

21 years of advocating for a more united Aotearoa – Media Release

The call for racial unity and social cohesion in Aotearoa is stronger today than ever and was echoed loud and clear at the 21st anniversary celebration of the Race Unity Speech Awards this month.

The milestone was marked by a special event held at Parliament, hosted by Minister of Police Honourable Ginny Andersen and the Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities Honourable Priyanca Radhakrishnan.

Member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Aotearoa, Suzanne Mahon, said recent events in New Zealand and overseas have shown that racism, nationalism, and other forms of prejudices remain powerful issues.

"It's important therefore that we continue to address these issues and strive for unity and understanding of all people," said Mahon.

The Race Unity Speech Awards was established by the New Zealand Baha'i Community after the tragic death of race relations advocate and Baha'i Faith member Hedi Moani in 1998.

With the speech awards almost now nationwide with over 2,000 secondary school participants over the years since 2001, Mahon said the kaupapa is the Baha'i community's contribution towards eliminating prejudice and bringing about unity in Aotearoa.

"Baha'is believe that empathy and compassion for others are essential for building relationships... The Race Unity Speech Awards provides a platform for young people to share their vision for a united and just society," said Mahon.

The sentiments shared by Mahon were endorsed by long-time partners and supporters of the Race Unity Speech Awards - New Zealand Police and the Ministry for Ethnic Communities.

Minister of Police Ginny Andersen said although the speech awards focus on fostering positive race relations, it also provides an opportunity for the voice of rangatahi to be heard.

"The awards have grown over the years to have more mana... I've seen young people speak straight from the heart about issues directly affecting them, their identity, their culture, their background and how they're perceived," said Andersen.

"These speeches work to break down those barriers, break down those stereotypes and to enable us to understand each other a little bit."

Andersen said it was the Police's mission to help ethnic communities feel safe, welcomed, and feel a part of Aotearoa and the Race Unity Speech Awards plays a vital role in that regard.

"They directly contribute to addressing racism and discrimination by encouraging social cohesion and also promoting youth leadership - Let's not stop, let's keep going."

Minister for Diversity, Inclusion and Ethnic Communities Honourable Priyanca Radhakrishnan acknowledged that the Race Unity Speech Awards have been impactful over the years.

"So many young people from different walks of life, different backgrounds, coming together to speak about something they're passionate about.

"The Speeches have been excellent, thoughtful, well-crafted, structured, poetic even on many occasions, where they outline their vision on what we need to do collectively," said Radhakrishnan.

The Minister and former Race Unity Speech Awards judge said New Zealand is an incredibly diverse nation and the work to embrace Aotearoa's diversity needs to continue.

"We have over 213 ethnicities represented across Aotearoa New Zealand... We need to continue to break down barriers that seek to separate us."

About the Awards

· The Baha'i Faith is a religious community concerned with promoting the oneness of humanity at the local, national, and international levels.

· The Hui and Speech Awards are organised by the New Zealand Bahá'í Community and are sponsored and supported by the New Zealand Police, the Human Rights Commission, Manukau Institute of Technology, the Ministry for Ethnic Communities, Te Taura Whiri i te Reo Māori, Speech New Zealand and the Hedi Moani Charitable Trust.

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