

Immediate Release
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Bestseller author releases new guide to understanding Te Tiriti and government

Barrister Roimata Smail has released a new handbook designed to help New Zealanders better understand Te Tiriti o Waitangi, kāwanatanga and the way government operates in Aotearoa.

[*Understanding Kāwanatanga: A Handbook of Basic Facts about Te Tiriti o Waitangi and Government*](#) is the third book in best-selling author, Smail's series of accessible guides explaining key areas where te Tiriti shapes New Zealand life.

Smail says the 36-page handbook aims to make complex legal and constitutional concepts accessible to everyone beyond academic and legal circles.

“Our constitutional framework affects all of us, but too often these concepts are explained in ways that feel inaccessible. By putting them into plain language, people better understand what they mean and have informed conversations about our country and our future.”

Understanding Kāwanatanga explores the meaning of tino rangatiratanga and kāwanatanga, and the relationship between tangata whenua and the land, a relationship that extends beyond concepts of ownership.

It also explains how government systems developed, including the Westminster model inherited from Britain, and how that system operates in Aotearoa today. Smail writes:

“The Westminster system was developed in Britain as the people demanded to choose their representatives rather than be ruled by a royal family. In 1840, the Westminster system was not a democracy because no women and only a small group of men could vote.”

The book examines the three branches of government, the executive, legislature and judiciary and the principle that separating power helps prevent any one part of government becoming too powerful.

It also explores how the Westminster system functions in Aotearoa, including questions about the relationship between Parliament and the executive, the role of opposition parties, Māori representation, constitutional conventions and the ongoing place of Te Tiriti within government decision-making.

Smail says Māori did not agree to the Westminster system, and the book considers the differences between imported democratic structures and Māori approaches to collective governance, which are grounded in whakapapa and relationships with whenua.

The handbook also covers historical and contemporary constitutional issues, including land legislation, Māori seats, democratic protections internationally, Te Tiriti in government, and the role of Te Tiriti in protecting the rights and interests of all people in Aotearoa.

It includes discussion of the 2025 urgent complaint Smail prepared for her client, Lady Tureiti Moxon to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

It raised concerns about Government actions affecting Māori and the role of Te Tiriti within public decision-making. The complaint resulted in international attention and a response from CERD expressing serious concerns.

The book also discusses the work of Matike Mai Aotearoa, the Māori-led constitutional transformation project established under the leadership of the late constitutional lawyer Moana Jackson, and its recommendation for ongoing conversations between tangata whenua, tangata Tiriti and the Crown about the future constitutional arrangements of Aotearoa.

“These conversations are too important to be left to experts alone. My goal is to make this information accessible so people can engage, ask questions and better understand the issues that shape the future of Aotearoa,” Smail said.

Suitable for individuals, educators, community organisations, students and anyone wanting a clearer understanding of Te Tiriti and government, *Understanding Kāwanatanga* provides a practical introduction to the constitutional relationship that continues to shape Aotearoa New Zealand.

The book follows her first publication, *Understanding Te Tiriti: A Handbook of Basic Facts About Te Tiriti o Waitangi*, which became a number one bestseller, and *Understanding Hauora: A Handbook of Basic Facts About Te Tiriti o Waitangi in the Health System*, which examined the relationship between Te Tiriti and the health system.

It will be officially launched tonight alongside an art exhibition featuring works by [Noelle Jakeman](#) and [Ngawai O’Leary](#), who contributed to the design of the book. The launch will take place from 6–8pm at 74 Karangahape Road.

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About Roimata Smail

Roimata Smail is a barrister, author and educator specialising in Māori law and constitutional issues. Her writing focuses on making complex legal concepts accessible to the wider public. Her previous books, *Understanding Te Tiriti* and *Understanding Hauora*, have helped thousands of readers better understand the role of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in Aotearoa New Zealand.