

Does New Zealand's indigenous diplomacy measure up?

Pounamu or plas-tiki?

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New Zealand's much-hyped Indigenous foreign policy has thus far amounted to little more than window dressing, Jayden Evett writes

Indigenised diplomacy – action and policy abroad that is grounded in and guided by domestic Indigenous values – is on track to be foreign policy's next big thing for settler states. Australia is the [latest](#) to try out this new approach and, in searching for lessons from other countries, has [turned to](#) Aotearoa New Zealand.

There's been much talk about Wellington's efforts to adopt a more Māori foreign policy, especially since the appointment of Nanaia Mahuta, New Zealand's [first female Māori foreign minister](#). But how do these efforts measure up?

While she is not Aotearoa's first Indigenous foreign minister, Mahuta is the first to talk clearly about grounding how the country interacts with the world in he tirohanga Māori (a Māori worldview). Her emphasis on the Māori values of manaakitanga (reciprocity), whanaungatanga (connectivity), kotahitanga (collective action), and kaitiakitanga (intergenerational stewardship) was heralded as the arrival of foreign policy's ["Indigenous moment"](#).

However, New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has a history of window-dressing – insincerely using Māoritanga (culture, way of life) to distinguish itself. To be fair, this isn't unique to them. For decades, international passengers on the then-state airline received [plastic hei tiki](#), mass-produced novelties which imitated traditional, culturally significant Māori pendants made of pounamu or greenstone.

Past uses of Māoritanga in New Zealand's diplomacy have been little better, amounting to what the late Māori activist Atareta Poananga [described as](#) putting "brown ethnic icing on a...white cake". Though this sort of window-dressing typical of the 1970s and 80s has passed, today's Indigenous foreign policy risks becoming similarly hollow due to the disconnect between rhetoric and action.

You don't have to look hard to find examples of this. Despite public commitments to Māori values, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade fails to empower its Māori Policy Unit to be meaningfully involved in developing foreign policy.

Notably, there are no available cases of policy being explicitly actioned in line with Māori values. When asked at a [conference in July](#), Secretary of Foreign Affairs Chris Seed could only point to its new ethnically proportionate recruitment of staff as the lone example of the Ministry putting these values into action.

This isn't to say that an effective Indigenous diplomacy for Aotearoa is not possible. Initiatives such as the [1984 Te Māori exhibition](#) and [1997 Burnham Talks](#), which effectively engaged with Māori leaders and communities, are evidence of this. However, a truly Indigenous foreign policy should mean that these initiatives become regular parts of everyday diplomacy.

Yet, the barriers to achieving this are much larger and more stubborn than what can be overcome by advocates alone. From the top, Mahuta is but one person, bound by electoral fortune, pushing against an institution that has ensured unparalleled policy stability for almost 80 years by repeatedly cloning itself. From below and inside, generations of Māori staff have continually pushed for change, both wearing the system down piece-by-piece and being worn down by it in return.

Mahuta believes it's ["too early"](#) to assess the impact of this bicultural approach on foreign policy. However, if we do not look frankly at how Indigenous diplomacy is being rolled out now, we risk letting Wellington relapse into old habits. For such important shift in how foreign policy is made to be a success, it is incumbent on non-Māori staff in the Ministry to get behind the changes and support their Māori colleagues.

It also requires more support from the top of national politics. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern could be more active in incorporating Māori values in her foreign policy speeches abroad, signalling to the world – and the country's bureaucracy – that the whole government is committed to this approach.

Australia too should learn these lessons, and not let its own First Nations foreign policy become an exercise in window-dressing.

For Aotearoa New Zealand, Indigenous diplomacy is truly promising. But the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade has reached its he i tiki moment: whether it's made of plastic or pounamu is up to them.

About the Author

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