

(Godfery, M., 2019)

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COMMENT & ANALYSIS

# 'They travel with shadows'

by **Morgan Godfery** | Oct 20, 2019 | 0 🗨️ | 6 min read



At the launch of *Matangireia*, former Māori MPs Marama Fox, Tau Henare, Tariana Turia, Georgina Beyer. (Photo: RNZ)

*Morgan Godfery gained a whole new appreciation for what it means to be a Māori politician when he sat down with six of them for RNZ's Matangireia series.*

After almost 10 years in and around media and politics, I'm not sure that I could ever encourage anyone to become an

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MP.

Yeah, the status is no doubt appealing, and using that mana to help people in need is an objective good. The money seems nice, too. But the work is punishing and, more often than not, thankless.

I was an intern for the late Parekura Horomia in 2011, when he'd usually work 14-hour days. He'd fly out of Wellington one morning and drive back in the same evening, somehow having made it to a tangi on the Coast, met with a CEO in Napier, caught the second half of a club rugby game in Wainuiomata, and still made it back in time for "House duty" in parliament that night.

I mean, if you're a machine, or if you can maintain the energy and commitment of a rangatira like Parekura, go for it. Stand for parliament. But do it knowing that the place — Wellington, and the institution of parliament — can either break you or make you.

This is one of the grim lessons I took from *Matangireia*, the new RNZ series which I host, and which Annabelle Lee-Mather and Mihingarangi Forbes produced. In our conversations with six former Māori politicians, each had their story about just how dark life as an MP can be.

When Dame Tariana Turia made the decision to cross the floor over the foreshore and seabed, few of her former colleagues ever spoke to her again. John Tamihere, the former Labour MP, who admits his mistake in voting for the raupatu, was one of the few to simply ask: "How are you?"

The rest of them, apart from a caring one or two, never said a word.

The remarkable thing, though, is how thoroughly Tariana *won* in the end. Seven years after crossing the floor, she and her colleagues in the Māori Party took the Foreshore and Seabed Act off the books. Her signature programme, Whānau Ora, is at the heart of social policy in New Zealand, and many of her former colleagues in Labour are champions for it — Waipareira Trust chief John Tamihere especially.

The same is true for all the politicians we spoke to for *Matangireia*. One way or another, they won. And, more often than not, they won *despite* their parliamentary colleagues.

Labour leader Jacinda Ardern cut Metiria Turei loose at the last election after "that" welfare speech, which forced the then Green co-leader to resign her position. But even out of parliament, it's the issues that Metiria championed — from



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child poverty to cannabis decriminalisation — which are driving this government’s reform programme.

That’s a legacy, right?

This was part of the thinking behind *Matangireia*. We were keen to know what kind of legacies our politicians left.

**P** Sandra Lee, the first Māori woman to win a general electorate seat, and, just as importantly, the first person to ever lead a kaupapa Māori party to parliament, broke two glass ceilings, and made it possible for every wāhine Māori who follows. How did she feel about that legacy?

Tau Henare made it in the same year as Sandra — 1993, the last first-past-the-post election — and three years later, he and his colleagues did what no one else had done in more than half a century: they won all the Māori seats off Labour.

Tuariki Delamere was part of that history-making group, and he became the immigration minister in the National-New Zealand First government. This made the Coastie the first Māori to control the borders since, well, 1840.

Now, I’ll admit that I live for this sort of thing, and I was counting down the days until filming. But, at the same time, the thought of interviewing the big six was terrifying. As a writer, I’ve written some critical pieces over the years. A good deal of them about the very politicians we were interviewing.

Marama Fox and the Māori Party, for example. *She’s going to destroy me*, I thought, as I prepared to meet her. And sure enough, after we took our seats for her interview, she told me: “I used to hate the things you wrote.”

I’m done, I thought. Psyched-out in record time. Then she added: “I liked you” — phew! — “but you just don’t get it.” What “it” was, I wasn’t quite sure. I didn’t get the politics? The personalities?

After an hour talking back and forth, it became obvious what the “it” was. I never properly understood the personal pressures on politicians. Parliament squeezes you. Sometimes to the point where there’s nothing left. It keeps you from your family and your community, as it did to Marama Fox. As co-leader, she’d travel the country for days on end, sorting constituency issues and policy problems, and more.

And if parliament doesn’t do a number on you, the media often will. Sometimes for nothing more than saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. For some journalists, this was

Metiria Turei's real crime in that career-ending 2017 speech, when she made the admission that she had to game the welfare system to feed her whānau.

The savvy thing to do would have been to never admit it at all.

Metiria's welfare speech put a bomb under the last election. The Greens were riding high in the first poll after the speech — 15 percent! — forcing Labour leader Andrew Little to step down and deputy leader Jacinda Ardern to step up. The rest, as we know, is history.

Before filming, I was itching to ask: “Do you regret it?” But, on the day of the interview, I thought this was a garish thing to go after. We're not here for an “angle” or a “scoop” on the speech and its fallout. This is Metiria Turei's legacy interview. We went back and forth. Her early life. Her career. Her politics and ideology. And her legacy?

“I was brave,” she said. “I took a big risk. It did come at a cost . . . it was the cost of my job.”

I was a Metiria Turei supporter before all of this. I'm a Metiria worshipper now. It takes someone extraordinary to put principle before her own career. And, in their own ways, all the politicians we spoke with for *Matangireia* did just that.

Tau Henare put a public backlash to one side to ensure mokomokai and kōiwi made it out of foreign museums and back home, flying “first class”. It didn't win him any new conservative supporters. But it didn't have to. It was enough that it was the right thing to do.

Sandra Lee put a stop to logging native timber on the West Coast. There were whispers about the wisdom of that decision in her own government. But did it matter? No. It was just the tika thing to do.



Four long-serving Māori MPs, in the 1970s. From left: Koro Wētere (Western Māori 1969–96), Matiu Rata (Northern Māori 1963–80), Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan (Southern Māori 1967–96), and Paraone Reweti (Eastern Māori 1967–81).

One thing you might not know about Māori politicians is that they travel with shadows. Their tūpuna inhabit every room they enter, they embody every act, and they help guide every word. This is especially so in *Matangireia*, the Māori Affairs select committee room. Nominally, each interview is a dialogue between the politician as interviewee and me as interviewer. But that's not quite it. In its entirety, *Matangireia* is a dialogue between the past and present. It's a conversation between, and with, the many ancestors in that room.

One striking thing about the series as a whole is how the late Matiu Rata, whose portrait keeps watch over the room, made his presence felt in every interview. Sandra spoke about his influence in her life. Marama spoke about how he helped politicise her. Tau told the story about sounding out the great man before he ran for parliament. Tariana spoke about how the former Mana Motuhake leader was an inspiration to all independent Māori movements.

This, I think, is at the heart of what *Matangireia* is. A gentle, and sometimes not so gentle, reminder that we're not alone, we all carry responsibilities to one another, and what we do in life is simply build on the past.