OR HELP ERADICATE IT

Our young people need an education that helps them overcome individual and institutional racism, both at home and at school. We are calling for greater diversity in school leadership and changes to curriculum, education policies and school culture.

3. WE NEED PLACES TO TALK ABOUT RACE AND CULTURE

If we are to become a truly inclusive society, we need social spaces in our communities where people of all backgrounds can talk about race relations and share their culture. These kinds of gatherings can help us move beyond mere acceptance or tolerance of different cultures to identify shared values, aspirations and goals.

4. INSTITUTIONAL RACISM EXISTS, AND IT MUST BE DISMANTLED

The continuing lack of diversity in positions of influence, the cultural bias of institutions, and racial inequalities of wealth, health and education are all examples of institutional racism: social structures that reflect and reproduce racial prejudice and inequity at a societal level. Responsibility for dismantling institutional racism sits not only with the leaders and members of institutions, but with all of us as citizens, stakeholders, employees and consumers.

1. EVERY NEW ZEALANDER MUST CONFRONT RACIAL PREJUDICE

As individuals, we should use our right to freedom of speech to uphold the rights of all New Zealanders. We cannot remain silent in the face of racism, whether online, in our neighbourhoods, in our schools, or in our workplaces. We all have platforms we can use to speak out against injustice, and actions we can take to build unity.

We can reflect on our own thoughts, words and actions – do they reflect racial prejudice?

A first step we can all take is examining our own attitudes towards race. We can question the labels and stereotypes we hear from our peers and from the media. We can reflect on our own thoughts, words and actions – do they reflect racial prejudice? We can respectfully enter a space where we might feel uncomfortable or out of place – a marae, a church, a mosque, a home – and learn about one another. We can befriend people of different backgrounds, appreciate their culture and perspectives, and learn from their experiences of race.

We have found that there are specific qualities and attitudes that help us build unity and justice. Compassion, empathy and a listening attitude are essential. We can listen to and acknowledge the stories of those who have experienced racism, both as individual incidents and as histories of oppression. An attitude of humility helps us deal with mistakes and misunderstandings, and makes it easier to learn from one another. The concept of ako is also helpful: when we teach we also learn. Courage and assertiveness are also vital, especially when responding directly to racism. Finally, we need to support and encourage one another – many of us can feel like we are alone in our struggle for justice.

We also have a responsibility to help others overcome their racial prejudice. Where possible we should try to control and focus our emotions, speaking out of love rather than anger. We can ask questions to probe the beliefs and experiences that underlie prejudice. We can 'flip the script' by asking them to consider their own experiences, such as bullying they've suffered or times they've felt out of place.

How we fulfil this responsibility depends on context. Before calling out someone's behaviour or words as racist, we should think about who we are speaking for, and the purpose of doing so. We also need to consider our own emotional readiness to educate others, and the limitations on what we can achieve as individuals. Not everything can be solved at the level of individual action: the responsibility for eradicating racism also lies with our communities and our institutions.

2. EDUCATION CAN REINFORCE RACISM, OR HELP ERADICATE IT

Education is one of the most important and effective tools for eradicating racism and building unity. Our first education about race takes place in our families. It is the responsibility of parents to raise children free from prejudice, to give children the opportunity to experience and appreciate diversity, and to shape their values and attitudes. As we grow up, our families become a place where we have both the opportunity and the responsibility to educate other family members.

Our school system has a significant role to play in promoting race unity. Many schools are extremely diverse, yet students often segregate themselves into cliques based on ethnicity. Many teachers and school administrators are motivated by a love for learning and a concern for social justice, yet we have seen and heard many examples of unconscious bias and explicit racism in the classroom, from both students and teachers. We consider that schools have a responsibility not only to prevent racism at school but to actively promote racial unity.

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We recommend that:

1. Boards of Trustees and principals consider the value of ethnic diversity when appointing school leadership, senior teaching staff and student leaders;
2. principals, administrators, teachers and student leaders receive education and training on recognising their own prejudices and understanding institutional racism;
3. teachers at all levels consider how to incorporate key values and concepts related to racism and race unity into the curriculum;
4. the Ministry of Education monitor and report on which schools are currently teaching the history of colonisation, and make this topic a core and compulsory component of the social studies and/or history curricula;
5. the Ministry of Education monitor and report on the current quality of Te Tiriti o Waitangi education across schools and year levels, and work to significantly raise the quality of teaching on this topic;
6. school managers, teachers and student leaders start learning how to create safe spaces within school where race relations can be discussed;
7. new entrants to primary and secondary schools be provided with opportunities to build relationships with one another across lines of race and ethnicity;
8. school zoning and entry policies be changed to prevent individual schools from being dominated by specific ethnicities or income brackets;
9. policymakers, school managers and student leaders reconsider the role of competition in school life, particularly at the secondary level;
10. the funding for needs-based scholarships be increased to match or exceed funding for merit-based scholarships (which are dominated by high-decile schools).

Together, recommendations 8 and 9 cover a troubling combination of issues: current zoning policies have allowed some schools to become dominated by one or two ethnicities. This trend is especially problematic when combined with the emphasis placed on competition between schools. In this light, there is a need to not only reconsider zoning policies but create more opportunities for students to cooperate with peers at other schools.

