

The Continuing Story of the Law in Aotearoa New Zealand

Remarks by Chief District Court Judge Heemi Taumaunu – Law Association Breakfast – 26 July 2026, Auckland

E ngā mana, e ngā reo, e ngā karangatanga maha, tēnā koutou katoa.

As I reflect on my own journey in the law, I find myself returning to the influence of two remarkable New Zealanders: Dr Moana Jackson and Sir Āpirana Ngata. Their example, in different ways, shaped not only my career but also my understanding of service, citizenship and the role of the law in our society.

Many years ago, while I was studying law at Victoria University, Moana Jackson asked me a question that has remained with me throughout my professional life: *Would I become a lawyer who is Māori, or a Māori who happens to be a lawyer?*

At the time, I was not entirely sure how to answer. Looking back, I realise it was not a question that required a single answer. Rather, it was an invitation to think deeply about identity, purpose and contribution.

My path to the law was not a conventional one. I left school at sixteen to join the Army, despite my parents' hopes that I would remain in education and eventually attend university. Without university entrance qualifications, tertiary study was not immediately available to me. Only as a mature student was I able to enter university and pursue legal studies. A significant factor in that opportunity was the introduction of a Māori law student quota at Victoria University, an initiative in which Moana Jackson played an important role. It opened a door that ultimately changed the course of my life.

Around the same time, I was reading extensively about Sir Āpirana Ngata. As a leader from my own iwi, he represented the highest ideals of public service, education and commitment to community. He understood that achievement is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means of serving something larger than oneself.

One of Sir Āpirana's enduring ideas was his reflection on the "price of citizenship". He recognised that citizenship involves more than the enjoyment of rights; it also carries responsibilities. We inherit the benefits of our society, but we also inherit obligations to strengthen it and contribute to its ongoing development.

That idea resonates strongly within the legal profession.

Most lawyers entered the profession because they believed that fairness matters, that justice matters, and that the law can make a positive difference in people's lives. The demands of

modern practice can sometimes obscure those motivations, but they remain at the heart of what lawyers and judges do every day.

None of us created the justice system. We inherited it from those who came before us. The challenge for every generation is whether we will leave it stronger than we found it.

For me, that responsibility is most visible in the District Court. For the vast majority of New Zealanders, the District Court is the justice system. Most people will never set foot in the Supreme Court or the Court of Appeal. Their understanding of justice is largely shaped by what they see, hear and experience in the District Court—whether as victims, defendants, witnesses, family members, business owners or citizens seeking the fair resolution of a dispute.

The District Court is where law meets real life. It is where legal principles are translated into practical outcomes and where public confidence in the administration of justice is either strengthened or diminished.

At the same time, we must be candid about the environment in which justice is delivered. The responsibilities of lawyers and judges have not fundamentally changed, but the context certainly has. Cases are increasingly complex. Information is more voluminous. Expectations are higher. Demands upon both courts and practitioners continue to grow.

Across the profession, lawyers are balancing significant caseloads, appearances in multiple jurisdictions, increasingly complex client needs and substantial administrative obligations. These pressures are real, and they deserve acknowledgement. A justice system cannot flourish if the people working within it are constantly stretched beyond capacity.

Yet despite these changes, the lawyer's essential role remains unchanged: to guide people through the justice system, provide independent advice, protect rights and advocate within the framework of the law. The role of the judge is different. Judges do not advocate. We listen, evaluate and decide according to law. Lawyers and judges perform distinct functions, but both serve a common purpose—to uphold the rule of law, facilitate the administration of justice and maintain public confidence in the justice system.

That shared purpose makes the relationship between the bench and the profession particularly important. Professionalism, trust and mutual respect are not optional qualities; they are essential foundations of a healthy justice system. Different perspectives are inevitable and often beneficial. However, disagreement should never come at the expense of respect.

The principles underpinning Te Ao Mārama have reinforced the importance of viewing justice from the perspective of those who experience it. At its heart lies a simple question: *What does justice look like to the person whose life has brought them before the Court?*

Can they understand what is happening? Can they participate meaningfully? Can they leave believing they were treated fairly? These questions are central to public confidence in the courts.

One observation from a court user has always remained with me: *"I may have lost, but I felt heard."* There is profound wisdom in that statement. People may disagree with an outcome, but

they are far more likely to accept it if they understand the process and believe they have been treated with fairness and dignity.

Lawyers play a vital role in making that possible. Long before a judge reaches a decision, lawyers are explaining procedures, advising clients, helping people understand their options and enabling meaningful participation in what can often be an unfamiliar and intimidating environment. That contribution is fundamental to the administration of justice.

Despite the challenges that exist, I remain optimistic about the future. Throughout New Zealand I continue to encounter judges, court staff and members of the legal profession who are deeply committed to public service. That enduring commitment gives me confidence in the strength and resilience of our justice system.

When I look back on my own journey, I am reminded that none of us reaches this profession through our efforts alone. Others create opportunities. Others provide examples. Others clear a path. Moana Jackson did that for many. Sir Āpirana Ngata did that for generations. Each left something behind that others could build upon.

The same is true of lawyers across Aotearoa New Zealand. Much of your most important work is rarely seen by the public. Yet every day you assist people during some of the most significant and challenging moments of their lives. Clients may remember the outcome of their case, but they also remember the lawyer who stood beside them through the process.

That work matters. It matters to clients. It matters to the courts. And it matters to the communities we serve.

Judges and lawyers are custodians of a justice system that was built over generations. Our collective responsibility is to strengthen it during our time and leave it in good heart for those who will follow.

When I think about that responsibility, I often return to Moana Jackson's question. Today, my own answer is simple. I am Māori. I am a lawyer. I am a judge. I have tried to serve, to contribute and to leave the path a little clearer for those who come after me.

But each of us must answer that question in our own way.

Every lawyer has a story about how they came to the law. Every lawyer has benefited from people who encouraged, challenged, taught or mentored them. Every lawyer has inherited opportunities they did not create for themselves. And every lawyer has the opportunity to leave something meaningful behind in return.

Perhaps, then, the most important question is not simply why we became lawyers, but what contribution we will leave for those who follow us. That contribution, however large or small, becomes part of the continuing story of the law in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Nō reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā tātou katoa.