

The Words We're Taking Back

We spent six essays not saying a word. Here is why, and why we can say it now.

Précis. There is one accurate word for what this series describes: sovereignty. We have mostly avoided it, because it has been made hard to hear — loaded, politicised, off-putting to the very people who would want what it names. So we made a wager: lead with the plain words (control, custody, ownership, your own) and earn the heavy one by showing it, never by asserting it. Six essays in, each plain word turned out to be a piece of the bigger one, anchored to a mechanism a reader can point at. This closing essay collects them, names the older words that carried the meaning long before the technology industry reached it, and then says the word plainly, because by now it has been earned.

A word can be ruined by the people who shout it. “Sovereignty” is a plain idea: the authority to govern what is yours. But it has spent a decade attached to border politics, to grievance, to movements that have nothing to do with a parish keeping its own records. A reasonable person hears it and flinches, and the flinch arrives before the meaning. That flinch keeps people away from a thing they would value under a quieter name.

So we decided at the start not to lead with the word. We would lead with what it means, in plain language, tied each time to something concrete enough that no one has to take it on faith. The plain words would do the work; the heavy word, if we used it at all, would arrive last, earned by six essays of demonstration. This is the settling of that wager.

Why we held the word back

The marketing instinct is to lead with your biggest claim. We did the opposite on purpose, and not from timidity. A word like “sovereignty” used up front is a promise the reader cannot yet check; it asks for assent before it has shown anything. That is the move this series objects to when Big Tech makes it (“trust us”), and we were not going to reproduce it in grander vocabulary.

There was also an audience we did not want to lose. The people most likely to need what we build (a volunteer board, a regional office, an off-grid cooperative, a security-minded team inside a larger organisation) are not, mostly, ideologues. They have a practical problem: their records and their tools belong to someone else. Lead with a politicised word and you sort the room by politics. Lead with “your records stay yours” and the room sorts by who has the problem, which is the sort you want.

So the rule was simple: plain word first, heavy word only once the mechanism is on the table. Demonstration before vocabulary.

What each plain word was carrying

Look back along the series and the plain words line up into the thing we were not yet naming.

- **Custody (essay one):** you hold it. The model runs on infrastructure the community controls, and the data does not leave. Authority begins with possession.
- **Bounded (essay two):** the AI is barred from deciding what only people may decide. Holding the instrument is not enough; it must answer to you, not the other way round.

- **A defensible record (essay three):** board deliberations signed, tamper-evident, the reasoning kept human, any single resolution’s deliberation liftable on demand. Authority that can show its own working.
- **Situated, not averaged (essay four):** a model tuned to your community rather than the global mean. Sovereignty was always particular: this place, these people, this record.
- **Federation on your terms (essay five):** Villages connecting by bilateral, revocable, consented agreement, neither side absorbed. Sovereigns have relations and exits; a dependent has neither.
- **Oversight without surveillance (essay six):** a control tower that reports health and never reads members’ content. Authority that polices itself.

Custody, bounded, defensible, situated, federated, self-restrained: one word, taken apart so it could be shown a piece at a time.

The older words

We are not the first to need this vocabulary, and the people who had it first had better words than ours.

The framework this platform is built on is grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and it borrows, with care and acknowledgement, from a body of thought that named these ideas centuries before there was a cloud to be sovereign from:

- *Rangatiratanga*: the authority of a people to determine their own affairs.
- *Kaitiakitanga*: guardianship, the duty of care that travels with a treasured thing and binds whoever holds it.
- *Mana*: authority and dignity together, the standing no vendor’s settings page can grant.
- *Whanaungatanga*: the web of relationship through which authority among people is exercised, because it is never held alone.

These are load-bearing, not ornament. When the third essay says the kaitiaki travels with the record, bound into it by a signed field that survives even when the record is shared, that is the most exact description of what the architecture does, and the language for it already existed. The technology industry is, in 2026, slowly and expensively rediscovering that data should have a guardian, that authority over a record should stay with the people whose record it is, that a thing of value carries obligations to those it came from. Communities here have held that as a first principle for a very long time. We are following, not leading, and the honest thing is to say so.

Taking it back

So here, at the end, is the word, plainly: what the Village offers is sovereignty. Digital sovereignty for a community — the authority to govern its own record, its own rules, and its own AI, on ground it controls.

We can say it now because the difference between asserting a word and earning it is the difference between this series and a slogan. We did not ask you to accept “sovereign” as a banner. We showed you a record that cannot be quietly rewritten, a model that runs on sovereign ground rather than a hyperscaler’s cloud, a federation you can leave without penalty, an AI forbidden to author your board’s reasons. Each is a piece of sovereignty you can inspect. Assembled, they earn the word. An earned word is much harder to ruin, because it is no longer a feeling attached to a fight; it is a description of something that works.

This is the only honest kind of reclaiming. Not shouting the word louder than the people who loaded it, but attaching it, every time, to something real, so that “sovereignty” in this context brings to mind a signed record, a guarded model, a community that holds its own, rather than a border or a grievance. The flinch fades when the word stops being a claim and becomes a fact you can check.

We have been open about the strategy throughout, because a strategy you have to hide is usually one you should not run. We led with the plain words to reach the people who needed the plain answer, kept the heavy word in reserve until it was backed, and pick it up now the way you pick up a tool you have earned the right to use.

The bottom line

A word is not reclaimed by repetition. It is reclaimed by being made true so often that the old associations lose their grip. We would rather a community never said “sovereignty” and simply held its own record, model, and rules than said the word a hundred times and held nothing. For the growing, principled number who do want the word, we want it to mean something they can stand on: not a position in a culture war, but the plainest account of who holds what.

You do not have to choose between Big Tech AI and no AI. You can hold your own, and that, in the end, is the only word for it.

Every claim in this series is something you can open and check for yourself: try the demo Villages at mysovereignty.digital/demos.html, or take the free governance course at mysovereignty.digital/course.html.

The Village is a running system, not a brochure — every claim in this series points at something shipped; see it at mysovereignty.digital. The framework’s grounding in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and in rangatiratanga, kaitiakitanga, and mana is described in its published values. — John G. Stroh, My Digital Sovereignty Ltd., June 2026.