

## The Platform: the radical legacy of the Polynesian Panthers

*The following is a transcript of a talk given by Melani Anae and recorded live at Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa the National Library of New Zealand on 6 August 2021. A question and answer session that followed the talk is also included.*

### *Transcript*

**Sarah Burgess:** Kia ora, ko Sarah Burgess tōku ingoa, he Pou Hītori ki te Manatū Taonga. Hi there, I'm Sarah Burgess, a historian at Manatū Taonga the Ministry for Culture and Heritage.

Welcome to the New Zealand History podcast channel, where you will find talks on Aotearoa New Zealand history, culture and society.

These talks are co-hosted by Manatū Taonga and Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa, the National Library of New Zealand, and are recorded live at the Library each month.

**Neill Atkinson:** Tēnā koutou katoa, Talofa lava, Mālō e lelei, Kia Orana, Mālō ni, Fakatalofa atu, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Ni Sa Bula Vinaka, Noa'ia, Mauri and warm greetings to you all. And I'm delighted today to introduce Dr. Melani Anae, Associate Professor of Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland, who has recently published the book *The Platform*, which recalls the radical activism of the Polynesian Panthers and the group's platform of peaceful resistance, Pacific empowerment, and educating New Zealanders about persistent and systematic racism.

And we'd arranged this talk some time ago. But since then, the timing has become even more fitting because, as I'm sure all of you know, last Sunday in Auckland, the Prime Minister formally apologised on behalf of the New Zealand government for the unjust discriminatory immigration policies and

practices that targeted Pacific communities in the 1970s which we know as the dawn raids. Now I was privileged to be able to attend that really powerful event on Sunday, and with my team at Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture and Heritage to have been working with the Ministry for Pacific Peoples on the apology process for the last six months or so. And we are looking forward now to continuing to support the collection of community stories and the development of historical resources over the next year or two.

Melani was there on Sunday, of course, supporting Alec Toleafoa, who is here today, who spoke very impressively on behalf of the Polynesian Panthers, a group which not only played a really major role in opposing the dawn raids but also in campaigning for the apology. So I'm really really delighted to have Melani here to talk to us and would now like to invite her to come up to the stage.

[clapping]

**Melani Anae:** Malo le soifua, malo le lagi e mama, fa'afetai mo le avanoa. Talofa lava and warm Pacific greetings. First of all, let me say how honoured I and fellow Panther, Alec Toleafoa, who will be coming front centre stage during the Q&A section, to be here, to be invited here. I'm also especially honoured to have BWB Books team here. They're responsible for this little book. This little book *The Platform*, the radical history of the Polynesian Panthers. A little book but power-packed with steel ink. My malu, my life, and my journey, with the Panthers and as one of them.

Fifty years ago, a bunch of Polynesian teenagers met in a house in Grey Lynn, Auckland, and formed an authentic, homegrown revolutionary organisation, which fought for human rights. Since that time books, articles, documentaries and more recently social media have articulated the history and

philosophy of the Polynesian Panther Party. There is even a TV series, *The Panthers* – I don't know whether you've seen the trailer – coming up in a couple of weeks. It is of course though a 'faction' – part fact, part fiction – and that is why we've appreciated the insistence of TVNZ in the release of several podcasts prior to the series being released. A very good six hour-long podcast of our story.

But important work needs to be done to improve public understanding of our continuing philosophy to encourage closer examination of our platform and the programmes that we developed and are still implementing. Among the many myths about the Polynesian Panthers is that it lasted for a relatively short time, and that it disbanded after support waned. While there's been much interest in and focus on the crucible years of the early 1970s, the party was long into, active still, into the '80s and are certainly not defunct. Our mantra is once a Panther, always a Panther. And boy, do I know what that means now after 50 years.

As Panthers, we knew that the strongest form of protest was to be successful. I didn't really understand that fully until I look back at the last 50 years, and at what we have accomplished, and realised that the platform was the inspiration behind the success that we Panthers achieved. The power of the platform lies in its potent mixture of inter-ethnic activism in palagi spaces to annihilate racism, and intra-ethnic activism in Pacific spaces to elucidate why cultural nonconformity was necessary. And also to celebrate our ethnic identities, however we define them.

