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Luamanuvao Laban

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Tribute to Phil Amos

1972

Talofa lava to the family: Jill, Tony, Brett, Odilla, Marama and Fransiska, and we also remember Debbie at this time - Kia orana daughter and sister.

To the members of the extended family, and to friends, warm Pacific greetings to you all.

The Prime Minister, the Right Honourable Helen Clark, has asked me to express her sincere condolences to the Amos family and her regrets that a long arranged trade mission to Australia has prevented her from being present today. She asked me to pay tribute to Phil Amos on behalf of the Government, and on her behalf as Leader of the New Zealand Labour Party.

Helen Clark told me that when she joined the New Zealand Labour Party in 1971, Phil Amos was an inspirational figure for her. She noted that he was much admired for his public advocacy for Education and for his contribution as a member of Norman Kirk's and later Bill Rowling's Labour Governments.

Helen recalled that Phil Amos' time as Minister of Education from 1972 to 1975 was an enlightened era after 12 bleak years of a National Government. And she remembered his innovations in Education that are now standard practices.

As Minister of Education Phil Amos was a pioneer. He pushed through the integration of Catholic schools, the achievement his son Tony tells us he was most proud of.

Phil Amos also promoted the debate on sex education in schools and was instrumental in establishing open-plan classrooms.

Phil Amos will also be remembered as New Zealand's first Minister of Island Affairs from 1972 to 1974.

Phil Amos entered Parliament as the Member for the new Manurewa seat in 1963 and held it until 1975.

As a life-long educator and teacher his Maiden speech, on the 23rd of June 1964, was largely devoted to Education. But Phil Amos also talked in his first speech about the migration of European, Maori and Pacific families to the city from rural communities and island homes. He noted that there were 300 Pacific Island families in Manurewa. And he made a special plea for 'understanding of Pacific Islanders'.

A decade later, when Phil was Minister of Pacific Island Affairs in Norman Kirk's Labour Government, he followed up his commitment to Pacific people and was instrumental in setting up the first Pacific Island Advisory Council and then Samoan, Cook Island, Tongan, Niuean, and Fijian Advisory Councils.

My father was the first chair of the Pacific Island Advisory Council and a foundation member of the Wellington Samoan Advisory Council. He worked very closely with Phil Amos to put in place policies that would ease the turmoil of immigration for Pacific Island families coming to New Zealand.

Migration is a time of loss, confusion and adjustment. Phil and Jill's daughter Debbie was a product of that time of turmoil.

Phil has told me that his Cook Island daughter, Debbie, was the source of his love of the Pacific and his motivation to ensure that the rights of Pacific people were protected in New Zealand.

As a child, I remember Phil Amos at Pacific Island community meetings. During these times, Debbie, myself and the other daughters and sons of the Pacific served our parents as they discussed the important issues of the day. As children we observed and took in the values and commitments of our parents and elders. We learnt the values of service and social justice that would guide our life's work.

For Phil Amos the personal and the political were always connected. He championed the causes of his day and worked to put his ideas into action.

His advocacy for Education, Pacific people and other migrant families had a powerful influence on New Zealand's social policy. And he was an early supporter for the anti-apartheid and nuclear-free movements.

Phil Amos was a man of his time. He was singular and enigmatic. He was a part of a Government that changed the shape and nature of New Zealand's social fabric.

But Phil had another life after politics, mostly out of the public eye in Tanzania, then back in Aotearoa in the Pacific the place he called home.

E rere e taku tavake
Kua anga taau moe e rere
E apai atu koe ki Havaiki
Te Korero o teia Kainga

Fly my tropical bird
Your sleeping is done so fly
Take with you to Havaiki
The stories of our home

Aroa Maata Phil, Meitaki mata.

Luamanuvao Laban Pacific Island Affairs

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