

Tariana Turia to resign byelection

NZPA, 2004a

30 Apr, 2004 4:48pm

Tariana Turia

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Associate Maori Affairs Minister Tariana Turia has announced her resignation from Parliament, effective from May 17.

Mrs Turia made the announcement at the historic Ratana Pa this afternoon, saying she would resign, seeking a fresh mandate through a byelection.

Her decision was prompted by her opposition to the foreshore and seabed policy, which she had opposed since it was floated about nine months ago.

Prime Minister Helen Clark today sacked Mrs Turia from her ministerial posts.

Ms Clark also said Labour would not fight a by-election in the Te Tai Hauauru electorate, saying it would be a waste of time and money.

Speaking on National Radio earlier today, Mrs Turia said she opposed the foreshore and seabed policy, and always had. Opposition in her electorate was also resounding.

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Mrs Turia said she had never wavered in her opposition, but the prime minister placed options before her she had to consider after consulting her electorate.

She had never considered not voting on the legislation, despite that being presented to her as an option.

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"It didn't feel right to me ... to go away and not vote at all, I felt my electorate would lose confidence in me."

Her family were outraged at the suggestion.

"It is my constituents who have put me into Parliament to be their voice," the Te Tai Hauauro MP said.

"I believe that at all times since I have been in Parliament I have been an active voice for our people."

She had made it clear to the Labour Party when it asked her to stand for Parliament that it was unlikely she would always agree with everything it did.

"I believed at that point that I would be able to speak on those issues that affected our people, and not be forced to have to vote against our own people."

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"I'm not prepared to do that."

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Mrs Turia did not consider forcing a by-election was an act of treachery to Labour.

"It isn't for me," she said.

"I see this as a positive opportunity for us to consider what our political future may be.

"Really that's what I'm going to be talking about to my whanau today -- that if we are to consider a by-election, what does that mean to us as a people."

She did not comment on speculation that a new Maori party would be formed around her.

National Business Review today quoted a "high-level source" in Maoridom as saying the party would be launched on the steps of Parliament next week.

The launch would coincide with the arrival of the foreshore and seabed hikoi in Wellington, the NBR reported.

Mrs Turia said whether she would lead such a party "remains to be seen".

"I'm focussing on today, to be frank."

Labour has activated its by-election contingency plans in case Mrs Turia quits the party.

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Prime Minister Helen Clark has had no contact from Mrs Turia and would not talk to Mrs Turia today.

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"She's said all she wants to say," said a spokesperson.

Labour Party president Mike Williams told NZPA the party had a permanent by-election strategy prepared after every election.

"We've certainly taken that off the shelf and taken a look at it," he said.

A Labour Party council meeting in Wellington will discuss the possibilities today and tomorrow.

If a by-election had to be held, Labour had no shortage of willing candidates, Mr Williams said.

Several names have been speculated over in media reports, among them former Kiwis rugby league international and coach Howie Tamati.

Mr Williams would not confirm names.

Mrs Turia has been in her Te Tai Hauauru electorate consulting constituents on her options for voting on the foreshore and seabed legislation.

The Labour caucus had given her permission to abstain on the May 6 vote.

Ms Clark had warned her that if she votes against the bill in Parliament, she would lose her ministerial portfolios.

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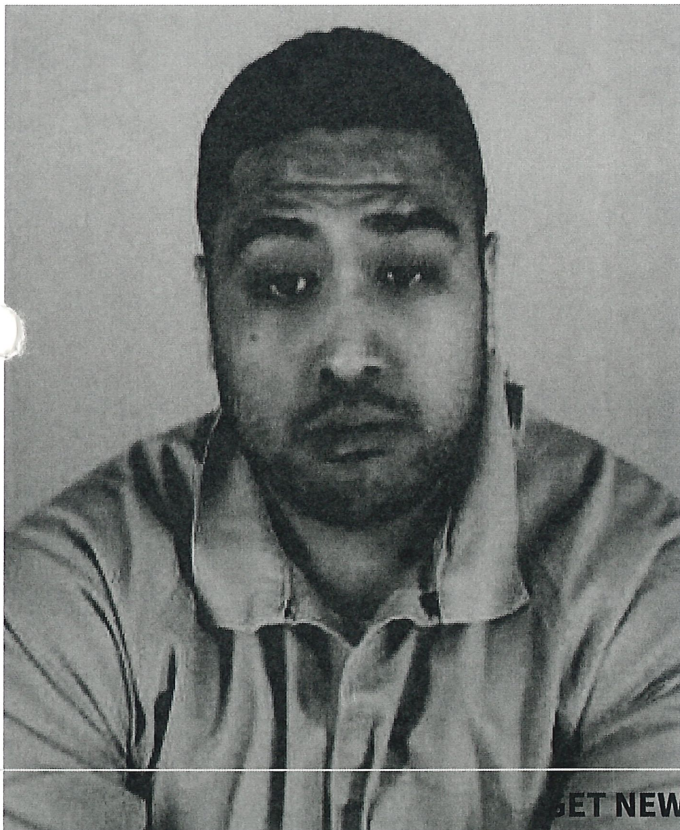
She may be able to sit on the backbenches before being brought back into the executive at some stage.

Dr Pita Sharples, who has been looking into the prospect of forming a new Maori Party, told National Radio today he did not expect it would be launched as quickly as next week.

If there was a by-election, Mrs Turia would initially stand as an independent "and after her success it would be natural to develop the party around her".

- NZPA

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