

Beyond Territory

Observations on Sovereignty, Stewardship and the Human Condition

Reflections from the *Embassy of Ireland Korero | Comhrá*

A Symposium on Culture, Identity and Language in an Uncertain Digital World

Elle Archer



Ambasáid na hÉireann | Nua-Shéalainne
Embassy of Ireland | New Zealand
Te Aka Aorere o Airangi | Aotearoa

Ireland - New Zealand



Contents

Foreword.....	3
Executive Summary.....	4
Observations from the kōrero.....	5
Observation One: Technology has changed the landscape, not the human questions....	5
Observation Two: Indigenous knowledge systems have always practised stewardship	6
Observation Three: Identity lives through relationship	8
Observation Four: Every technology embodies a worldview.....	10
Observation Five: Governance and guardianship are different.....	12
Observation Six: Indigenous innovation is already shaping the future	14
Observation Seven: Hope is a strategic capability.....	16
Observation Eight: Hope asks us to act	18
Observation Nine: Relationships are the foundation	19
Observation Ten: We are all becoming ancestors.....	21
Afterword.....	22
Acknowledgements.....	24
With appreciation to all panellists:	24

Foreword

A chairde, Tēnā koutou, Talofa lava

It is a pleasure to introduce this paper, which reflects on our Embassy of Ireland Kōrero | Comhrá event, held on 8 and 9 July 2026 with the title ***Sovereignty Beyond Territory: Culture, Identity and Language in an Uncertain Digital World.***

Held during the week of Matariki, our three panels were given a daunting task. We asked them to express what is meant by data sovereignty, to discuss how indigenous identity can be at the heart of digital systems and to consider how indigenous data should be governed. Naturally, given the calibre and experience of our contributors they rose to the task beautifully. Their insights are captured across the following pages.

Throughout the event, they touched on themes that are becoming increasingly central to our shared future: identity, language, knowledge and above all, responsibility.

Although much of the discussion began with artificial intelligence and the rapidly changing digital landscape, the kōrero returned so often to something more enduring. To people, relationships, culture and the responsibilities we carry to those who come after us.

This paper captures that spirit of inquiry. It does not seek to provide definitive answers to complex questions, but to preserve and extend the connections that emerged across the two days. Its observations remind us that while technologies may change rapidly, questions surrounding trust, kaitiakitanga/guardianship and responsibility will remain.

For Ireland, engagement with Aotearoa New Zealand and with Indigenous perspectives is grounded in a deep respect for culture, language, identity and the importance of intergenerational knowledge. We recognise that the future of technology must be shaped not only by innovation, but also by wisdom, relationships and a commitment to ensuring that progress serves people and communities.

The conversations reflected in these pages offer much to consider. They offer grounds for hope, but with a call to action. As the world navigates profound technological and social change, collaboration across cultures, disciplines and generations will be essential.

I recommend this piece of work to all those interested in the future of sovereignty, technology, culture and human connection. I extend my sincere thanks to Elle Archer for steering the comhrá, to all of our excellent panellists and those who joined us as audience members.

Jane Connolly

Ambassador of Ireland

Executive Summary

Held during the week of **Matariki 2026**, the Embassy of Ireland Symposium *Sovereignty Beyond Territory: Culture, Identity and Language in an Uncertain Digital World* brought together Indigenous leaders, researchers, technologists, lawyers, educators, policy practitioners and community advocates from Aotearoa and beyond to explore some of the defining questions of our time.

While the symposium was framed around sovereignty, artificial intelligence, digital identity and emerging technologies, the conversations repeatedly converged around something much more enduring: people, relationships, stewardship and our shared responsibility to future generations.

This paper is not intended to reproduce the presentations delivered over the two days, nor does it attempt to provide conference proceedings. Instead, it captures the recurring observations that emerged across the symposium, the patterns that continued to surface regardless of discipline, organisation or perspective.

In many ways, Matariki became the quiet rhythm of the symposium. Its annual invitation to remember those who came before us, reflect on where we stand today, and intentionally look towards the future mirrored the journey of the conversations themselves. Questions about technology repeatedly became questions about humanity. Discussions about data became conversations about trust, identity and stewardship. Artificial intelligence became another lens through which to consider much older questions about responsibility, belonging and the kind of future we hope to leave behind.

Rather than offering definitive conclusions, these observations are shared as an invitation to continue the kōrero. They reflect one gathering, one moment in time, and one collective exploration of what sovereignty might mean in an increasingly interconnected digital world. It is hoped that they contribute to ongoing dialogue between Indigenous communities, governments, researchers, industry and all those committed to shaping technologies that strengthen both people and place.

The purpose of observation is not to reach conclusions too quickly, but to notice what remains true as the world around us continues to change.

Observations from the kōrero

Observation One: Technology has changed the landscape, not the human questions

One of the earliest patterns to emerge over the course of the symposium was that conversations which began with technology rarely stayed there for long.

Artificial intelligence, digital sovereignty, cloud computing and data governance provided the context for many of the discussions. Yet regardless of where a speaker began, the conversation almost always found its way back to people. It returned to questions of identity, belonging, responsibility, trust, relationships and the legacy we leave for those who follow us.

Lawyers spoke about governance and intellectual property. Technologists explored the opportunities and challenges of artificial intelligence. Educators reflected on preparing future generations for a rapidly changing world. Indigenous practitioners shared perspectives grounded in whakapapa, tikanga and collective responsibility. Although each conversation approached the kaupapa from a different direction, they repeatedly arrived at remarkably similar places.

