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## "A Different Light"

### **A Different Light –8<sup>th</sup> July 2023 – “Ministry’s gift of name a sign of the times – at last”**

Hold one hand in a “stop” sign. Now turn the palm to face you , as you bring it upwards. No, it’s not creative dance. It’s not yoga. It’s the new NZ Sign Language (NZSL) name for Whaikaha, (the Ministry of Disabled People). The new sign name was officially gifted to Waikaha by representatives of the Deaf community and the NZSL Board at parliament last week. The sign represents the rātā vine which appears on Waikaha logo and the whakatauaākī – “Me he aka rātā ka tipu tahi, ka puāwai tahi kia tū kaha i ngā hihi ō Tamanuiterā - Like the rātā vines growing together and flourishing to stand strong in the warmth of the sun’. A very positive statement indeed, and hopefully we will have some more frequent sunshine to go with it.

It is the first time a Ministry has received a sign name in New Zealand, despite the fact that NZ Sign Language (NZSL) has been an official language in Aotearoa for 17 years. This, then, is progress - albeit glacial. In recent years we have seen the progression of a bilingual approach to naming government agencies . Some better known examples are Te Waka Kotahi (NZ Transport Agency), Whata Ora (Health NZ), Kainga Ora (Housing NZ) and Oranga Tamariki (Ministry for Children).

This bilingual naming has been generally accepted by the NZ public apart from the occasional Neanderthal dissident.

NZSL as an official language has, therefore, a lot of catching up to do. In 2010 we didn’t have NZSL Interpreters at any official event or announcement. Now it is hard to imagine a time when the Prime Minister addressed the nation on TV without an a NZSL Interpreter in very close proximity, creating inclusivity for the Deaf Community.

In 2011, on behalf of Tiaho Trust, I wrote to Dame Tariana Turia, who was then the Minister of Disabilities: “I write to you as a last resort to endeavor to have tri-lingual interpreters (Te Reo, New Zealand Sign Language, English) present at the formal Waitangi Day celebrations this year. While the Commemoration Committee is supportive of their having Interpreters at the celebrations, funding for Interpreters is not available. I feel strongly that this is a huge opportunity to stand by the third official language of New Zealand and include it on the day we celebrate the foundations of New Zealand society”.

Lo and behold, funding was found and NZSL Interpreters have been at the Treaty of Waitangi celebrations at the Waitangi grounds ever since.

Sign names are given to people with whom a particular Deaf Community may be very familiar. Such names can be very descriptive, in fact they can be rather brutal, and to the point. My sign name is a hand held in front and hand trembling. The current Minister for Disability Issues Priyanca Radhakrishnan’s sign name is the motioning a bob hairstyle with your hands. I remember working years ago with some of the local Deaf Community and there was an older woman whose sign name was reflective of her large bust. At the time I didn’t know where to look, but the others didn’t bat an eyelid.

NZ Sign Language is a rich, sophisticated and a rather direct descriptive language. I wait with fascination as more official sign names come to fruition.

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