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Maunga Authority Radical and Out of Touch

MT ROSKILL, AUCKLAND (16 May 2019) – Community campaigners are outraged at what they perceive as the undemocratic and aloof attitude of the Tupuna Maunga Authority. Without care for the desires of the communities around these maunga, the Authority has made clear that their vision for the summits – as spaces free of any structures or trees whatsoever regardless of heritage value – will be achieved regardless of outcry from the public. This disregard for the wishes of local communities seems in keeping with the broader trend of “we know best” leadership in Auckland’s non-elected statutory and council organisations.

Mt Roskill residents Fonoti Luke Gates, Ella Kumar, and Jonathan Subritzky presented a petition signed by 4,000 members of the public asking the Authority to restore the 60-year-old practice of erecting a light cross on Mt Roskill between Christmas and Easter; a tradition the Maunga Authority ended last year with the swift removal of the cross’s supporting infrastructure.

“We appealed the decision on behalf of thousands of members of our community and the response from the chairman is that our petition is essentially futile as his group only deliberates on the future of the maunga through a culturally exclusionary lens”, group member Jonathan Subritzky said.

“The chairman wrote to us and told me *“the Tūpuna Maunga Authority does not exist to carry out the “wishes of the “majority”*. This is misleading, because the Authority was actually established in 2014 on a ‘co-governance’ model comprising appointees of iwi, Auckland Council, and the Crown. They are also bound by section 17 of the Reserve Act in their administration of the maunga – bulldozing over our maunga heritage and restricting public access shows duplicity which is out of line with the spirit of the Reserves Act and the spirit of good faith on which the settlement process took place.”

“The Authority’s recent callous decisions, and their response to our petition, is revealing of just how radical and strident this body has become compared to what was envisaged during the settlement process in 2012”.

Group member Ella Kumar says that the group is “frustrated and deeply disappointed” that the Authority’s ideology precludes any productive discussion or shared path forward for other communities with their own connections to the summits.

“This Authority is not reflecting the views of the diverse communities and connections to the Maunga, creating disharmony. Communities should be part of the discussions and years of traditions should be taken into consideration when decisions are made by public bodies”, Mrs Kumar said.

Mr Subritzky says the behaviour of the members themselves is evidence that the Authority’s has become hostile to scrutiny and out of control: “At the meeting on Monday [6 May], we found we were not alone in our frustrations, with a mother and a young boy who were there to express their opposition to the body’s plans to fell every non-native tree on the mountains being berated and told their views were “disgusting” by councillor Josephine Bartley”.

“This issue is also part of the larger problem of a democratic deficit in our council organisations, similar to the aloof attitude displayed by Auckland Transport and others. The Authority’s views toward what the maunga should look like is actually undermined by kaumatua themselves, many of whom oppose what the Authority is doing to the maunga – particularly on Puketapapa/Mt Roskill,” says Fonoti Luke Gates. “If the Authority cannot properly address the concerns of our community, then Parliament must provide a new governance framework based on democracy and cooperation; not exclusion”.

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