This was perhaps one of the most striking observations of the symposium.

The technologies may be new, but the questions they are asking of us are not.

Humanity has always wrestled with questions of who holds authority, how knowledge is shared, what responsibilities accompany power, and how communities navigate change together. Artificial intelligence has not created these questions. It has simply given them a new environment in which to play out.

Throughout the two days, I found myself returning to a simple observation that quietly became an anchor for my own thinking.

Technology did not create these questions. It simply gave them a new landscape.

That idea subtly changed the way I listened to the conversations that followed. Discussions about data governance became conversations about stewardship. Questions of digital identity became reflections on belonging. Conversations about artificial intelligence became conversations about ethics, education and future generations. Technology was rarely the destination. It became the pathway through which much older human questions continued to reveal themselves.

Contemporary discussions about emerging technologies often begin with capability. We ask what artificial intelligence can do, how quickly it will develop, and which industries it might transform. Far less frequently do we ask what kind of people we need to become in order to use these technologies wisely.

As I reflected on the conversations across the symposium, I was left with the sense that if our technologies continue evolving at extraordinary speed, then our capacity for discernment, judgement and stewardship must evolve alongside them. Otherwise, we risk becoming increasingly sophisticated in the systems we create while remaining unchanged in the assumptions we bring to them.

Perhaps that is the deeper challenge before us.

Our future will depend not simply on the intelligence of our technologies, but on the wisdom of the people who design them, govern them and choose how they are used.

If that observation holds true, then the future of digital transformation is, and always has been, a profoundly human endeavour.

Observation Two: Indigenous knowledge systems have always practised stewardship

One of the strongest themes to emerge over the two days was that Indigenous peoples were not arriving late to conversations about data governance. If anything, they have been practising it for generations.

Long before cloud storage, digital repositories and artificial intelligence, Indigenous communities had already developed sophisticated ways of caring for knowledge. Knowledge was not treated simply as information to be collected or owned. It was carried through whakapapa, entrusted to people and places, shared according to tikanga, and held within relationships that acknowledged both authority and responsibility.

Kirikowhai Mikaere reminded us that our earliest repositories of knowledge were our marae and wharehau. Access to that knowledge was never indiscriminate. It was contextual. It was relational. It came with obligations. Those who carried knowledge also carried responsibility for its care and transmission.

That perspective quietly shifted the centre of the conversation.

Much of today's language surrounding digital sovereignty is framed around ownership, access and control. Yet throughout the symposium, those concepts were repeatedly expanded. Stewardship asks different questions. It asks not simply who owns knowledge, but who is responsible for its wellbeing. It recognises that knowledge carries whakapapa of

its own, and that the way it is gathered, interpreted, shared and preserved affects both present and future generations.

Several contributors reinforced this idea through practice rather than theory. **Vailahi Vailahi** described working alongside elders in Nanumea, Tuvalu, before undertaking digital preservation of culturally significant places. The technology itself was not the starting point. Time was first invested in building understanding, explaining the purpose of the work, and ensuring those who held the knowledge remained central to decisions about how it would be preserved. The resulting digital archive became more than a technical exercise. It became an act of cultural continuity in the face of a changing climate.

Similar themes surfaced elsewhere. Discussions about Indigenous language models, community-led data initiatives and local governance all pointed towards the same underlying principle: technology works best when it strengthens existing relationships rather than replacing them.

Listening across the symposium, I found myself wondering whether we have approached the conversation from the wrong direction. We often ask how Indigenous communities might adapt to rapidly changing technologies. Perhaps the more interesting question is what digital systems might learn from Indigenous ways of stewarding knowledge.

Artificial intelligence has prompted renewed conversations about consent, provenance and trust. Indigenous knowledge systems have been grappling with those questions for centuries.

That does not mean they offer every answer. Nor should they be romanticised. Like all systems of knowledge, they continue to evolve. Yet they remind us that governance is not simply about creating rules. It is about cultivating relationships capable of carrying knowledge well.

Perhaps that is one of the symposium's most enduring contributions. Stewardship is not a new idea emerging in response to artificial intelligence. It is an ancient practice whose relevance is becoming increasingly apparent as our technologies become more powerful.

The question that remains is not whether Indigenous knowledge systems have something to contribute to the future of digital governance.

The question is whether we are prepared to learn from them.

Observation Three: Identity lives through relationship

One of the most thought-provoking conversations across the symposium centred on identity. Not identity as a field within a database, nor as a collection of demographic attributes, but identity as something that lives within relationships.

Throughout the discussions, contributors consistently challenged the idea that identity could simply be captured, stored or represented by digital systems. Instead, identity was described as something dynamic, continually shaped through our relationships with people, place, language, whakapapa and community.

Aleisha Amohia spoke about identity data as being far more than information about an individual. It reflects the ways we relate to one another. It carries context, history and responsibility. Without those relationships, the data itself begins to lose meaning.

That whakaaro resurfaced in different ways throughout the symposium.

Amber Taylor reflected on the importance of designing Indigenous identity into digital systems from the very beginning, rather than attempting to incorporate it once the technology has already been built. Maramataka, language, values and Indigenous ways of understanding the world cannot simply be layered onto existing systems. They need to shape the way those systems are imagined in the first place.