3. WE NEED PLACES TO TALK ABOUT RACE AND CULTURE

If we are to become a truly inclusive society, we need social spaces where people of all backgrounds come together to talk, learn and get to know one another. We need gatherings for meaningful and constructive conversations about race relations. We need places to build friendships at the neighbourhood and community level, across lines of ethnicity, race and class. We need opportunities to celebrate our culture and actually experience unity in diversity.

We consider that these spaces for dialogue and learning are most effective when they

1. accommodate and value not only ethnic diversity but diversity of thought, experience and language
2. make use of the arts
3. use the power of food to bring people together and help them appreciate one another's culture
4. are based on a clear shared purpose that can be a point of unity for the participants.

In our experience, these kinds of gatherings can help us identify shared values that cross cultures and religious traditions, and move beyond mere acceptance or tolerance of different cultures to the development of common aspirations and goals.

We consider that tikanga Māori and tāngata Māori have an important role to play in creating and shaping these spaces. We see coherence between Māori values and practices and other cultural and religious traditions, which are often holistic and based on community. We also value the structure that pōwhiri and mihimihi can bring to the process of bringing different people together for a common kaupapa.

We see Multicultural Councils as one set of institutions that are well-placed to initiate such spaces for dialogue and learning, because of their connections to multiple ethnic communities and their presence in centres across Aotearoa. Of course, many other institutions and agencies can also help create these spaces, from local councils to religious communities, non-governmental organisations and businesses.

No matter who takes the first step towards creating a space for dialogue, we see it as vital that young people are given a meaningful role in shaping the nature and purpose of the space. The participation of over 150 youth from across Aotearoa in the challenging discussions that have contributed to this statement is but one example of the significant role that youth can and should play in this arena.

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4. INSTITUTIONAL RACISM EXISTS, AND IT MUST BE DISMANTLED

Much progress can be made towards race unity through individual action, effective education and the creation of spaces for dialogue. However, we also need profound change in the institutions that hold the most political and economic power in our society – Parliament, the justice system, government agencies, businesses, and the media.

We see the inclusion and representation of ethnic diversity as crucial to progress at the institutional level. People in positions of influence need to reflect the full diversity of Aotearoa. In addition, institutions should undertake true consultation with the communities affected by their decisions and give these communities real power in deciding policy.

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Whatever their background, leaders and members of institutions need to consider what worldview and assumptions shape their institution's decisions and operations. For example, the current emphasis on individual rights over collective responsibilities can be seen as aligned with a liberal European philosophical tradition, but out of step with many other cultural and religious traditions. There might be value in reframing the current debate about freedom of speech and hate speech in terms of the responsibilities that we should all be expected to fulfil when exercising our right to free speech. As another example, we can ask: many institutions have recently adopted Māori names and symbols in their branding, but how many of these have deeply considered the implications of a Māori worldview for their work?

Economic inequality also needs to be addressed in order to improve race relations. For many people of colour, economic deprivation intersects with inequalities of health and education, and experiences of racism and exclusion. We are also concerned that economically deprived Pākehā may incorrectly attribute their difficulties to immigration, or resent the targeted support received by some Māori whanau from government and from their iwi and hapū. We have seen overseas how this kind of resentment and ignorance can be fertile ground for the spread of white supremacist ideology and xenophobia. We cannot allow the same pattern to unfold any further in Aotearoa – politicians of all parties should treat economic inequality and racism as matters of social cohesion and collective security.

The lack of diversity in positions of influence, the cultural bias of institutions and racial inequalities of wealth, health and education are all examples of institutional racism – social structures that reflect and reproduce racial prejudice and inequity at a societal level. Dismantling these social structures and establishing more just frameworks is no small task. But this is the responsibility that sits on all of us, as leaders and members of institutions, as citizens and constituents, as stakeholders and consumers.

As we work to dismantle institutional racism and establish equity and inclusion, we should keep in mind the interdependence between people and institutions. Institutions are composed of individuals whose hearts and minds can change, and groups of people whose culture and norms can shift over time. We can educate people in power about ethnic diversity, racism and the means of establishing unity. We can also create spaces for dialogue and learning within institutions, such as lunchtime discussions in workplaces and professional associations. We can also drive institutional change by working outside institutions at the grassroots to build consensus.

At the same time, those working towards institutional change need to learn to recognise and navigate the power structures within institutions. We can ask – what are the goals of this institution? what are the values and beliefs it operates on? what motivates its leaders and members? These sorts of questions can help identify opportunities to drive internal change. Rather than simply trying to force change, we can persuade hearts and minds by explaining benefits to the institution and calling on moral values such as equity and justice.

CONCLUSION

The statement above is the product of focused effort and reflection by over 150 young people of diverse backgrounds and experiences. It offers both a frank assessment of the issues facing us and a vision of hope for the kind of society Aotearoa could become. We hope that those reading it will show similar thoughtfulness, determination, and hope in considering and acting upon it.

THE RACE UNITY HUI WERE ORGANISED AND SPONSORED BY



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