The fire burning in our bellies about the empowerment that this Panther platform can create remains as strong now as it was for us back in our teens, and that can never be extinguished. Many Panther members remain actively committed to the platform. They continue to share an intense drive to help Pacific Island youth realise their full potential by drawing on their Pacific heritage and developing their

professional skills as New Zealanders. For some, university education added intellectual breadth to our perspectives on racism, inequality, feminism and the gay rights movement, and demonstrated how knowledge could lead to political and social empowerment. Knowledge is power. For me, it also provided a context within which to explore and then understand the subordinate status of Pacific peoples in New Zealand society and to expose systemic racism in education.

Alec Toleafoa, Panther member, joined the Panthers at the age of 16. He is now a Presbyterian minister, he has been involved in the care of people in urban street communities, prisons, youth and adult custodial and residential settings, and developing youth leadership and personal development skills learning.

Alec's brother, Wayne Toleafoa, was the Polynesian Panther Minister of Information – 'cause he was a university student. He joined the Panthers at the age of 17. He went on to become a police officer, then a Presbyterian minister. He became principal chaplain of the Royal New Zealand Defence Force and is now the Minister of St Columba's Presbyterian Church in Havelock North.

Tigilau Ness was the Panther Minister of Culture and Fine Arts 'cause he could draw and play the guitar. He joined at the age of 16. His activism is reflected through his music, his award-winning music career. In 2009 when he was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Award at the fifth Pacific Music Awards in New Zealand, and in 2016 he won the Vodafone New Zealand Music Awards roots reggae award. He continues to give back to the community with his lead role in the Mellow Dads Programme and his role as an assessor for Creative New Zealand grants and many Panther rap sessions.

As for myself: Panther member of the university intelligentsia. I was a group of sisters who were first-year university students. I joined at the age of 17. I have been bestowed with many honours as the bio has it: associate professor, Fulbright scholar, a member of the QSO – Queen’s service award medal, the officer award – Marsden award. But what gives me great pride is that as well as that I’ve also been bestowed the Samoan chiefly titles of Lupematasila from Falelatai, and Misatauveve from Si’umu, my parents’ villages in Samoa. Along with these honours, however, I am most proud of the consciousness-raising and revolutionary impact I have made on the lives of hundreds of my university students over the last 20 years and the thousands of young New Zealanders in schools through the Polynesian Panthers’ rap programme, Educate to Liberate.

In our active and latent phases, both overtly and indirectly, the Panthers have worked hard for basic human rights. In the seventies, our efforts were a catalyst for political change, prompting successive governments not only to recognise the burgeoning Pacific population but also to exercise its duty of care. As Panthers, we developed community survival programmes and shone the light on a monocultural system which didn't give a damn for the needs of Pacific people. And I don't think they still do but here's hoping.

As Panthers, we developed the community survival programmes and our achievements were acknowledged by our own Pacific Island communities, by the New Zealand government, and by the Black Panther Party in the United States. So, you know, some people call us revolutionaries, some people call us activists. Our parents used to call us moepi, as Alec said on Sunday, which means bed-wetters. And that's – we were just kids. But you know, we were really intent on making change for our communities. We saw how our parents slaved their guts out six days a week in the factories in Grey

Lynn. We – I never got to speak to my dad except on Sundays when we went to church. That's how we, we just didn't have time with our parents. So we became their voice.

But let's go back to the crucible years. And it's important because I've read stuff out there that says, you know, the dawn raids happened and that's what you know, why the Panthers sprang into action. No, well that's not true. We had already three years of setting up our community survival programmes, our homework centres, the PIG patrol, the TAB programme. So we were really active before the dawn raids happened.

I'll read from the book.

The inaugural meeting. On a cold night, 16th of June 1971, I snuck out of the family home to attend the meeting. The sight of these guys with afros, black leather jackets and elei (island-patterned) shirts was mesmerizing. I wondered what was going on. Then the leader spoke of forming a politicised group called the Polynesian Panther Movement, modelled on the Black Panther Party in the United States. Their charismatic styles and revolutionary talk were riveting. They talked about using passive resistance to fight back against exploitation and racism – by the police, by the system, by unscrupulous landlords, by the teachers and the education system. All of us knew what they were talking about at that meeting. We knew and had suffered the everyday racism. It was there at school; at the shops; when walking down Ponsonby Road or playing sport. It was there in the government departments, attuned to the needs of palagi only. It was there when we went home to a house with rats running around or leaky pipes the landlord wouldn't fix. It was there every day of our lives. 'I can do this,' I remember thinking. Yes, joining this movement would give me a chance to fight back against the injustices that I and all of our families were suffering from.