Chris Cormack offered another perspective, observing that whakapapa itself continues to evolve. Identity is not fixed. It grows as relationships grow, responding to changing contexts while remaining grounded in enduring connections.

Colin Kennedy challenged the language we often use in technology, particularly the idea of *embedding* identity. The word itself assumes identity is something separate from the system, something that can simply be inserted once the technical work has been completed. Yet identity is rarely experienced in that way. It is lived. It is complex. It resists being flattened into neat categories.

That observation stayed with me.

Digital systems often rely upon classification. They ask us to define ourselves through fields, labels and predefined options. Yet human identity has never fitted comfortably within fixed categories. It is layered. It is contextual. It is relational.

Perhaps that is why several conversations returned to the importance of co-design. If identity continues to evolve through relationships, then the technologies intended to serve communities should also emerge through relationships. Designing alongside communities,

rather than for them, becomes more than a preferred methodology. It becomes an acknowledgement that identity cannot be separated from the people who live it.

The discussion also extended well beyond Aotearoa. Examples from Indigenous communities across the Pacific, Africa and elsewhere demonstrated that language, culture and local knowledge continue to shape digital innovation in distinctive ways. Rather than seeking uniformity, these initiatives embraced diversity. They recognised that difference is not a problem to be solved, but a strength to be nurtured.

One comment from the floor captured this beautifully:

"Our identity is what makes us beautiful."

It was a simple observation, yet it carried considerable weight.

Artificial intelligence often works by identifying patterns, similarities and averages. It looks for what is common across vast quantities of information. Yet Indigenous perspectives throughout the symposium reminded us that our humanity is often found in the places where we differ.

Our language.

Our whakapapa.

Our customs.

Our places.

Our stories.

These are not anomalies within the data.

They are expressions of who we are.

As I reflected on these conversations, I found myself wondering whether we have been asking too little of our technologies. Rather than asking whether digital systems can represent identity, perhaps we should be asking whether they create the conditions in which identity can continue to flourish.

That feels like a different question altogether.

It moves us beyond representation and towards relationship.

Beyond information and towards understanding.

Beyond technology and towards people.

Perhaps that is where the future of digital identity will ultimately be found, not in the sophistication of our systems, but in the quality of the relationships they help to strengthen.

Observation Four: Every technology embodies a worldview

Throughout the symposium, contributors repeatedly challenged the notion that technology is neutral. At first, this appeared to be a conversation about artificial intelligence. Yet as the discussions unfolded, it became increasingly apparent that the real conversation was about people.

Every technology reflects a series of human decisions. What problems are worth solving? Whose knowledge is considered valuable? Which languages are supported? Whose stories become part of the training data? Who is invited to participate in the design process, and who is absent? What assumptions are we making? What compromises are we accepting? What narratives are we perpetuating through the systems we create?

Long before an algorithm begins making decisions, people have already made countless decisions on its behalf. Those decisions shape not only what a technology is capable of doing, but whose aspirations it advances, whose voices it amplifies, and whether it strengthens or diminishes the communities it exists to serve.

Amber Taylor returned to this idea several times throughout the symposium. Indigenous identity, she argued, cannot simply be added to a digital platform once the technical work has been completed. It must be present from the beginning. Indigenous worldviews need to shape the design itself, influencing not only what a system does, but how it understands the world it has been created to serve.

Maramataka became one example of this way of thinking. Rather than treating Indigenous knowledge as supplementary content, it becomes part of the logic through which a system operates. In doing so, technology begins to reflect a different relationship with time, place and community.

Aleisha Amohia extended this thinking by reminding us that Māori data governance is not simply concerned with protecting Māori interests. It is equally concerned with advancing Māori aspirations. At the very least, the systems we create should not cause harm. At their best, they should actively contribute to the wellbeing, capability and flourishing of the people and communities they exist to serve. That subtle distinction shifts the conversation

beyond risk management. It asks us not only what technologies are capable of doing, but what futures they are helping to create.

That same principle surfaced throughout the symposium. **Michael Puhara** reflected on the work of Te Hiku Media, describing how the development of Indigenous language models was shaped not simply by technical expertise, but by relationships, values and trust. Communities remained connected to the technology throughout its development. The technology became an expression of those relationships rather than a replacement for them.

Chris Cormack added another important perspective through what he described as the *refusal test*. If a digital product appears to be free, it is worth asking what is being exchanged in return. Increasingly, our attention, our behaviours and our data have become the product. Genuine consent, he argued, requires far more than accepting terms and conditions. It requires understanding. It requires transparency. Most importantly, it requires choice.

The symposium also challenged assumptions about where innovation is occurring. Examples from Kenya's emerging Silicon Savannah, Indigenous language initiatives, and community-led technology projects across Aotearoa demonstrated that new models of digital development are already taking shape. These initiatives begin from different assumptions. Relationships come before extraction. Communities remain connected to the knowledge they contribute. Data is understood within its cultural context rather than separated from it.

Listening across these conversations, I found myself wondering whether we have been asking the wrong question. We often ask whether technology contains bias. Perhaps a more useful question is to ask what worldview a technology has been designed to reflect.

- ❖ Every system embodies assumptions.
- ❖ Some assume knowledge should be open by default.
- ❖ Others assume it should be entrusted.
- ❖ Some prioritise efficiency.
- ❖ Others prioritise relationship.
- ❖ Some seek consistency.
- ❖ Others recognise complexity.

