

IN THE WAITANGI TRIBUNAL
KEI MUA I TE ROOPU WHAKAMANA I TE TIRITI O WAITANGI

WAI 745/1308
WAI 2700

IN THE MATTER the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975

AND

IN THE MATTER OF The Mana Wāhine Kaupapa Inquiry

AND

IN THE MATTER OF A claim by **Luana Pirihi** and **Paki Pirihi** (deceased) on behalf of Patuharakeke (Wai 745) and a claim filed by **Ngawaka Pirihi**, **Paraire Pirihi** (deceased), **Harry Midwood**, **Patricia Heperi**, **Crete Milner** and **Terence Pirihi** on behalf of the owners of Pukekauri 1B1, 1B2, 1B3, 1B4 and 1B5, and Takahiwai 4C, 4D1, 4E, 7A, 7B2 and 7C (Wai 1308)

BRIEF OF EVIDENCE OF FAYE DEBORAH HARDING

Dated this 10th day of April 2026

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TĒNĀ E TE TARAIPIUNARA

Ko Manaia te maunga

Ko te Rerenga Paroa te moana

Ko Takahiwai te Marae / te whenua

Ko Patuharakeke te hapū

Ko Henare Maki Pirihi taku matua

Ko Crete Milner (nee Pirihi) taku whaea

Ko Deborah Harding ahau

Introduction

1. Ko Faye Deborah Harding, tōku ingoa. I am also known as Deb Harding. I am the current chairperson of Patuharakeke Te Iwi Trust Board (“**PTB**”). I have been a trustee since August 2015 and have previously held the positions of treasurer and chairperson of the Patuharakeke Treaty Claims Progression Committee.
2. I come from a long line of Rangatira, from the Pirihi line, who have led Patuharakeke for generations. Our mana is grounded in our whakapapa, our tupuna shape how Patuharakeke rangatiratanga is exercised today. Patuharakeke have always been vocal in local governance. Our tupuna, Wiki Te Pirihi and Tauhou Auriro were examples of instrumental leadership which forged strategic relationships across the rohe. Together they gifted the land for Rangiora (Takahiwai) Marae.
3. I hold a post-graduate diploma in Māori Business Management. Since May 2018, I have been Managing Director of Harding Consulting Limited.
4. I am the current sitting councillor for the Whangarei District Council (“**WDC**”) Māori Ward, I was elected in 2022.
5. My evidence is filed in support of the Wai 745/1308 claim in the Waitangi Tribunal Mana Wāhine Inquiry (Wai 2700). My evidence details my experience in governance boards, in particular, at the Whangarei District

Council and the impact Crown instruments have on wāhine Māori rangatiratanga.

Governance Roles

6. I have been involved in Māori governance roles since 2007. I was involved with Te Uri o Hau Settlement Trust between 2007 and 2018. From 2007 to 2010 I was Tangata Development Manager. I held the Chief Executive Office until 2018. I have previously been a trustee on Te Runanga o Ngāti Whātua as the Whangārei takiwā representative from 2014 to 2017.
7. I have been councillor for the Whangārei District Council Māori Ward since 2022. In my first term, I was chair for Te Karearea Strategic Partnership committees. This term I am the Chair for Community Development Standing Committee.
8. The varied experiences I gained prior to joining WDC has been instrumental to how I approach governance roles today. I have been placed in a strong position to approach the Māori wards with the level of pragmatism and sensitivity that is required for the role. The time I have spent in these roles has emphasised wāhine Māori must remain visible, build and sustain connections and navigate complex systems both for our own participation and to create space for other wāhine.
9. Wāhine like Minister Nanaia Mahuta were formidable in achieving the binding poll to establish Māori wards through the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act 2021. Her influence provided an instant increase of wāhine in local government politics and allowed for full representation through the Māori wards. She is the reason why I have put up with such divisiveness on the council since 2024. He wāhine Mareikura.
10. Before WDC, I ran for the Northland Regional Council, in the Coastal constituency but was unsuccessful. I resolved to try again for the Urban Whangārei District, and in 2016 I ran for the general seat under the Okara Ward but unfortunately missed out.