The community activities the leaders were talking about would fill the gaps in a monocultural system which didn't care about or cater for Pacific people's needs. I was sold. The movement's rules were simple but strict: no possession of narcotics or being under the influence of alcohol during movement time; no possession of guns, weapons or harmful devices; no using the name of the movement in public for self-glory; and there was equality between men and women; read *Seize the time* by Bobby Seale. This formal structure and political thinking were new to me. I felt comfortable with it though. Although most of the guys there were ex-gang members, the rules about no drugs, weapons, alcohol made me feel safe. The movement's base in Pacific culture and worldviews was also comforting, as was the goal of equality between the sexes.

So the period from '71 to '74 is what I call the crucible years. It was that time when I was active. When most of the Panthers were active. It seemed in 1973–1974 we all, I suppose, tried to grow up and become adults and went to have our lives. Some people were working out 'What am I gonna be?'. Some of us fell pregnant and had to start being mothers. That kind of thing. So we kind of gradually – but there was the core: Tigilau Ness and Ama Rauhihi Ness who were frontline and represented the Panthers at the Springbok tour, the land marches. So we were still you know, there in spirit with our brothers who were being active and front liners.

It was a period when the Polynesian Party were outspoken and visible, even if the brothers particularly found it hard to shake the gang image. Even now, when we speak to family members, they still when they hear Polynesian Panthers think 'gang'. And it's been really hard to break that. I mean, gangs don't set up homework centres, or visit old folks' homes and give concerts and things. So you know, that's interesting.

But the grassroots programme and activities illustrates our focus on community welfare as a survival strategy. And I put that down to my – I was the first one to make contact with the Black Panthers Party in 1972. First year at university, passed all my units, and as Samoan parents do, they like to shout their children for trips to see their families and other countries if they pass their exam. So I was off to America, Cerritos, Los Angeles, to visit my auntie and uncle who lived there. But before I left, I got the message from the leadership that I had to make contact with the Black Panthers. Oh my God, that spoilt my whole holiday, didn't it. I was just terrified. I mean, me, 17-year-old good Samoan girl, from Grey Lynn going to meet the Panthers. Anyway, this long story short, I left it to the end of my holiday, I couldn't tell my auntie and uncle or my cousins what my mission was. So I, you know – and that's why I'm an associate professor, I guess, I'm very resourceful – I looked them up in the telephone book. And, you know, rang the headquarters up and had this wonderful conversation trying to explain where New Zealand was, and where the Pacific and Samoa, so. But in the end, a week after I got back to New Zealand, a box of resources arrived from the Black Panthers, about community programmes, food co-ops, and things like that. So one of our leaders took that box to Sydney, where the Aboriginals were trying to set up an embassy. And so that was the kind of intercommunalism that the Black Panthers were really trying to build at that time. That's my little, you know, claim to fame. And we've kept up that contact with the Black Panthers to this day. Emory Douglas has been here on several occasions. Tigilau Ness and other Panthers went to the 50th anniversary. So you've got to remember, they started five years before us, but they were our age as well. They were in their seventeens and eighteen years old when they set their party up. So they were five years before us.



And so this is some of our programmes that we ran: legal aid, the legal aid booklet with the help of David Lange. He was our solicitor. And you know, the policemen got really uptight about these young upstarts who knew their legal rights and they would say, 'Okay, you're misinforming the public, take me to who put this booklet together', and we said, 'Well, you better go and see David Lange who helped us set the book up'. But it was so empowering. You know, it was little things like again, kiddie things, like, an officer can't arrest you, if he's not wearing his hat. You know, an officer can't arrest you, if you, if he hasn't got his, you know, numbers visible. Little things like that but those little things ended up to be big things in terms of how they made us confident, and safe, safer, and stopped that brutality that was going on. So those were, you know, a snapshot of our community programmes.