None of these assumptions are neutral. Each reflects values that have been consciously, or unconsciously, embedded into a technology long before anyone begins using it.

Recognising this changes the conversation. Rather than viewing ethics as a set of principles applied after development, ethics become something continually expressed through design. The architecture itself becomes ethical. The training data becomes

ethical. The governance becomes ethical. Even the relationships that shape a technology's development become ethical. The measure of a technology therefore becomes more than its capability. It also lies in whether it advances the aspirations of the communities it exists to serve, or at the very least, does no harm.

Technology, then, becomes more than software.

It becomes an expression of the worldview from which it was created.

Perhaps that is why Indigenous leadership matters so deeply within the future of digital innovation. Not because it offers another perspective to include, but because it reminds us that every technology is already expressing one.

The question is not simply whose. It is also **to what end**.

Observation Five: Governance and guardianship are different

As the symposium moved into conversations about Indigenous data governance, I became increasingly aware that we were using familiar words to describe very different ideas. Ownership, control, privacy, governance, guardianship and stewardship were all used throughout the discussions. Each carries its own assumptions, yet they are often spoken about as though they are interchangeable. Over the course of the symposium, contributors quietly demonstrated that they are not.

Lynell Tuffery Huria brought an important legal perspective to the conversation, reminding us that existing intellectual property law was never designed to protect every form of Indigenous knowledge or data. Copyright and other legal mechanisms provide important protections in particular circumstances, yet they do not automatically recognise collective relationships with knowledge, nor the responsibilities that accompany them.

Rather than dismissing those legal frameworks, Lynell encouraged us to understand them well. Change is already occurring. Māori data governance, mātauranga Māori policy and international trade agreements are beginning to acknowledge concepts that were previously absent from many legal conversations. The work ahead is not simply about replacing one system with another, but about carefully creating space for different systems of knowledge to coexist and inform one another.

Amy Dove complemented this perspective by reflecting on the growing importance of assurance as artificial intelligence becomes embedded within increasingly significant decisions. Governance, she observed, is not simply about creating policy. It also requires transparency, accountability and confidence that systems are operating as intended. Trust is strengthened not only by good intentions, but by the ability to demonstrate integrity throughout the lifecycle of technology.

Te Taka Keegan approached the conversation from another direction. He reflected on the distinction between governance and guardianship, observing that the answer depends on both the nature of the knowledge itself and the relationships surrounding it. Iwi understand the significance of iwi data because they understand the stories, histories and responsibilities that give that data meaning. Governance, in this sense, is not simply administrative. It is relational.

Aleisha Amohia continued that thread by reminding us that Indigenous data is always about people before it is about information. Data without context tells only part of the story. Indigenous governance brings that context back into the conversation. It asks not only how information should be managed, but how relationships should be honoured.

As these perspectives accumulated, I found myself thinking less about governance as a process and more about stewardship as a practice.

Governance asks how decisions will be made.

Guardianship asks how something will be cared for.

Stewardship asks another question altogether: how do we ensure that what has been entrusted to us is stronger when we pass it on than when we first received it?

The distinction feels subtle, yet it changes the nature of the conversation.

Ownership can end with possession.

Governance can end with compliance.

Stewardship never really ends.

It recognises that knowledge is inherited, held for a time, strengthened through use, and eventually entrusted to others. That perspective perhaps explains why discussions throughout the symposium continually returned to future generations. Stewardship assumes that the decisions we make today will shape possibilities for people we may never meet.

Artificial intelligence has renewed conversations about governance because it has expanded both the opportunities and the consequences of digital systems. Yet the symposium suggested that governance alone may not be enough. As our technologies become more capable, our responsibility must deepen alongside them.

Rules remain important. Institutions remain important. Law remains important. But none of these, on their own, guarantee wisdom. Wisdom emerges through the quality of the

relationships we cultivate, the values we uphold, and the care with which we exercise the authority entrusted to us.

Looking back across the symposium, I was left wondering whether stewardship is not simply another form of governance.

Perhaps it is governance practised with future generations already in mind.

Observation Six: Indigenous innovation is already shaping the future

One of the more encouraging observations to emerge throughout the symposium was that Indigenous communities are not standing on the sidelines of technological change. Across Aotearoa and around the world, they are already helping to shape it.

Too often, conversations about emerging technologies position Indigenous peoples as those who must adapt to a future designed elsewhere. Over the course of the symposium, that assumption was quietly dismantled. Again and again, examples emerged of Indigenous communities leading their own digital futures. Some were preserving language. Others were developing artificial intelligence models grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems. Some were reimagining education, while others were creating community-led approaches to data governance or using immersive technologies to protect cultural heritage for future generations.

None of these examples were presented as distant aspirations.

They already exist.

Vailahi Vailahi shared the story of digitally preserving culturally significant places in Nanumea, Tuvalu, before rising sea levels have the opportunity to erase them. The technology itself was impressive, yet what remained with me was not the virtual reality environment he created. It was the process that came before it. Time was taken to sit with elders, to explain the technology, to answer questions and to build understanding. Only then did the technical work begin.

The innovation was not simply the digital preservation of place.

It was the preservation of trust.

