

Chatham Islanders vote in first election

6 December 1922

(MCH, n.d.[b])



Although the first elections for New Zealand's House of Representatives were held in 1853, it would be another 69 years before residents of the isolated Chatham Islands (Rēkohu or Wharekauri) were able to vote for members of Parliament.

The Chathams' exclusion from the electoral system had long been a cause of concern to some residents, who pointed out they were subject to taxation without representation. Riccarton MP George Witty raised the matter in the House in mid-1922, and the Legislature Amendment Act 1922, passed just five weeks before that year's general election, incorporated the Chathams into the Lyttelton general electorate and the Western Māori seat. Lyttelton was chosen as it was the main port for the islands' trade, even though the Chathams were closer to Napier (and Witty advocated for his own electorate). The selection of Western (rather than Southern) Māori reflected the ancestral ties of the Ngāti Tama and Ngāti Mutunga settlers who had invaded the island in 1835 and subjugated the original Moriori inhabitants.

The islanders were almost denied their historic moment in 1922, when a seamen's strike briefly threatened to delay the delivery of voting papers on the steamer *Kamo*. It was then customary, voting for the Māori seats was held the day before the

5th

general election, in this case Monday 6 December. Forty-five votes were cast at the Chathams' sole polling station. Perhaps surprisingly, only 14 voters backed Reform MP Māui Pōmare (Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāti Toa), who had whānau connections to the islands and had lived there as a child; 29 voted for Haami Tokouru (Toko) Rātana (Ngāti Apa), the eldest son of the religious leader Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, and two for Rangi Māwhete (Rangitāne). Nevertheless, Pōmare won Western Māori by 798 votes.

The following day, Tuesday 7 December, 82 Pākehā (or 'half-castes') voted in the Lyttelton electorate. They backed the Reform Party's Robert Macartney, a Tai Tapu farmer, over the incumbent Labour Party MP James McCombs by 64 votes to 18 (the Liberals did not stand a candidate), but McCombs' popularity in the port of Lyttelton and in Woolston saw him returned to Parliament by 614 votes. Equally important in this era was the triennial national referendum on liquor licensing – while Māori electors were excluded, Pākehā Chatham Islanders backed 'continuance' (the continued sale of alcohol) over national prohibition by 49 votes to 27, with six favouring the third option on the ballot, state control of liquor sales.

The 1922 election was also notable for being the first in which results were broadcast by radio on election night. Three years later the Lyttelton contest was especially dramatic, as the initial count produced a rare dead heat, leading to a recount and an electoral court review. In the end James McCombs prevailed by just 11 votes – thanks in part to his 20-vote majority on the Chathams. Following James's death in 1933, Lyttelton voters elected his widow, Elizabeth McCombs, as New Zealand's first woman MP, even though Chatham Islanders backed her Reform Party opponent, Frederick Freeman, by 81 votes to 49. As the *Evening Post* reported: 'Strangely enough, the first result to hand was from the most distant part of the electorate, the Chatham Islands. This return, received by wireless, gave Mr. Freeman an initial advantage, but he failed to hold it very long.' McCombs ultimately won 62% of the votes.

Following Elizabeth's death in 1935 Lyttelton was won by the couple's son, Terence, who swept the Chathams vote. By this time the island had three polling stations, at Waitangi, Kāingaroa and Ōwenga. The same year, Toko Rātana won the Western Māori seat by 38 votes, helped by a 28-vote majority on the Chathams. Western Māori would be controlled by Rātana-Labour candidates for the next six decades.

After 73 years in the Lyttelton and Western Māori electorates, in 1995 the Chatham Islands were shifted into the Te Tai Tonga Māori electorate and Wellington's Rongotai seat.

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