The collaborations we had. We couldn't have done what we did without our relationships with all these parties here: Ngā Tamatoa, People's Union, Halt All Racist Tours, CARE [Citizens Association for Racial Equality]. And people often say, 'How come you all work together so well?'. I said, 'Well, because we all had the common beast', which was racism. That's what drew us together and helped us to be a force to be reckoned with. And probably that's the problem with a lot of the protest groups today. They're fragmented, and there's nothing that they're working on to unify in terms of what they're trying to achieve. And the Polynesian Party, Panther legacy are those things. It's consciousness-raising. We had to conscientise three sets of people in our teens. One was tangata whenua. So we built up the relationships with Ngā Tamatoa – and even before that. And the other group was the main dominant palagi group. And then there was our own elders. Our own parents didn't understand why we were being so, you know, bolshie and radical. They just wanted us to be good citizens like they were because they had tremendous respect for authority. It's in our cultures. We were visitors. So you know, you had to respect law and order and everything.

And then the dawn raids. The dawn raids, there's been so much out there about it, but there were two waves of these terrorist attacks. State-sanctioned racism, based on laws which allowed those things to happen. But more insidious than the dawn raids were actually the random checks. The random checks, that – we've got since the apology was announced, there's been a floodgate opened with people coming out with these stories about the random checks, about the dawn raids.

And so, the 1974 dawn raids happening were under the Labour government and the 1976 dawn raids was under the – Muldoon used law and order and crime as his platform when they took power. What did the Panthers do? I'll read, I'll read from the book there.

At 3 a.m. on a cold foggy night in June 1976, three groups of Panthers and some palagi supporters (we had to have palagi supporters because none of us had cars. We were only fif– not even drivers' licenses. So that's where this unity, this unified platform of protest was so good. So, we'd hop into our palagi mates' cars – well these guys did, the military wing) and they, simultaneously "Dawn-Raided" three National politicians' houses in upmarket streets in Epsom, Pakuranga and North Shore in Auckland. A small group including Tigilau Ness and others went to the home of Franklin MP Bill Birch. The reverse dawn raids also occurred at the homes of MPs, North Shore George Gear and the Minister of Immigration Frank Gill. When Air Commodore Gill was interviewed on the radio the next day about the incident, he said, 'How dare these people come into us at such an ungodly hour!' But that was the whole point, wasn't it? The Panthers further responded to the dawn raids by scaling up our PIG patrols. We probably, if the research was done, there were less police, you know, putting our people in prisons that occurred during the PIG patrols because they were so busy trying to escape our cars. You know, trying to do the right thing and so – kid stuff.

But it wasn't only New Zealand's national identity as a multiracial society that was being forged around the country during this period and within the party, the party itself, it was also our own identities as first generation New Zealand-born Pacific people. We were the first of the first, the first New Zealand-born generations from our migrant settler parents in the 1950s. There were no role models. Our parents expected us to turn out like them, but we had been born here. And you know, we had no role models. So we had to, to create that ourselves. Our Pacific parents weren't keen on their teenage children fighting back against discrimination. They had a fundamental cultural conviction that we were 'visitors' in the land. And so that view has continued today.

The apology. Now, you will be privileged in this room to – this is the whakapapa of the apology, okay, this is how the apology happened. We'd been fighting for that for 50 years in our own way, the Panthers, but two years ago on *The project*, TV3's programme *The project*, there was a little show on Pauline Smith's dawn raid book, and I was being interviewed about the Panthers. And Mark Richardson was on the panel and towards the end of the show, he says, 'I think it's about time there was an apology regardless of which government is in power'. And he said, 'And I hope the National people don't drop the wine on the carpet' at him you know, being so brave enough to say that. And so he was the first one to mention that. And then that kind of bubbled up with us and we decided yeah. And when we were going around to the schools, even the school children were asking us, 'Has there been an apology?' And we would say, well, no, not really. So there was a groundswell of kind of apology speak. And then it came to a head when we decided that yes, we're going to ask for an official apology. And so, Liz Craig, who's a list MP in Invercargill, Pauline approached her and she took it to the politicians. Next minute we, the Panthers were asked to visit the Ministry for Pacific Peoples.

So two years ago, we were in talk, in conversation with the government about the apology. Okay? And then we had that lovely petition from the young Josiah [Tualamali'i] and Benji [Timu], who, after talking with us said, 'We want to do something'. And so that's what was put into train, was their petition.