Kevin Shedlock similarly demonstrated how digital technologies can become instruments of cultural continuity. His work illustrated that digital heritage is not simply about preserving artefacts or creating virtual experiences. At its best, it creates new ways for future generations to encounter places, stories and knowledge that may otherwise

become increasingly difficult to access. Preservation, in this sense, becomes less about storing the past than sustaining relationships with it.

That same principle surfaced elsewhere. Michael Puhara reflected on the work of Te Hiku Media and the development of Indigenous language technologies grounded in enduring relationships with communities rather than the extraction of data.

The symposium also challenged assumptions about where innovation is occurring.

Amber Taylor pointed to emerging Indigenous-led AI language laboratories and the growing number of Indigenous language technology initiatives across Africa, particularly within Kenya's rapidly growing technology sector. These examples demonstrated that new models of digital development are already taking shape. These initiatives begin from different assumptions. Relationships come before extraction. Communities remain connected to the knowledge they contribute. Data is understood within its cultural context rather than separated from it.

Colin Kennedy offered another perspective by challenging us to think differently about innovation itself. Innovation, he suggested, is not always about creating something entirely new. Sometimes it is about dismantling inherited systems that no longer serve us and rebuilding them in ways that better reflect who we are.

That observation resonated throughout the symposium.

Whether discussing language, education, digital identity or governance, Indigenous innovation consistently began from a different set of questions. Whose knowledge is this? Who benefits? Who remains connected? How will this strengthen our people?

These are not simply technical questions.

They are questions of purpose.

Listening across the symposium, I found myself reflecting on how often innovation is measured by speed, scale or commercial success. The examples shared over these two days suggested another way of thinking. Perhaps innovation should also be measured by what it helps to protect, the relationships it strengthens, the languages it sustains, and the confidence it gives communities to shape their own futures.

Perhaps the most hopeful aspect of these conversations was not that Indigenous innovation is emerging.

It is that it is already here.

The challenge now is not convincing communities that innovation is possible. The challenge is ensuring governments, researchers, funders and industry recognise Indigenous communities not simply as stakeholders in technological change, but as partners and leaders in shaping it.

Ernestynne Walsh expanded this perspective beyond technology itself, reflecting on the growing importance of Indigenous participation within international trade and emerging digital economies. Sovereignty, she suggested, is not solely about protecting cultural knowledge. It is also about ensuring Indigenous communities are able to participate confidently in shaping the economic systems emerging around new technologies. Innovation therefore becomes not only cultural and technological, but economic.

As I reflected on the conversations over these two days, I was left with the sense that some of the most significant innovations of the coming decades may not emerge from those with the greatest computational power or financial investment. They may instead emerge from those who remain most deeply connected to people, place and purpose.

Innovation is not defined by the sophistication of the technology, but by the depth of the relationships it serves.

Observation Seven: Hope is a strategic capability

Before the symposium began, I expected many of the conversations to be dominated by uncertainty. Artificial intelligence continues to evolve at an extraordinary pace, while questions surrounding sovereignty, digital governance, intellectual property and cultural preservation are becoming increasingly complex. It would have been understandable if the prevailing mood had been one of caution.

Instead, something quite different emerged.

Hope.

Not the kind of hope that ignores complexity, nor the kind that assumes technology will somehow solve the challenges before us. Rather, it was a hope grounded in observation.

Throughout the symposium, speakers consistently pointed to examples of communities already responding with creativity, courage and purpose. They spoke about Indigenous language revitalisation, community-led governance, digital preservation, ethical approaches to artificial intelligence, new models of education, and international collaborations that are already reshaping the future. Hope was not presented as an abstract aspiration. It was demonstrated through practice.

That distinction feels important.

Hope is often dismissed as being idealistic or naïve. Yet over the course of these conversations, it became something far more practical. It emerged because people could already see change occurring around them. Communities were not waiting. Researchers were not waiting. Educators were not waiting. Indigenous innovators were not waiting. The future was already being built.

Aleisha Amohia captured this beautifully towards the close of the symposium. She reflected that gatherings such as this create hope, not because they produce immediate answers, but because they remind us that we are not asking these questions alone. They create connections. They spark new ideas. They encourage collaborations that continue long after people leave the room.

That observation resonated deeply.

Michael Puhara reminded us that optimism alone is insufficient. Hope becomes meaningful when communities are equipped to participate in shaping the technologies that will influence their futures.

Across the two days there was remarkably little sense of competition between participants. Instead, there was generosity. People built upon one another's ideas. Different disciplines informed one another. Questions were explored rather than defended. Curiosity consistently took precedence over certainty.

As I reflected on those conversations, I found myself wondering whether hope is less an emotion than a capability. It enables people to continue acting despite uncertainty. It creates space for experimentation, encourages collaboration, and allows us to imagine futures that do not yet exist while remaining grounded in the realities of today.

This feels particularly relevant when discussing emerging technologies. Artificial intelligence often invites us to predict what may happen. Hope, by contrast, asks a different question: *What future are we prepared to help create?*

That subtle shift places agency back into human hands. It reminds us that although technology will undoubtedly influence the future, it will never determine it on its own. Our decisions still matter. Our relationships still matter. Our values still matter.

Perhaps that is why hope became such a recurring presence throughout the symposium. Not because the future appears certain, but because there remains every opportunity to shape it with intention.

For me, this was one of the symposium's most enduring lessons. Hope did not emerge because the challenges before us became smaller. It emerged because, together, they began to feel more possible to navigate.

