

THE GOONZETTE

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The Federal Trust Responsibility: A Promise Made, A Promise Broken, A Promise We Must Enforce

As I sit in my office reviewing yet another federal policy proposal that treats tribal sovereignty as a suggestion rather than a legal reality, I'm reminded of something my grandmother used to say: "When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time." The federal government has been showing us who they are for over 200 years, and it's time we stopped pretending otherwise.

The federal trust responsibility—that foundational legal doctrine arising from treaties, statutes, and the federal-tribal relationship—has become the government's favorite shell game. They invoke it when convenient, ignore it when costly, and redefine it when challenged. This isn't accident; it's strategy.

The Shell Game in Action

Take the recent infrastructure bills. Billions allocated for broadband, water systems, and transportation—all desperately needed in Indian Country. But buried in the implementation language are requirements that effectively force tribes to compete against states and municipalities for funding that should flow directly to us through the trust relationship. It's like making the beneficiary of a trust fund apply for their own money in competition with strangers.

This is federal Indian policy in 2024: acknowledge tribal sovereignty in press releases while undermining it in practice. Create programs that look inclusive while maintaining structures that ensure tribal needs remain afterthoughts. It's sophisticated colonialism wrapped in bureaucratic paper.

Beyond the Consultation Theater

The Biden administration deserves credit for elevating tribal consultation from complete joke to merely inadequate performance art. But consultation without co-creation of policy is just expensive listening

sessions. Real respect for sovereignty means tribes have decision-making power, not just commenting privileges.

When the Department of Interior announces new policies affecting tribal lands after a 30-day comment period, that's not consultation—that's notification with extra steps. True government-to-government relationship requires federal agencies to seek tribal consent, not just input, on policies affecting our lands, resources, and people.

The Ho-Chunk Nation didn't survive forced removal, boarding schools, and allotment by waiting for federal permission to exist. We're still here because we never stopped asserting our inherent sovereignty, even when the federal government pretended not to hear us.

Strategic Realism for the Path Forward

Here's what tribal leaders need to understand about federal policy: it will never prioritize us unless we make it more expensive not to. That requires strategic thinking beyond the quarterly grant cycle.

First, we must weaponize the trust responsibility. Every federal policy that impacts tribes should be challenged through the lens of trust doctrine. Make the government defend their decisions in court, not just in committee hearings. The Cobell settlement proved that persistent legal pressure can force the federal government to acknowledge its obligations—eventually.

Second, we need to build coalitions that extend beyond Indian Country. Climate change, infrastructure needs, and economic justice affect everyone. When we frame tribal sovereignty as essential to addressing these broader challenges, we expand our base of support beyond the usual suspects.

Third, we must invest in our own policy infrastructure. Too often, we're responding to federal initiatives rather than driving them. The National Congress of American Indians and regional tribal organizations do critical work, but we need more tribal voices in federal agencies, congressional staff positions, and think tanks where policy gets written before it hits the hearing room.

The Real Trust Responsibility

The federal trust responsibility isn't charity—it's payment for a continent. Our ancestors negotiated treaties that exchanged vast territories for promises of protection, education, healthcare, and support for tribal self-governance. The United States became a global superpower by leveraging resources taken from our lands. The least they can do is honor their contractual obligations.

But we can't wait for federal enlightenment. Every day we delay asserting our rights is another day the federal government assumes we've accepted their latest redefinition of the relationship. That's not respect; that's abandonment.

The trust responsibility should mean the federal government actively supports tribal sovereignty, prosperity, and self-determination. Instead, it's become a limitation on tribal authority disguised as federal obligation. We must reject this framework and demand what our treaties promised: genuine partnership between sovereign nations.

Federal Indian policy will only change when the cost of ignoring tribal sovereignty exceeds the cost of respecting it. Our job is to make sure that calculation shifts in our favor—through courts, congress, and communities that understand our survival benefits everyone.

The promises were made. Now let's make sure they're kept.

Hoocak Hacı Nijic

When the Pigskin Speaks: NFL Week Hits Different, Bro

Kia ora, whānau! Your boy Tommy back with another week of gridiron chaos that had me glued to the couch like a whakatōtara on a rock. Man, this NFL season is serving up more plot twists than a telenovela, and I'm absolutely here for it.

****The Good, The Mid, and The Straight Bussin'****

Let's keep it 100 – this week separated the contenders from the pretenders faster than you can say "He Whakatōhea." Some teams came through with that big dick energy we love to see, while others had me questioning if they even belong in the league, kia ora.

The defensive performances this week? *Chef's kiss* Some of these coordinators are playing 4D chess while others are still figuring out checkers. Watching elite pass rushers work is like witnessing a master carver with their tokotoko – every movement has purpose, every strike precise. That pocket presence (or lack thereof) from some QBs had me crying laughing though. Brother, if you can't feel a 300-pound defensive end breathing down your neck, maybe it's time to hang up the cleats.

****Coaching Calls That Hit Different****

Yo, can we talk about these play calls for a hot minute? Some coaches out here making decisions that have me wondering if they've been hitting the kawakawa tea a little too hard. Fourth and short at midfield with two minutes left? That's when you channel that Māori warrior spirit – "Kaua e rangiruatia" (don't be of two minds). Commit to the play, trust your line, and push forward like your tūpuna before you.

But then you got other coaches playing it safe when they should be going for the throat. Risk management is important, sure, but sometimes you gotta embrace that "ka mate, ka ora" energy – it is death, it is life. Football is about those clutch moments where legends are born.

****Player Performance Check-In****

The rookie class this year is absolutely not mid, I gotta say. These young bloods are coming in with that fresh energy, studying film like their lives depend on it. Reminds me of my early days when every rep mattered, every play was a chance to prove you belonged. That hunger hits different when you're fighting for your spot.

Some vets though? Bro, they're looking cooked. Age comes for everyone – even Tom Brady couldn't outrun Father Time forever. There's wisdom in knowing when to step aside and let the next generation carry the whakapapa forward. "Ahakoa he iti, he pounamu" – although it is small, it is greenstone. Sometimes the young talent packs more value than the aging superstar.

****The Numbers Don't Lie****

Fantasy football algorithms are going absolutely feral right now. The waiver wire is more active than a marae during Matariki celebrations. Props to anyone who started some of these random breakout players – you either did your homework or you're blessed by Tangaroa himself.

The injury reports are looking rough though, not gonna lie. Soft tissue injuries everywhere because these dudes are pushing their bodies to the absolute limit. Recovery and conditioning isn't just about physical strength – it's about mental resilience too. That whakatōhea (fighting spirit) has to be balanced with smart training and proper rest.

****Looking Forward****

Next week's matchups are setting up to be absolute cinema. Division rivals squaring off with playoff implications on the line? That's that premium content we live for. These games where every snap matters, where one play can shift the entire narrative of a season.

The beauty of the NFL is that "Kia kaha" mentality – be strong, stay strong. Every team gets their shot each week. Doesn't matter what happened last Sunday; it's about showing up when the lights are on and the cameras are rolling.

****Final Thoughts****

This league continues to evolve, and honestly? I'm loving the direction. More offensive creativity, defensive innovation, and player safety improvements. It's not the same game I played, but it's still that beautiful violent chess match that captured my heart years ago.

Until next week, whānau – keep grinding, stay blessed, and remember: in football as in life, "He aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata" – what is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people.

Catch y'all on the flip side! 🏈

Ka kite,

Tommy