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Flashback: Sir Apirana Ngata, inspirational champion of Maori cultural renaissance

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Apirana Ngata leads the haka at Waitangi, 1940.

Sir Apirana Ngata is widely held to be Maoridom's greatest statesman.

Sixty-seven years ago last week the boy from the East Cape died aged 76 and his tangi drew well-wishers from throughout the country.

In July 1950 his funeral, near Ruatoria, featured on the newsreel Weekly Review, which pronounced that "both in and out of parliament Sir Apirana Ngata devoted his life to the advancement of his people and his body will go to rest in their midst in sight of the land he loved so well".

Apirana Turupa Ngata, [ca 1905] Reference Number: 35mm-00094-D-F Formal portrait of Sir Apirana Ngata, taken while he was the Member of Parliament for Eastern Maori by an unknown photographer.

One of 15 children, Ngata, of Ngati Porou descent, is revered as our foremost Maori politician. First elected in 1905 for the Eastern Maori electorate, he held the position consecutively until 1943.

Ngata graduated with a BA in politics in 1893, the first Maori to complete a degree at a New Zealand university. Three years later he completed a law degree, and notched up another honour – the first New Zealander to gain a double degree.

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Once in Parliament, wielding intelligence, tact and political savvy, he became renowned for his oratorical prowess, speaking out against the government's policies towards Maori, particularly those encouraging the sale of Maori land.

Not just a politician, lawyer or scholar, he was also known as an activist, agitating for the protection of the Maori culture and language – actively promoting haka, poi, traditional carving and the building of whareniui around the country as well as writing widely on Maori culture's place in the modern age.

Ex-politician and broadcaster Willie Jackson in 2010 hailed Ngata as Maoridom's greatest politician and social engineer.

A member of the Liberal party, the forerunner to today's National party, Ngata made some brave and controversial decisions as an MP, Jackson said.

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For him, three decisions stood out: Ngata's support of the Tohunga Suppression act 1907; his direction to Maori to go to war; and his ban on alcohol sales to his Ngati Porou people of the East Coast.

When he supported the controversial Tohunga Suppression act, aimed at replacing traditional Maori healers with modern medicine, Ngata risked selling out his own culture.

"But he was more concerned about mortal risks posed by charlatans dispensing lethal concoctions than any diminishment of Maori traditions and knowledge," Jackson said.

The Maori battalion was Ngata's brainchild – he believed Maori should volunteer for the Great War to show their Pakeha countrymen they were equals. He believed such a sacrifice would be rewarded once the fighting was over.

"We will lose some of our most promising young leaders. We have lost a few already," Ngata said. "But we will gain the respect of our Pakeha brothers and the future of our race as a component and respected part of the New Zealand people will be less precarious."

Jackson wrote: "When he encouraged Maori to fight in two world wars, thousands of Maori lives were sacrificed. The heavy loss, Ngata reasoned, was the price of citizenship."

But he really took a risk when he banned the sale of liquor to his people on the East Coast in the 1920s. It was done to ensure their mortgages would be paid instead of being wasted on alcohol.

Ngata was condemned by many men, who accused him of treachery," Jackson said.

Despite that, Jackson said Ngata is regarded "as the East Coast and Ngati Porou's greatest son – and is described by many as the greatest Maori ever."

Reflecting on relations between Maori and Pakeha in the *Taranaki Daily News* in 2015, Archbishop Brown Turei said that for the first 100 years of the Treaty of Waitangi, Pakeha did much to ignore their obligations.

"It was a century of war, bloodshed, the mass confiscation of Maori land, and marginalisation of the Maori race," Turei wrote.

In 1940, during the 100th anniversary of the Treaty signing, leaders and chiefs gathered at Waitangi, Ngata stood and said: "I do not know of any year the Maori people have approached with so much misgiving as this centennial year ... in retrospect what does the Maori see?"

"Lands gone, the power of chiefs humbled in the dust, Maori culture scattered and broken. What remained of all the fine things said 100 years ago?"

"Before proceeding further with the new century, it is the clear duty of the government to try to wipe out the mistakes of the past 100 years."

Bernie Harris, a founding member of the Federation of Maori Authorities, remembers Ngata with reverence.

Harris's mother, Witarina Harris, was Ngata's secretary (and a champion of Maori in her own right) in the early 1930s, a time when Ngata was effective in using European tools in commerce and law to give leadership to Maori progress.

"There is only one word in my lexicon that would adequately describe Sir Apirana Ngata – inspirational," Harris said.

"He has been the model, always in the background, that has shaped my life in everything that I have contributed and shared in Maori economic development in New Zealand. I live my life with the three baskets of true values held by Maori – honour, integrity and humility. Just the mention of his name, and the memories come flooding in from the past.

"I have other models to follow, but none in my view that compares with him, from the past, now, and into the future."

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