Parliament's people

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Māori in the House

Important leaders of Māori society have represented their people in the House: Māui Pōmare, James Carroll, Matiu Rata and, most famously, Apirana Ngata. These and other men – and they were all men until 1949, when Iriaka Rātana was elected – could be lonely Māori voices in a Pākehā-dominated House. It was not until the 1980s and the later introduction of mixed member proportional representation (MMP) in 1996 that more Māori entered the House and represented electorates other than traditional Māori seats.

The Māori seats

Through the 1850s and 1860s Māori pressed for political representation as a right of British subjects. Some politicians supported general Māori representation, but in the end Parliament decided to have separate Māori seats in which only Māori could vote. It was thought that the greater number of Māori in some areas would swamp the Pākehā vote. Four Māori seats were established, three in the North Island and one in the South Island, in time for the first elections for Māori members in 1868. The Māori seats were only meant to be a five-year trial, but in 1876 they became permanent. There were still only four seats a century later, and it was not until MMP that there were more – five in 1996 and seven in 2002.

The first Māori Members of Parliament

Frederick Nene Russell, Mete Kingi Te Rangi Paetahi, Tāreha Te Moananui and John Patterson took their places as the first Māori Members of Parliament (MPs) in the House in 1868. Te Moananui was the first to speak, and he urged the government to enact wise laws to promote good, and for Māori and Pākehā to work together. The speech was in te reo, and his words were translated by an interpreter organised at the last minute. Owing to the difficulties of language and being a Māori minority in a white Parliament, these and other early Māori MPs struggled to make a difference.

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Many Māori gave up on the 'Pākehā Parliament' in the 1890s, for it was not seen to be serving Māori interests. The confiscation of Māori land following the wars of the 1860s and the continued taking of Māori land led the Kotahitanga movement to hold a number of Māori Parliaments (Paremata Māori) as alternative forums. Prominent politicians, including James Carroll, visited the Māori Parliament, but Premier Richard Seddon remarked that it was really only a runanga – there was 'only one parliament in New Zealand, and it would never give up control of the Maoris or their lands'. A proposed boycott of the Land Court failed, and the Kotahitanga movement faded away.

Early Māori MPs encountered problems in the House. There was the language barrier for a start, although interpreters were provided in the House. Māori MPs faced a hard road in taking government policy out to their people, for bills and other parliamentary papers affecting Maori were seldom translated into te reo. Between 1889 and 1910, an annual series of relevant legislation was printed in Māori, and between 1881 and 1906 there was a Māori Hansard, *Nga Korero Paramete*, which contained the speeches of Māori MPs.

The Young Maori Party

In the early 1900s a new group of dynamic Māori MPs emerged who would have a profound effect on Māori society and politics for years to come. The Young Maori Party was a loose association of like-minded individuals who were committed to working within the system to improve Māori health, develop Māori land with state assistance and foster Māori arts and crafts. Perhaps the most prominent of the men was Apirana Ngata, who was elected for Eastern Maori in 1905 and promoted to Cabinet in 1909 as Minister for the Public Trust Office. Ngata continued to promote Māori land development, and on becoming Native Minister in 1928 (as the Minister of Māori Affairs was called until the 1940s), he initiated many land schemes. He was knighted in 1927 but had to resign from Cabinet in 1934 because of irregularities in the administration of the schemes. He retained his seat until 1943, by which time he was 'Father of the House', the title given to the longest-serving politician.

A Māori prime minister

James Carroll, who had once worked as an interpreter in the House, was a key Māori politician a century ago. He was the first Māori to win a general rather than a Māori seat; no other Māori MP would do this until 1975. Carroll's central place in the Liberal party in the 20th century was recognised when he became acting prime minister in 1909 and 1911. He was the first Māori to hold that position. In 1892 he was appointed as a

member of the Executive Council representing Māori, and from 1899 to 1912 he was Minister of Native Affairs. Carroll saw the need for compromise in dealings between Māori and Pākehā although he could never hold at bay the continual demands of government and Pākehā settlers for Māori land.

New alliances

A new group of Māori MPs appeared in the 1930s when the first MP with a connection to the Rātana religious movement was elected to Parliament. The Rātana Church forged an alliance with the Labour government, elected in 1935, and for many years after this Labour's Māori MPs were Rātana members. It had been the goal of Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, the founder of the faith, to have his handpicked members – the Four Quarters – in all the Māori seats. This was achieved by 1943.

These MPs pressed for greater recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi, but their sway in government was limited. It was the Minister of Māori Affairs who wielded the real power in Māori matters in Parliament. Nearly 50 years were to elapse between the appointment of Ngata as Minister of Native Affairs in 1928 and the next Māori promoted to this portfolio. Matiu Rata, appointed as the Minister of Māori Affairs in 1972, steered through some significant measures, including the creation of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975. His tenure was brief, as Labour lost the election in 1975. He resigned from the Labour Party in 1980 to found the Mana Motuhake Party, which focused on issues of importance to Māori.

In turn, Mana Motuhake, along with other small parties, entered the Alliance Party in 1991. In 1993 Sandra Lee became its first MP. She was also the first Māori woman to win a seat in a general electorate. Mana Motuhake was the first, and longest-lived, of a small cluster of Māori parties that emerged in the 1980s seeking to represent Māori issues in the House.

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