Observation Eight: Hope asks us to act

If hope became one of the unexpected themes of the symposium, it was never presented as a destination. It was always accompanied by responsibility.

As conversations moved from identifying challenges towards exploring opportunities, it became increasingly clear that hope was not being offered as reassurance, nor was it being used to soften the realities of an uncertain future. Instead, hope became an invitation, an invitation to design differently, to govern differently, to educate differently, to collaborate differently, and perhaps most importantly, an invitation to participate.

Throughout the symposium there was a quiet but persistent rejection of the idea that technological change simply happens to us. Again and again, speakers demonstrated that communities already possess the capacity to influence the futures they inhabit. Whether through language revitalisation, Indigenous-led artificial intelligence, community governance, education or digital preservation, people were already exercising agency.

That observation subtly shifted the tone of the conversation. Rather than asking how we prepare for an uncertain future, participants increasingly asked how we help shape one. The distinction is subtle, yet significant. Preparing implies adaptation. Shaping implies participation.

Aleisha Amohia reflected on this during the final panel, observing that gatherings such as this create hope. Not because they provide immediate answers, but because they bring together people who might not otherwise meet. They create opportunities for ideas to move between disciplines, for relationships to form, and for collaborations to continue long after the formal programme has ended.

Hope, in that sense, is not something we leave with.

It is something we carry forward.

Te Taka Keegan offered a similar challenge. Stay focused. Stay the course. Believe in what you are doing. Bring others with you. His words were not simply encouragement; they described a way of working. Meaningful change is rarely achieved alone. It grows through relationships, shared purpose and a willingness to continue despite uncertainty.

Listening across the symposium, I was reminded that stewardship has always been an active practice. It is not enough to recognise that change is needed. We must also be prepared to participate in creating it.

Artificial intelligence provided a useful example. Many of the discussions acknowledged legitimate concerns around bias, governance, consent and cultural representation. Yet

very few contributors suggested stepping away from the technology altogether. Instead, the emphasis consistently returned to engagement, building capability, strengthening communities, supporting Indigenous leadership, creating better governance, and designing systems that reflect the values we hope to see expressed in the world.

Hope therefore became less about optimism and more about commitment. A commitment to remain involved. To continue asking difficult questions. To keep building relationships across disciplines and cultures. To ensure that future generations inherit technologies shaped not only by intelligence, but by wisdom.

As I reflected on these conversations, I found myself thinking that hope is perhaps most powerful when it moves us beyond conversation. Not because conversation is unimportant—indeed, conversations such as these are where relationships begin, but because good conversations invite good action.

Perhaps that is the quiet work of hope.

Not simply helping us imagine a better future but giving us the confidence to begin building it together.

Observation Nine: Relationships are the foundation

As the symposium drew to a close, I found myself reflecting on a theme that had quietly threaded its way through almost every conversation: relationships. Not as a welcome addition to the work, nor as something that happens once the technology has been developed, but as the very foundation upon which everything else depends.

Whether the discussion centred on artificial intelligence, Indigenous languages, digital identity, education, governance or international collaboration, progress was consistently described as beginning with people. Before systems came conversations. Before platforms came partnerships. Before innovation came trust.

This pattern appeared again and again.

Vailahi Vailahi described spending time with elders before any digital preservation work began, ensuring they understood both the technology and its purpose. The digital archive that followed was only possible because relationships had been established first.

Michael Puhara reflected on Te Hiku Media's approach to developing Indigenous language technologies, where language was never separated from the people who carried it. Technology became one expression of those relationships rather than a substitute for them. Chris Cormack offered a similar perspective, emphasising the importance of building

connections before attempting to solve technical problems. Relationships, he suggested, create the conditions in which communities can confidently lead their own digital futures.

Even discussions about international trade, legal frameworks and public policy continually returned to collaboration. Progress was rarely described as the product of a single organisation or discipline. Instead, it emerged through partnerships, shared understanding and a willingness to work alongside one another.

Listening across the symposium, I began to notice that relationships were often spoken about as though they sat outside the technical work. Yet the conversations themselves suggested something quite different. Relationships are not external to innovation; they are part of its architecture.

Without trust, data is less likely to be shared. Without trust, communities are less likely to participate. Without trust, even the most technically sophisticated systems struggle to gain legitimacy.

Technology can accelerate communication, but it cannot manufacture trust.

Trust is built much more slowly. It grows through consistency, transparency, listening and reciprocity. These qualities are not peripheral to digital transformation. They are fundamental to it.

Whakawhanaungatanga surfaced repeatedly throughout the symposium, although not always by name. Contributors spoke about bringing communities alongside the work, co-designing solutions, investing time before implementation, and recognising that enduring outcomes depend upon the strength of the relationships that support them.

Perhaps this should not surprise us. Long before digital networks connected people across continents, human societies relied upon relationships to exchange knowledge, resolve conflict, share resources and navigate uncertainty. Technology has changed the speed with which we connect. It has not changed what makes those connections meaningful.

As I looked back across the two days, I found myself wondering whether we have spent too much time investing in digital infrastructure and not enough time investing in the social infrastructure that enables it to flourish. The fastest networks in the world cannot compensate for the absence of trust. The most sophisticated artificial intelligence cannot replace genuine partnership. Nor can policy, on its own, create the relationships upon which effective governance depends.

Perhaps the future will belong not simply to those who develop the most advanced technologies, but to those who are able to cultivate the strongest relationships around them.