When we walked into the offices of the government, the Panthers calling for an apology, we went into that process with our eyes wide open. Especially yeah, some of us who still had the thing about, you know, the government, the distrust. The government lobbyists seldom get everything they ask for but our intent was honest and real, and fueled by our Panther legacy and love for the people. In its submission for healing and restoration the Panthers were clear about what we wanted: an apology, as well as 100 annual scholarships, and the overhaul of the current educational curriculum to include the compulsory teaching of racism, race relations, the dawn raids, and Pacific Studies and the significance of the Treaty of Waitangi as the cornerstone of harmonious race relations in Aotearoa across all sectors, and assessed as [NCEA] achieved standards, not just unit standards, with appropriate non-history subjects.

If what we Panthers called for was granted and acted on, it would provide a clear message to all Pacific peoples and communities and to all New Zealanders, that the government was ready for a truly liberating education and a world-leading pathway to the best race relations, Kiwi style, in the world. And I still believe that. I still believe that New Zealand can lead the world. We have in so many other ways. We stopped nuclear ships in our harbours, gave women the first to vote in the world. And we have the best relations, race relations, in the world now. It's not 100%, you know, correct or right, and

it's working, but, we're still screeds above other countries in the world. And it's something that makes me very proud. And if we could just take it to this next step, well, what a world it would be.

But alas, the apology delivered was a watered-down version of what the Panthers called for. By perpetuating a myopic view of our long-term educational needs, the short-term gestures that they were called will not be enough to grow a truly liberated and informed youthful leadership for the future. All our kids need to know about these things, so they can make their own informed decisions about life. And they need to know about the ideas which led to the dawn raids. You know, what I call – in my university students, I say, you know, white supremacy uses the processes of colonialism, the three C's: colonialism, christianity and capitalism. They need to know what those ideas are and how they have formed the situation, the unjust situations that we're in. Okay, so, what we were given in this apology did little to dismantle systemic racism. Much more work needs to be done to decolonise and re-indigenise our education system. If the changes the Panthers have fought for over the last 50 years don't materialise then we will have no alternative but to, as Maōri scholar and activist Ranginui Walker says: Ka whawhai tonu mātou. We still have to keep fighting. That's it.

[clapping]

But now I would like to welcome my fellow Pather, Reverand Alec Toleafoa, and we will be very happy – this is the best part of the talks, is having a talanoa with you all, and trying to answer the questions that you have, so ...

**Audience member one:** Where was the house in Grey Lynn?

**Melani Anae:** Keppell Street. Keppell Street? Do you know Newton? There was, a few doors from our house was just number four Home Street in Grey Lynn. And one of the cofounders of the Panthers, who was an ex-NIGS gang member, lived at Keppell Street, and his parents were away, and so he let's, let's have this meeting. And then when, you know, they came back earlier, and we just, wah!, skedaddled, jumped out the windows, out of there.

**Audience member two:** It would have been a quite exciting time in terms of women's liberation issues. Could you talk a little bit more about the, how women's liberation and feminism impacted on the Panthers?

**Melani Anae:** Great question. When we had to read *Seize the time* by Bobby Seale, it talked about the black sisters. There's a chapter there that's about the black sisters. And when I read it, I said, 'How? That's not what Samoan women are like'. Our Samoan matriarchs rule the family like the men. I mean, my dad gave his pay packet to mum every, every payday. She was the head of the household. You know, everyone in here who's got a Samoan matriarch knows what I mean. And so I just totally – and that's what really pointed out to me the difference. That's why we called ourselves the Polynesian Panthers because they came from a different socio-historical context to us.

So I've never considered myself a feminist. Because I love men too much, especially my dad. And so you know, it was like more – and I'm studying this now and I've published on it – it's a thing that's called womanism. I like the womanism kind of thing, which has started with the black women in America. But because that talks about complementary relationships with the males, not 'them and us',

and it also has the notion of spirituality, in part of the womanism. And that's what I think is a Pacific trait as well. So, I've published on that. And if people want to know, I'll give you the reference.

