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No surrender vows to Heuheu as she loses role

By RUTH BERRY political reporter

National MP Georgina te Heuheu was stripped of her shadow Maori Affairs and Treaty Negotiations portfolios yesterday, after refusing to bow to pressure to resign them.

It followed her string of criticisms of the party's race relations policy, unveiled by leader Don Brash a week ago.

National deputy leader Gerry Brownlee will replace her as the party's Maori Affairs and associate Constitutional and Treaty Negotiations spokesman.

Mrs te Heuheu, the party's sole Maori MP, said yesterday that there was a "deep chasm" between her and her colleagues over the role and place of the Treaty of Waitangi today.

Under those circumstances this outcome is probably the right one. I will continue to argue strongly for those things I believe in.

"I believe in equality before the law, but I don't believe there is equality before the law."

Mrs te Heuheu said she refused to voluntarily hand over the portfolios because she had "fundamental beliefs ...

entirely consistent with being a member of this party".

She failed to see why she should step down for holding those beliefs - referring to her view that the party had deserted its core principles.

It is understood Mrs te Heuheu had thought some type of compromise was possible.

But after a caucus discussion on the issue yesterday, she realised this would be difficult and that Dr Brash had already decided he wanted her replaced.

Mrs te Heuheu will remain broadcasting spokeswoman and will pick up a new portfolio in coming weeks.

She said the decision could "possibly" spell the end of any long-term future with National but it was too early to say whether she would stand again.

Dr Brash said he was disappointed that Mrs te Heuheu disagreed with aspects of his policy, but he confirmed that he had asked her to give up the roles.

Mrs te Heuheu maintained much respect in caucus, he said, and he expected her to be well placed on the list if she stood at the next election.

He "fundamentally disagreed" with suggestions that her stance signalled how repugnant the policy was to Maori.

Polls and anecdotal reports suggested many Maori felt comfortable with his Orewa speech and National caucus members yesterday threw their support behind it.

Mrs te Heuheu said it was disappointing to have a Pakeha as Maori Affairs spokesman, but added all MPs had a responsibility to improve the position of Maori. Dr Brash said some of the best ministers of Maori Affairs in National's history had been non-Maori.

Mr Brownlee, a former Maori-language teacher, who now has only a "small understanding" of te reo, said he hoped to work with Mrs te Heuheu to understand better the chasm she spoke of.

The Ilam MP said it was important to remember National was committed to resolving historic grievances.

"Maori are overrepresented in sad statistics through the country and we do have to do something about that. What Don Brash has said is look to need and not race."

Green Party Maori Affairs spokeswoman Metiria Turei said Mrs te Heuheu's stand had left National with no credibility on Maori issues.

National should come clean and admit it was engaged in nothing but a "cynical vote-catching ploy".

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