

Linda Te Aho



Makuru ana te tupu i te maara a Whakaotirangi

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Whakaotirangi was a wayfinding leader in the era of Tainui waka migration. An “heroic and annointed noble woman of great mana and significance” in her own right, her story became “lost in history’s mists”.^[2] In sharing my experience about governance and leadership, I highlight the strength and wisdom of Whakaotirangi and other influential women in our Waikato-Tainui tribal history.

I te kitenga a Whakaotirangi i te waahi e tau ai a Tainui, ka kite ia i te o wii, i te o waa.^[3]

It is said that Whakaotirangi had a clear vision as to where the Tainui waka would eventually settle, and it was her vision that influenced the waka to change course towards its ultimate landing place in Kāwhia Harbour. It was also Whakaotirangi who took responsibility for a variety of plants and seedlings, including kūmara, ensuring their survival and establishment in the new lands as sources of food for future generations. The qualities of Whakaotirangi which continue to be conveyed through a variety of whakataukī and kīwaha today, include

selflessness, prudence, and planning. Stories of our tūpuna remind us that governance and leadership require these qualities, along with courage, persistence, clear vision, and confidence in our own matauranga. They also remind us of the importance of diversity and collaboration for progress: wāhine mai, tāne mai.[\[4\]](#)

After graduating from Auckland Law School, I practised in a large commercial firm. However, my more meaningful involvement in law and policy making, and as an advocate in courts and tribunals, has been as a legal academic and advisor. I was attracted to an academic career in Te Piringa Faculty of Law, Waikato University, because the faculty recognised the importance of bicultural legal education, and because I value the role of mentoring future leaders. For 25 years I have specialised in teaching and researching Māori law and governance issues. As an Associate Dean I have served as a senior academic leader in the university. This experience has been valuable in my iwi governance and leadership roles that I was first drawn into when my father lodged our Ngāti Koroki Kahukura Treaty claim in the early 1990s. I was part of the Treaty negotiation team and am now a trustee for Ngāti Koroki Kahukura's post-settlement governance entity and a director of our small commercial entity, to which I refer below. As regards my much larger iwi organization, I was appointed by Waikato-Tainui as a member of the Guardians Establishment Committee under the Waikato River Treaty settlement and helped create the Vision and Strategy for the holistic restoration of our ancestral river. More recently I have served as a member of Te Whakakitenga o Waikato (the governing body of Waikato-Tainui), of Te Arataura (the executive board), and as an iwi-appointed director of Tainui Group Holdings Ltd. I have recently been elected as the Chair of Te Arataura.

In my experience I have seen that women continue to be transformational in governance and leadership. The most recent term for Waikato-Tainui was remarkable for the visibility of women in key leadership roles. The legacies of Parekawhia McLean, Tipa Mahuta, Rukumoana Schaafhausen, Patience Te Ao, and Donna Flavell[\[5\]](#) will be remembered for the qualities demonstrated by our tupuna, Whakaotirangi. Whilst I firmly believe in the importance of diversity and balance, I continue to draw strength from strong Tainui women, including Dame Nganeko Minhinnick, Tuaiwa Rickard, Merekara (Ollie) Kara, and my own grandmother, Te Reo Papa. I also draw strength and wisdom from our Kīngitanga leaders, Piupiu Te Wherowhero, Te Puea Herangi, and Te Arikinui, Dame Te Atairangikaahu. I was raised as part of our marae community at Pōhara, in the South Waikato. The settlement originated as a papakāinga in the late 1920s, during the time of the great depression. Pōhara was established by Piupiu Te Wherowhero, a contemporary of, and first cousin to King Te Rata. A strong and steely woman by all accounts, Piupiu offered a safe haven in times of despair, and left us with a guiding mantra: *kūpapa ki raro, titiro ake*. Remain humble as you seek excellence. Perhaps more well-known is Te Puea Herangi (first cousin and contemporary of King Te Rata and Piupiu), often credited with breathing new life into the King movement and transforming a former wasteland into Waikato's premier marae, Tūrangawaewae, in Ngāruawāhia.[\[6\]](#) The story I dwell upon here, for its direct relevance to my own whānau, is Te Puea's strength in opposing conscription during World War I. As a result of this stance, Waikato were labelled seditious traitors. Te Puea herself was accused of being a German sympathiser. She drew harsh and at times personal criticism, including