If that observation holds true, then relationships are not simply part of the work.

They are the work.

Observation Ten: We are all becoming ancestors

As the symposium came to a close, I found myself returning to the opening remarks that had framed our time together. We had gathered during the week of Matariki, a time to remember those who came before us, to reflect on where we stand today, and to intentionally look towards the future. At the time, those reflections felt like a fitting way to welcome people into the conversation. By the end of the symposium, they had become something more. They had become a way of understanding it.

Again and again, regardless of discipline or perspective, contributors spoke not only about the decisions before us, but about the generations who will inherit them. **Xaviere Murray-Puhara**, in particular, reminded us that while technologies continue to evolve, the principles that guide us endure. Kawa provides continuity, while tikanga enables each generation to respond to new contexts without losing sight of who they are. Her reflections offered a quiet reminder that the future is not built by abandoning our foundations, but by carrying them forward with intention. Although these conversations appeared different, they all shared a common orientation. They were future-facing, not in the sense of predicting what comes next, but in recognising our responsibility for what comes next.

Much has been written about innovation, disruption and transformation. Far less attention is given to inheritance. Yet inheritance quietly sat beneath almost every discussion. Every dataset we create, every governance framework we establish, every policy we develop, every digital platform we design, and every relationship we strengthen becomes part of the world that future generations will receive. Artificial intelligence has amplified the scale and speed of those decisions, but it has not altered the responsibility that accompanies them.

Perhaps that is why stewardship emerged so consistently throughout the symposium. Stewardship asks us to think beyond immediate outcomes. It reminds us that we rarely build systems for ourselves alone. We build them for people we may never meet.

Looking back across those two days, I found myself reflecting on something Kirikowhai Mikaere shared. We are grandchildren. We are descendants. But one day, whether we realise it or not, we also become ancestors.

That simple observation quietly reframed the entire symposium for me. It reminded me that the choices we make today will eventually become someone else's starting point. The systems we design, the values we embed, the knowledge we preserve and the relationships we nurture do not end with us. They continue.

Perhaps this is where conversations about sovereignty ultimately lead. Not towards greater control, but towards greater responsibility, responsibility for one another, responsibility for our languages, responsibility for our cultures, responsibility for our technologies, and responsibility for the futures we are already creating.

As I left the symposium, I found myself thinking less about artificial intelligence and more about ancestry. Technology will continue to evolve. New tools will emerge. New challenges will follow. The pace of change is unlikely to slow. Yet beneath that change, the work remains remarkably familiar: to care well for what has been entrusted to us, to leave things stronger than we found them, and to create conditions in which people, knowledge, language and culture may continue to flourish.

Perhaps that has always been the work.

The symposium did not offer definitive answers to the questions surrounding sovereignty, identity or artificial intelligence, nor should it have. Instead, it reminded us that the future is not something waiting for us beyond the horizon. It is being shaped every day through the choices we make, the relationships we cultivate and the responsibilities we choose to carry.

The question, then, is not whether we will influence the future. We will.

The more enduring question is this:

What kind of ancestors will we choose to become?

Afterword

After the symposium concluded, I found myself thinking less about artificial intelligence than I was about people.

The symposium had been framed around sovereignty, culture, identity and language in an uncertain digital world. I expected to leave thinking about technology. Instead, I found myself reflecting on relationships.

Across two days, lawyers, researchers, technologists, educators, community leaders and Indigenous practitioners approached the kaupapa from very different places. Yet time and again they found themselves asking remarkably similar questions. How do we care well for knowledge? How do we strengthen identity rather than diminish it? How do we govern wisely? How do we prepare future generations for a world none of us can fully predict?

Technology was rarely the destination. It became the context through which much older human questions revealed themselves. That observation has stayed with me.

Perhaps we have become so fascinated by the pace of technological change that we sometimes overlook the slower work required of us. The work of building trust. The work of strengthening relationships. The work of listening across disciplines and cultures. The work of stewardship.

The week of Matariki provided a fitting backdrop for these conversations. Its annual invitation to remember those who came before us, reflect on where we stand today, and intentionally look towards the future quietly shaped not only the symposium itself, but this paper. As I look back across these observations, I am reminded that every generation inherits both opportunities and responsibilities. We receive knowledge from those who came before us. We add our own experiences. Then, whether consciously or not, we pass something forward.

Perhaps that is why the final question continues to sit with me. Not what kind of technology we will create, but what kind of ancestors we will become.

The symposium has now ended. The conversations, I hope, have not.

As this paper was nearing completion, **Professor Te Taka Keegan** shared one final reflection that felt too important not to include.

He observed that hope is, by its very nature, an optimistic position to take. It would be easy to become pessimistic in the face of rapidly advancing technologies, unequal resources and the immense scale of change before us. It would be easy to conclude that the challenge is simply too great and allow technology to happen to us rather than helping to shape it.

Yet, as he reflected, optimism is not naïve. It is essential. If we are to create technologies that genuinely reflect our peoples, languages and cultures, and enable future generations to continue being themselves, then hope becomes more than a feeling. It becomes a deliberate choice to participate.

His final words stayed with me: 'Nothing ever was built by a pessimist.' Perhaps that is the quiet challenge this symposium leaves with all of us.

These observations were never intended to provide definitive answers. As Aleisha observed during our closing discussion, they offer an invitation to *continue the connection*.