**Alec Toleafoa:** One of the important cultural references that we have is this thing called feagaiga. And the strongest relationship within the Samoan culture is between the brother and the sister. And there's just this, it's a sacred relationship and an ancient one, where the brother is pretty much the servant to his sister. And so there is already that disposition, so to, so to speak, of a male attitude to women. This is, of course, pre-missionary times. And then when the missionaries came, they, the nature of the feagaiga changed. And so now, that's been pretty much decimated and put in another context than from the original context. So the veneration and the respect for the sister has now been taken by these strangers and imposed in place in the Christian context, where now the feagaiga is given to the Christian God and to the Christian servants of God, to the point now where ministers of religion are referred to as a feagaiga fou – the new feagaiga. But there are still, thankfully, practitioners of feagaiga still out there, and that's being rediscovered and reindigenised and that's a beautiful thing.

**Melani Anae:** And it operated in the Panthers like, you know, we knew the boys would have our backs if we were in danger or protesting. And we always had the boys' back when they got really angry and wanted to, you know, fight. We'd say, 'How about a petition? Let's do a petition'. You know, and so we had all the, everything covered, you know, our group, and there was tremendous respect for each other and that's how we got things done. And yes so, but the sisters were the backbone of the Polynesian Panthers. Don't get me wrong, they were then and now. Even today, you've got the sister Pauline and her books. You've got my books and we kind of coordinate our Educate To Liberate

programme in the school so nothing much has changed over 50 years in terms of the gender relationship in the Panthers.

**Audience member three:** Really good to see Melani and Rev [Toleafoa] again. Just really want to, Rev, if you could just share with us that special relationship we have with the tangata whenua? So, you've mentioned Bastion Point and some of the other protests, but you shared with MSD [Ministry of Social Development] around that special relationship. If you could share that with everyone else? 'Cause I think that's a really powerful story in itself.

**Melani:** Thank you.

**Alec Toleafoa:** Okay well, my name is, well as you know, Alec Toleafoa but my grandmother is Meatuai Tamasese who is the older sibling of Tamasese Lealofi-o-a'ana III, who was shot and then later died of his wounds by the New Zealand Armed Constabulary. An apology has been given already for that. Seems to run in the family, asking for apologies.

Anyway, the story goes that – and this is a story that circulated in my family ever since: he, Tamasese Lealofi III, he was the head of the Mau, which was a peaceful resistance movement in Samoa against the New Zealand administration and the imposition of its rather oppressive laws, etc., colonial Samoa. And he was exiled to New Zealand and imprisoned in Mount Eden jail. I can see the equivalent here would be Mount Crawford, one of the oldest jails here. It was an old, already an old jail in the 1920s when he was exiled here. The offence for which he was imprisoned was his failure to move a hedge on his own land to comply with the governor's or the New Zealand administration's programme of



reorganising the villages so that they were more along the lines of an English village and ordered according to that plan. So he refused to move his hedge, his hedgerow on his own land and that was just what the admin needed to have him removed, arrested. So he ended up in Mount Eden prison. He was there for two years. But while he was there, he was visited by Māui Pōmare. And they began a relationship which still, and they made arrangements that still we honour today in our own family.

If you can imagine, Tamasese, he would have been one of the first Samoans here to New Zealand and certainly one of the first Samoan political prisoners to be in a New Zealand jail, but he was treated as a criminal. So, Māui Pōmare, who was from a high born family himself, he understood this, so he went to see Tamasese while he was in Mount Eden. And he took books, and food, and clothing to him. And Tamasese was pretty much taken out of the things that he was familiar with. Away from the food, away from his people. He was also stripped of his titles. And there are four royal titles, there's four royal titles in Samoa, and he holds one of them. So Māui Pōmare understood that and he went to pay homage to him and that's formed this relationship now that is very strong in my family. And whenever the current holder of that title comes to Aotearoa, he goes to Hoani Waititi Marae, which is in West Auckland, and that is pretty much the place that is home for us, is there.

A lot of people think that the Polynesian Panthers, our deference to the tangata whenua began with Ngā Tamatoa, and while that did happen, it's much older than that. It is much, much older than that. Much more significant than that. So what Tamasese said to Pōmare was that he and his kin owe Māui Pōmare and his people a great debt. And that from this time, our kin, his kin, me, okay, to remember the kindness that was given. And anyone who is Samoan will know how, how significant hospitality is,

in our culture. So he was extended this great aroha and hospitality in his time of greatest need. And he never forgot that and neither have we.