from senior Māori politicians and statesmen. When her first cousin (King Te Rata's brother) was taken into custody it is said that the resolve of her people started to weaken. Her encouragement to them, "*kia manawanui*", to be steadfast in their position, is memorialised in the name of our wharenuī at Maungatautari Marae, Manawanui. This naming serves as a constant reminder that there will be times when we, as leaders, will be required to make difficult and politically unpopular decisions, and to remain strong amidst the inevitable challenges - often from our very own.

Pōhara and Maungatautari are the two active marae of Ngāti Koroki Kahukura. We have applied this name to our emerging commercial entity, Manawanui Developments Ltd. The entity was established in times of conflict and tension amongst our people. It is no coincidence that the chair who led us through the governance transition is another strong woman, Poto Davies. In essence our dairy farm operations were struggling and reached a crisis point. Intervention was necessary to retain ownership of our tribal lands. As part of the new governance regime, we have prioritized our role as active kaitiaki of our environment, and set out on a journey of succession planning and land diversification with a focus on food sovereignty. We retired lands from the dairy operations to create a papakāinga near our marae, thus transforming the lives of over 30 whānau members who are now homeowners. At the same time, we are running a profitable business. The combination and co-ordination of the experience and skills of the men and women on our board, and our dedication to tikanga Māori, have restored and strengthened our organization, and our people.

The vision of Ngāti Koroki Kahukura and Manawanui Developments is for a vibrant and flourishing iwi, connected to our ancestral lands and waters, and confident in our ability to exercise mana motuhake and mana whanake with cultural integrity under the mantle of Kīngitanga. This directly aligns with the long-term vision of Waikato-Tainui as articulated in Whakatupuranga 2050. Like many other Māori organisations, we are relearning our matauranga, our tikanga, and our maramataka. We are using this knowledge to strengthen our whānau, to shape our vision and strategies, to bolster our kaitiaki work, and to inform our business operations. Much of the wisdom that we draw from, though not all... has come from our women. Our ancestresses were transformational and inspirational leaders. In their own ways they each displayed strength, resilience, humility and kindness. They were visionary, forthright, and articulate.

My predecessor, Rukumoana Schaafhausen,[\[7\]](#) delivered a keynote presentation in 2020. When asked what advice she might give to her 19 year-old self, she responded: ""Know your story, know who you are, and back yourself." This is great advice to wāhine who aspire to governance and leadership roles. You will bring qualities and make contributions to governance and leadership that not many others can. You will make a difference.

Makuru ana te tupu i te maara a Whakaotirangi. The garden of Whakaotirangi is thriving.

[1] Ngāti Koroki Kahukura, Ngāti Mahuta.

[2] Circa 14th Century. See <https://www.toti.co.nz/he-tangata-project/whakaotirangi>.

[3] *He Puna Kupu He Manawa aa Whenua* (2019), p219. O wii and O waa are two peaks seen in a vision to mark the landing place of the Tainui canoe.

[4] Other leaders of the Tainui migration include Hoturoa (captain, and husband of Whakaotirangi) and Rakataura (tohunga).

[5] Long-time contributors to tribal governance and management, and the Chairs and Deputy Chairs of Waikato-Tainui's key governance structures from 2017-2020. Donna Flavell is CEO.

[6] Michael King, *Te Paea A Life* (2008).

[7] Director of Contact Energy, AgResearch, Trustee of Tindall Foundation, and Chair of Miro.