They invite us to consider what it might mean if stewardship became a guiding principle for artificial intelligence and digital governance, rather than something considered only after technology has been developed. They encourage us to imagine digital systems that recognise relationships, whakapapa and context, rather than simply information. They ask what governments, researchers, industry and Indigenous communities might continue

learning from one another as new technologies emerge, and how we might cultivate technologies that strengthen identity, language and culture rather than flattening or homogenising them. They also invite us to consider what deeper collaboration between Ireland, Aotearoa and Indigenous communities around the world might make possible as we navigate these shared opportunities and challenges together.

None of these questions belong to one organisation, one country or one discipline. Nor can they be answered through technology alone. They invite ongoing dialogue. They invite partnership. They invite stewardship.

Perhaps that is the quiet legacy of this symposium.

Not certainty about the future.

But confidence that we are willing to navigate it together.

Acknowledgements

This symposium was made possible through the vision and generosity of the **Embassy of Ireland** in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Special thanks to **Her Excellency Jane Connolly**, Ambassador of Ireland, for championing this kaupapa.

Heartfelt thanks to **Paul O'Hara** for his leadership, coordination and tireless work bringing this symposium together.

Special acknowledgement to **Xaviere Murray-Puhara**, whose relationships, generosity and quiet leadership helped bring this symposium into being. Through her ability to connect people across communities, disciplines and cultures, she created many of the relationships from which these conversations emerged.

Deep appreciation to every panelist for the generosity with which they shared their knowledge, lived experience and whakaaro.

With appreciation to all panellists:

- **Aleisha Amohia** – Technical Lead, Catalyst IT
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/aleishaamohia/>
- **Amber Taylor** – Founder, Native Sentient, Indigenous AI & Innovation Strategist
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ambertaylornz/>
- **Amy Dove** – Forensic Partner, Deloitte New Zealand; Executive Council Member, AI Forum New Zealand
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/amypdove/>
- **Chris Cormack** – He Māwhitiwhiti Matihiko ki te Kākahu o Hine-Raraunga, Te Kāhui Raraunga
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/chrisormack/>
- **Colin Kennedy** – Chief Growth Officer, Creative HQ, Education and Digital Learning Leader
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/colin-kennedy-76403915/>
- **Ernestynne Walsh** – Trustee, Te Taumata; Indigenous Trade Leader
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/ernestynne-walsh-1a16b795/>
- **Dr Kevin Shedlock** – Digital Heritage Researcher, Masters and PhD Supervisor, Technologist, Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka, School of Engineering and Computer Science
<https://people.wgtn.ac.nz/Kevin.Shedlock>
- **Kirikowhai Mikaere** – Lead Technician, Data ILG, Te Kāhui Raraunga
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/kirikowhai-mikaere-5432b8295/>
- **Lynell Tuffery Huria** – Tumuaki | Partner, Kāhui Legal – Lawyer specialising in Māori Data Governance, Digital Trade and Intellectual Property
<https://www.kahuilegal.co.nz/our-people/lynell-tuffery-huria/>
- **Michael Puhara** – CTO and Co-Founder Kahu.Code
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/michael-puhara/>
- **Dr Te Taka Keegan** – Professor of Computer Science, University of Waikato; Māwhitiwhiti Matihiko/Computer Scientist, Te Kāhui Raraunga
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/te-taka-keegan-505149b/>
<https://profiles.waikato.ac.nz/tetaka.keegan>
- **Vailahi Vailahi** – PhD Student, Digital Heritage Researcher and Immersive Cultural Preservation Practitioner, Victoria University of Wellington – Te Herenga Waka, School of Engineering and Computer Science
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/vailahi-vailahi-5362b12b7/>
- **Xaviere Murray-Puhara** – Co-Founder, Kahu.Code; Indigenous Technologist and AI Advocate
<https://www.linkedin.com/in/xaviere-murray-puhara/>

Finally, thank you to everyone who attended. Your questions, reflections and willingness to engage transformed this symposium from a series of presentations into a genuine conversation. These observations belong not only to those who spoke, but also to those who listened, questioned and continued the kōrero.

Nō reira, kia mau ki ngā taonga tuku iho. Kia ngākau māhaki ki te ako. Kia māia ki te waihanga i ngā huarahi hou.

Kia maumahara tātou he uri tātou nō ngā tūpuna, ā, he tūpuna hoki tātou mō ngā whakatipuranga kei te heke mai. Nā reira, me waiho e tātou tētahi ao e toitū ai te tangata, te mātauranga, te reo, me ngā hononga mō rātou.

Mā te mahi ngātahi, mā te whakawhanaungatanga, mā te manaaki hoki, ka taea e tātou te whakatere i ēnei wā hurihuri me te whakapūmau i tētahi anamata e puāwai ai te katoa.

E kore e mutu te kōrero ki konei. Koinei kē te tīmatanga.

Ngā manaakitanga ki runga i a tātou katoa. Mauri ora.

Therefore, hold fast to the treasures handed down to us. Remain humble in learning. Be courageous in creating new pathways.

Let us remember that we are descendants of our ancestors, and we are also the ancestors of those yet to come. Let us leave behind a world where people, knowledge, language and relationships continue to flourish.

Through working together, through whakawhanaungatanga and through manaakitanga, we can navigate these changing times and help shape a future in which all may flourish.

The conversation does not end here. In many ways, it is only just the beginning.