**Melani Anae:** And it's not by accident that there's four, five, Tamasese members in the Polynesian Panthers. I mean, you know, we didn't kind of think, 'Oh, let's you know, let's join the Panthers because we're Tamasese!' No, that's a fight was in them already. The activist kind of, yeah, tendency to do what's right.

**Audience member four:** Kia ora, thank you for your generosity and sharing your history and your stories with us today. I have a question for Alec. I understand the significance of the Christian church within the Polynesian community. And I just – wondering about how you situate yourself as a revolutionary within the Christian church?

**Alec Toleafoa:** Well, there is racism even within the Christian church. Despite how much stained glass you want to put around it, or how many prayer books there are, it's still racism. And all of us have, within the spheres of activity that we have gone into, we have taken our anti-racism doctrine with us, including into the church.

One of the things that I'm very, very interested in now is decolonising the Christian Church in Samoa, and, by extension through the Pacific. And I was giving a talk on that very subject and looking at recovering our own Pacific spirituality. And one of the critics was saying that, isn't there, isn't there just one, one God? And my response was, well, you know, if you can't hear the voice of your God, through our own cultural references, then you're probably not listening. Or else God's not speaking to you. One

of those two. So I can't see that there's any, any harm or any kind of separation of the two. But I would like for our people to understand that before contact with the missionaries, we had our own spirituality. We had our own deity, our own theism, our own understanding of things. And it's not religion, it's spirituality. And this is what I would, this is what I would like to encourage. And one day, from the pulpit, there might be this invocation to Tagaloa and to the God of the Bible, and to the God of the Pacific. That's the invocation I would like to hear from the pulpit.

**Audience member five:** Kia ora, you've mentioned the homework group, and Educate to Liberate, and I'd love if you'd be able to expand on that and kind of touch on the role of education within the movement.

**Melani Anae:** Well, it's interesting, that programme, the homework centres was to provide our young Pacific kids a place where they could do their homework, and so a lot of us were university students, so we would help them with their homework at a set time. But one of the lovely stories we heard just the other day when we were giving a Panthers' rap at St. Cuthbert's in Auckland, the principal came down and said, oh, that she was one of the homework tutors back in the day when she was at university. So I can imagine, you know, the activist kind of education coming out of St. Cuthbert's.

So those sorts of things. But the Educate to Liberate, our parents came to this country for a better education. It's since been subsumed by sports and creative things, but, it's always been education because, you know, knowledge is power, even, you know, indigenous peoples know that around the world. So education to me is the kind of the coverall for everything else. If you get the education right, there will be peace and harmony. It's not an us or them. It's not polarising. It's just knowledge, the

sharing of knowledge and being open to different worldviews. To be open to different understandings of things. So together, you learn new things, and, and so educate to liberate.

I've done that in my work as an academic. You know, and it's, it's, it's amazing that the students that I've had there have gone on to become teachers, and have now introduced Pacific studies into the curriculum in their schools. And you know, that's amazing, 'cause that's, as Panthers, that's where the revolution lies. That's the revolution, is, is changing the mindset of everyone that hears our story, that hears our histories, of our realities.

And so I'm just sitting back. I mean, the apology is the apology, but I know that out there our young, our youth, are demanding. We're getting, we're getting stories from questions from young kids saying, 'I want to be an activist, how can I be an activist?' And the brothers will usually say, 'Oh, well, you have to tidy up your room when your mum says so.' That's true because it teaches you discipline and respect. It's all those things. So you know, that's the kind of thing as – and we tell them, if you look at our platform: annihilate all forms of racism, celebrate your ethnic identity – whatever it is – and educate to liberate, then you are Panthers.

And so it's not just an education about, you know, a subject, it's your life, it's educating your whole approach to life and people and relationships. Because in the Samoan culture va, the va is crucial. The va is the social and sacred spaces of relationships. You know, you can't have one by itself, they both interact, to make optimal outcomes. Things work, you get things done, when you look after the va, the relationship, and the va between those above, beside and below you. And that's why Samoans are so schizophrenic. You're gonna have to know what all these va are. But we're taught from a very young age, about these different va. And it's what I call, you know, the instructional adhoc framework. It's,

'do this, do this, don't do that', without any explanation. And we learnt, so that's how we learn. We learn how to behave properly, and all those va. It's amazing. But that's, that's our fa'asamoa for you.

