

Paul Reeves

Biography

1985

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The Right Reverend and The Honourable Sir Paul Alfred Reeves ONZ, GCMG, GCVO, QSO, KStJ.

Paul Reeves was born in 1932 in working-class Newtown, where his father D'Arcy worked for the tramways. Mortgage payments on his parents' small house left little money to spare, but that did not prevent their son from excelling at Wellington College and at Victoria College (now University), where he earned a MA before going to St John's Theological College in Auckland to train for the Anglican priesthood.

Nineteen fifty-nine was a momentous year for Paul Reeves. He married Beverley Watkins, whom he had met at Victoria, resigned his Tokoroa curacy and travelled to Britain on an Oxford scholarship. After working in British parishes, in 1964 the family returned to New Zealand where Paul became vicar of Ōkato. There, in this small Taranaki community, he rediscovered his Māori heritage – his mother, Hilda, whose Māori name was Pihemana, was Te Āti Awa from Taranaki – his whānau, and New Zealand history. In 1971 he capped his rapid rise in the church by becoming Bishop of Waiapu, a diocese he rejuvenated while boosting Māori participation in church governance. In 1979 he became Bishop of Auckland, then Primate and Archbishop of New Zealand the following year.

Five years later, Reeves returned to Newtown as governor-general. It had been a difficult decision for the couple, since it meant relinquishing careers they loved, but on 20 November 1985 Sir Paul became New Zealand's first Māori governor-general. They brought a new atmosphere to Government House. 'I've tried to hitch the house onto the life of the community', Sir Paul said in 1990, 'so that it flows in and out', remembering a successful public open day and nights when 100 Māori camped in the ballroom.

The 1980s were turbulent. In his church days, Sir Paul had supported progressive causes but now he had to deal with Labour's market-driven reforms and ministers' views on Waitangi Day. He modelled his governorship on the role of a bishop: 'a bishop travels, a bishop stands alongside people and searches for a common ground'. He paid special attention to hard-hit rural and small town New Zealand.

Although most of his predecessors had reduced their public role after leaving Government House, Sir Paul launched himself into another two decades of service at the very highest levels, starting with three years as Anglican Observer at the United Nations. Later, on behalf of the United Nations or the Commonwealth, he observed elections in Ghana and South Africa, helped write constitutions for Guyana and Fiji, and chaired the Nelson Mandela Trust. He earned wide respect throughout the Pacific.

At home, Sir Paul continued his work for Māori, race relations and Treaty settlements. Amongst other things, he became Ahorangi of Te Rau Kahikatea, St John's Māori theological college, chaired the Queen Elizabeth II National Trust and the Bioethics Council and helped to select judges for the new Supreme Court. He continued his lifelong commitment to education through visiting professorships and becoming chancellor of the Auckland University of Technology. In 2007 New Zealand awarded him its highest honour, membership of the Order of New Zealand.

Sir Paul died in Auckland on 14 August 2011 after a short battle with cancer. He was survived by his wife, Beverley, Lady Reeves, and three daughters.

By Gavin McLean

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