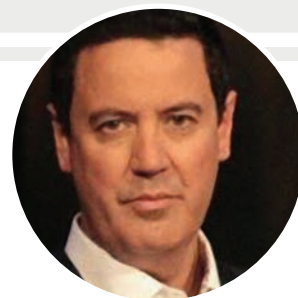


Māori parliamentary seats – is their time up?



So – are we approaching time up on the Māori seats? I ask this question in light of the efforts of our whanaunga Rino Tirikatene to enshrine in law something precious to us for over 150 years – the Māori seats. His proposal, through the Electoral (Entrenchment of Māori Seats) Amendment Bill, is to protect the Māori seats by requiring a supermajority of politicians (75%) to agree to any proposed dis-establishment of them. I would suggest the passing of such a law would be highly unlikely.

But the significance of this proposal cannot be overlooked. And perhaps it's timely that we Māori think about the future of the seats as we consider the proposed bill.

These seats stood as a beacon of hope for Māori during the darkest days of our existence post the settlement of Aotearoa by Pākehā. The seats came to represent the last avenue left for Māori to have their voice heard in parliament.

For the first 27 years post-1840, Māori virtually had no vote at all. There were only around 100 Māori who voted in the 1853 election. From the late 1850s the alienation of Māori land by fair means or foul began, and then accelerated not a decade later. The lack of Māori representation in parliament, and the inability for Māori to successfully pursue means to halt the loss of land, left our tūpuna little choice but to reluctantly take up arms to try to force the authorities at the time to listen to our people. It didn't work.

And yet it wasn't one-way traffic against Māori in the early part of New Zealand's history. It was New Zealand's third premier, Sir Edward Stafford, who fought for and achieved the creation of the Māori seats. It has to be said though that to be truly representative, the number of seats at the time would have been 14 rather than four; given the size of the Māori population and the proportionality of seats that were awarded to Pākehā land owners.

The seats remained the one mechanism by which Māori could try to influence governments that were deaf to Māori pleas for equity. Our tūpuna came to view the seats not just as a means of representation, but as a symbol of hope that Māori would eventually take our place as equal members of parliament.

When the seats were first established,

most people thought they would be required for no more than five years, as Māori would have all land title individualised and so be able to vote in general seats. History shows that prediction was quite wrong.

The first calls for abolition came in 1902. And a number of Māori supported abolition, as they felt the seats ghettoised their voice, and stopped Pākehā having to take Māori issues seriously. Tā James Carroll (known to Māori as Timi Kara) publicly supported abolition in 1905. He had previously won the general seat of Waiaapu in 1893, and felt this proved that Māori could compete in an open market (so to speak).

Look, I could give a detailed history of the seats, but let's cut to the chase – the Electoral (Entrenchment of Māori Seats) Amendment Bill to entrench the seats is in front of the country, and it is a noble and principled effort on the part of Rino Tirikatene.

But what is the problem that the bill addresses? That hasn't been clearly articulated. Is it that without the Māori seats, Māori political tenure might be put at risk? Or that we don't have enough Māori in the house? The bill itself merely states the purpose is to correct constitutional imbalance.

So let's head back to the original intent of the seats. They were an imperfect solution to Māori political representation, designed as a short-term response until Māori could sit equally with Pākehā as land owning voters.

And the Māori seats performed that function. But they have never allowed for greater Māori participation in politics – MMP achieved that. The Māori electorates are viewed amongst many politicians (yes, even some in Labour) as an easily ignored "ghetto", because they tend to vote Labour. If you're National you might be saying, "Why should we bother – they'll never vote for us." And if you are Labour, "Those votes are in the bag so no need to bother." It could be argued that the very existence of the seats is a cynical nod to Māori representation.

Besides, times have changed. Look around parliament today. Seven of the nine party leaders and deputies are Māori. There are 29 Māori in parliament. They represent nearly a quarter of all MPs, which is well in excess of the Māori population (around 15 per cent). Even if we take out the seven Māori electorate seats, the remaining Māori

MPs still comprise more than 18 per cent of all MPs.

These numbers did not require entrenched Māori seats. But that's not to say having the Māori seats didn't contribute to those numbers – they most certainly did. Are those Māori seats the anchor for Māori representation, or the conduit that has done its job? I tend to think the latter.

In 1893, Tā James Carroll was elected into the general electorate seat of Waiaapu (Gisborne area) and many Māori politicians have subsequently proved that Māori can win general electorate seats; including Ben Couch, Winston Peters, Paula Bennett, te mea te mea.

We also need to address the other elephant in the room – Māori voters. During the last Māori Electoral Option in 2018, more than 4000 Māori left the Māori seats for the general roll. The percentage split is now 52.4% of Māori on the Māori roll, and 47.2% on the general roll and increasing. Are Māori already questioning the purpose of the Māori seats?

Look – the seats have been an important and necessary part of Māori political involvement – but that has changed. Even without the Māori seats, we will never allow ourselves to be under-represented in parliament. And no major political party will ever dare exclude Māori representation. Māori finally have both the political and economic weight to be heard – and sometimes we do need to challenge and be heard. The foreshore and seabed fiasco is just one example of Māori challenging back and (largely) winning when the country chose to ignore our voice.

We have taken our place at the political table in Wellington and are active across all the major parties. There are already some political commentators noting that Māori are in fact over-represented in parliament. Frankly, there can never be too many Māori in politics – but do we need the Māori seats anymore? I'm not so sure.



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