**Audience member six:** You've given us a tremendous reminder of the importance of civil disobedience in New Zealand, in our society. And I wonder, given that, if there's one really critical thing about discrimination, is it's the worst thing is where we don't want to know, we don't want to look. And I wonder, as a consequence of the value of civil disobedience, what has it been complemented by? And how our systems operate, that shed light on the things that you've expressed that are so dear and important to New Zealand?

**Alec Toleafoa:** Okay, one of the, one of the first, the first activist things, I suppose you would say, in our community (and we are only 16–17 year-olds), was installing traffic lights and pedestrian crossings, in a very dangerous intersection in Ponsonby. And that's because a lot of our people were being injured and there was no safe way to cross the – or safer way – to cross the road. So what we did was, we just formed this continuous line, and just marched around there, this intersection, so that no cars could come through. And that was just continuous. We weren't breaking the law. But it was being, doing, being annoying really. And then traffic started to build up on either side of the intersection and they were being annoyed as well at what we were doing. But we were very clear on what we wanted. We wanted traffic lights here. So three weeks after that the city council put traffic lights there. So that's the influence of civil disobedience on law, and law change, how it happens, you can do that. And it's, I think it's in my blood really. The Mau in Samoa, they did a lot of civil disobedience as well and gained their independence as a result. So these are the ways that the relationship between civil

disobedience and the sorts of, sorts of things that can happen as a result. And it does remind the people of their own power, you have power, and let's just use that. And we use it at times when there is some danger to us or to our society or to the wellbeing of our society. So there's all these different dynamics that spring from civil disobedience and actually give rise to civil disobedience as well. Just down there in the foyer of this building, I see photos of the 1980s Springbok tour. That's the ultimate, in this country anyway, civil disobedience, and the amazing global effects of that action. Amazing.

**Melani Anae:** Yeah, that's that's one good example of where we annihilated racism together, was the apartheid, you know, the Springbok tour.

**Neill Atkinson:** And then we got one last question.

**Audience member seven:** Hi. So you talked a bit about how young people can have a difference in education. I was wondering if you had any thoughts on some of the newer movements around climate change, specifically the School Strike 4 Climate, and the need for more Pacific views and activists and groups in that sort of arena?

**Melani Anae:** We were talking about that just earlier. In that same vein about the question about how can I become an activist, right? You have to be ready to give – lay down your life, for the cause. You have to be passionate, you have to have lived that experience of what you're, you know, trying to change. So unless you're in the Pacific and suffering climate change in a big way, it's difficult, you know, to make – I mean, every young person is really on this bandwagon about climate change and

without really understanding the, you know, the, the intricacies of what that means, because ... What I'm not hearing is what the people back in the islands in the places, you know, the islands that are sinking. I don't hear their voices, I don't hear them jumping up and down and being activists about it, because they've lived with it for thousands of years. They have lived through hurricanes and typhoons and, and survived. So you know, I think it's people who have caused the climate change that are now worrying about it.

**Alec Toleafoa:** At a more local, local level, we encourage young people, you know, to take up something that they feel strongly about and use their own agency for change. In Tamaki, there's just, there's a group of school, school children who were tired of intra-school violence. And so working against the advice of their school, they still created this march against intra-school violence. It never made the media, which is typical of how youth are treated in the media, but they still got up there and you know, they empowered their community and themselves and found their voice and their legs and went out there and did it. And so I guess there's a lot of these youth movement, new youth activist movements, that are growing, that we don't hear much about, because mainly they're youth and the media seems to want to get onto this sensationalist narrative and not care too much about. And we experienced that ourselves as young Panthers. So I would, I would encourage that, you know, the new youth movements because they're finding their own agency, they're finding their feet and I'm all for that. I'm all for that.

**Melani Anae:** And you know, we tell them, if you see racism, stand up. If you feel racism, stand up.

**Sarah Burgess:** Thanks for listening to this New Zealand history podcast from Manatū Taonga. Don't forget to subscribe. And if you're looking for other content about New Zealand history, check out earlier talks in the series. You can find them on your favourite podcast channels. Just search for New Zealand history. Mā te wā.