11. Despite setbacks I felt I had something to offer my community. I had served through several voluntary trusts including Northland Event Centre (Toll Stadium), Reconnect Northland (environmental biodiversity), Jigsaw North (counselling and social services) and Te Karearea (Strategic Partnership Standing Committee which comprises Whangārei hapū representatives and Whangārei District Councillors).
12. My roles with Patuharakeke Trust Board, Te Kārearea, and Te Huinga brought me closer to the kōrero and deliberations around what we needed to gain more seats and be able to influence decision making at election time. It was following these roles in 2016 to 2022 I made the decision to stand again under the Whangareia District Council under the Māori ward.
13. I have seen how Crown structural influences shape the ability of wāhine Māori to exercise rangatiratanga in decision-making spaces. The Crown often defined the parameters of rangatiratanga and consequently, the inherent mana as wāhine Māori. The alienation of wāhine Māori in the Māori wards referendum demonstrates a broad Crown attitude that rangatiratanga is a state privilege rather than our inherent right.
14. In my experience, I have seen a significant increase of wāhine holding leadership roles in the governance space. Growing up, there were fewer wāhine leaders in political and pae Māori positions. So, the Crown's decision to remove Māori wards and maintain structures that have historically alienated wāhine in rangatira spaces is a significant step backwards for Māori communities.
15. It limits opportunity and reinforces the pressures wāhine Māori continue to face in order to participate in governance. This has a direct impact on how rangatiratanga is able to be exercised in practice and effects our communities.

Navigating Dual Burden – Rangatiratanga in Governance:

16. Exercising rangatiratanga in governance spaces requires a constant weighing up of what world you are in. I have a foot in te Ao Māori and a foot in te Ao Pākehā, where I am balancing formal elected responsibilities with the often-unacknowledged informal cultural advocacy. Both of these

responsibilities can place restrictions on our voice and ability to be heard as wāhine.

17. When operating in the governance space, we are not just representatives of our communities, we become the primary defenders of Māori interests in a space that is hesitant to accept our expertise, recognise our authority and undermine the communities we speak for.
18. Meeting the requirements of both worlds, I assess constantly how I should advocate because I know that wāhine in governance are measured differently and often in a defensive posture. I don't think that is natural to our mana. You do not realise until you reflect the constant mental energy required to exist in this space.
19. My term on the Whangarei District Council began in 2022, following the 2021 removing the binding poll mechanism from the Local Electoral Act. For a brief moment it appeared the Crown were removing barriers that were limiting our ability to exercise rangatiratanga.
20. While the shift should have allowed us to focus on genuine representation for our communities institutional barriers still remain today. There is a clear hesitation to treat Māori workload and perspectives as equal expertise. This directly impacts policy outcomes for our communities. I have often had to justify my presence on boards before we can even begin the work.
21. During an early hui at the WDC with the other elected members, one councillor kicked the meeting off with, "why do we have to resource all of these cultural things?". A direct insult to my role and our community. I elected to withdraw from that hui early, advising I would not participate in this sort of kōrero.
22. The facilitator of the hui remained passive during the exchange. While she apologised privately later, the harm had already occurred. I informed her she had no idea how uncomfortable that was for me, to sit there and defend my role and the whole of the Māori community.

23. It was a cold and calculating experience. One in which I hope that my choice to leave that hui and my subsequent discussion with the facilitator demonstrated that an apology does not mitigate the personal and professional isolation that occurred in that room and could not be taken back.
24. I have since questioned whether this specific incident warrants trial because such experiences have become a normalised expectation in my role. I have learned that in order to maintain a wāhine Māori voice, you must be prepared to go out on a limb and be emotionally beaten up.
25. Instead of a safe governance space, I have encountered a dual burden as structures were neither built for wāhine nor Māori. I have learnt to maintain strong reserves and endure the emotional toll it takes to ensure that my voice is present and defended against. I know this must be done for the benefit of the community.
26. I have to maintain a cautious approach in leadership spaces. While there is an impulse to shout and be heard, I will always approach to lead with tika, pono and aroha. Sometimes, that is about being courageous enough to be quiet, walk away in decision-making spaces and show our tikanga is not for sale for a role.
27. Perhaps that is just the Deb Harding way, but I do believe as wāhine we must be strategic and smart in our responses; we are bringing solutions to the board not problems. But the requirement to constantly prove our voices should not be feared can be exhausting.
28. The experience on the WDC I described above was not an isolated one. At times, I was the only wāhine and the only Māori on committees. When I observed a significant lack of focus and strategic backing for the task at hand, I left and advised again I would not participate in hui that wasted our time. This approach was met with the occasional “oh here she comes” attitude from some, but eventually the outcome was positive. The meetings became more focused and robust.
29. This friction is more than a clash of personalities. These moments were micro-demonstrations of a much larger divide within our system. They are

symptoms of the gendered and racial imbalance in the recognition of authority in governance. My stance was never about being difficult, but understanding I have to exercise my mana differently, in a strategic and often cautious way.

30. This is where I think the experience of wāhine fundamentally diverges from our tāne. For tāne there is often a more upfront platform established, an assumed authority supported by tikanga that places tāne at the forefront of the kōrero.
31. We do not share the same defensive toll in these spaces because the platform we advocate from is structurally more volatile than for our tāne. We are expected to hold our own in rooms that are not shaped for us.
32. Tāne have the luxury of advocating for bits and pieces of community interest. There are many parts of these spaces that are designed to accommodate to their voice. As wāhine the responsibility felt is total – we are trying to look after our whenua, our moana wholeheartedly not just bits and pieces.
33. The strength to be absent, silent, or quiet shows our mana – I think this is often the quiet reality of wāhine rangatiratanga today, we stand firm in tika and pono, but we protect our voice and show we are not going to be hallowed by a broken process.

Māori Wards Referendum

34. My experience with the Māori wards referendum highlighted the way in which the Crown treats our rangatiratanga as vulnerable. It was offered as a temporary privilege as opposed to a right grounded in tikanga.
35. The Local Electoral Amendment Act 2001 repealed the Local Electoral (Māori Wards and Māori Constituencies) Amendment Act 2021 that repealed the need for binding polls to establish Māori wards. It offered the opportunity for Councils to disestablish, rescind or hold a binding poll to keep the Māori wards. Despite nationwide numbers indicating more voters supported keeping the wards than removing them, the majority of councils voted to dismantle them. It is a prime example of the Crown perceiving

rangatiratanga as something that they have power over to give to Māori and remove from Māori as they see fit.

36. Māori wards are necessary, reflecting the Māori electoral roll and ensuring there is meaningful participation. It was unfair, by not allowing our current council the opportunity to retain Māori wards. This is especially where significant advantages and benefits have been gained by our presence and engagement with our whānau, hapū, hāpori. No other ward is asked to carry the mandate over the whole rohe, nor is their existence put to a public vote. The inequity is overt. No other ward will know this burden, and it feels crafted to thin our presence, and for wāhine it will have this effect. While I anticipated the outcome of the referendum before the result, the outcome was no less demoralising or wounding because it was expected.
37. This decision was a blow to our right to sit at the table. Watching fellow councillors be joyous about this decision was deeply hurtful. We are often the only voices in spaces that have long marginalised wāhine Māori rangatira, and now our role faces threat of being absorbed by the very structures that exclude us.
38. The maemae felt for your community and mana of your people is profound. They are both made to feel vulnerable and as an afterthought beneath Crown authority. We are stripped of the ability to represent our own and given a narrow window to influence outcomes for our communities and future wāhine rangatira, while a system that denies our rangatiratanga remains.

The impact for Wāhine Māori

39. It is a stark reminder of the environment we navigate – I often don't reflect on the mask I put on to continue. I wasn't sure if I had anything to offer for this type of kōrero because who we are as Patuharakeke wāhine means we have been taught to constantly pivot. While the lack of understanding and the outcome is deeply wounding, it forces a choice, and to assess whether you have the energy to keep going.

40. It is this “wounded soldier” mentality. We often do not have the luxury of time to reflect on the unfairness before you have to pivot. At the end of the day, we now only have a very small window to get across to the whole community that increasing Māori wellbeing increases the wellbeing of the whole community.
41. Just like mama’s and our nana’s Aunty Kathy has spoken of, the ones who ploughed the gardens and milked the cows while the men were away, we do not have the luxury of time or registering emotional dumps for too long.
42. Aunty Kathy is the type to come wipe the tear out of your eye, tell us to get it together and keep going. If we do not build these pathways ourselves, no one else will do it for us.
43. Inadvertently, we have become the experts at masking. We ensure our physical, professional appearance and our whole ahuā are composed, so that our authority cannot be questioned.
44. Our wāhine refuse to give in – we bring solutions and demand excellence even in the structures that perpetuate our exclusion. We continue to build pathways of leadership because it is essential to the wellbeing of our people.
45. The burden we carry can be hard to articulate. It is only when we peel back our experience do we see how differently we have been treated. When I consider what this means for the generations to come, the loss is immense.
46. Māori wards presented one clear, visible pathway into local government. Their impact is undeniable – where Māori were established the number of elected wāhine rose.
47. At one of the first local government events I attended, Nicola Willis was remarked on the unprecedented number of female elected council there were. I was dying to ask the question because I knew of course, it was the Māori wards that opened that door.
48. I have seen the power of participation for leadership. My mother was chair of Patuharakeke Te Iwi Trust Board, and similarly, Mere Kepa. Within

Patuharakeke and the Far North wāhine are stepping forward in marae and Māori committees significantly. We recently appointed four exceptional wāhine when we were only seeking two. Up north, wāhine have moved through community boards and on to be elected members of council.

49. All four of these wāhine have come from operational roles, stepping into strategic roles will be a new journey for them.
50. Visibility and participation are essential for our wāhine to lead with confidence and expertise. I have felt those barriers myself, but our mana has never come from the Crown. It is inherited, lived, and carried. Where avenues to exercise rangatiratanga has been blocked, we continue to pivot and create new ones. Our goal is not merely representation, but to create abundance for our communities.
51. My hope is for us to get to the point when our wāhine stop having to justify our right to stand here, so we can continue to do the mahi we were called to without first needing to prove we belong.

DATED at Whangārei this 10th day of April 2026



FAYE DEBORAH HARDING