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# Sandra Lee: If you're Māori, you can't help growing up political

by Dale Husband | Aug 12, 2017 | 3 🗨️ | 14 min read

*Sandra Lee, as she acknowledges in this conversation with Dale, had a bit*



*of cheek long before she had the political experience to go with it.*

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*But that experience came in abundance – linking up, when she was still in her 20s, with Matiu Rata to help found Mana Motuhake in 1979. Chairing the Waiheke County Council. Leading Mana Motuhake as president and then party leader. Spending nine years in parliament, including time as a cabinet minister in the Labour-Alliance coalition government. Having a taste of the diplomatic world as New Zealand’s High Commissioner to Niue. And being a sharp-eyed observer of the political talents and failings of others – as she is here.*



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**Kia ora, Sandra. Now, from what I’ve learned through the years, you have a number of geographical connections. Wellington, of course, because of your three terms as an MP, the West Coast, Waiheke Island, Auckland, Niue, and now Whakatane.**

Well, I was born in Wellington. My papa kāinga tūturu is Arahura Pā on the west coast of the South Island. I grew up in a tiny, two-bedroom Māori Affairs house that my parents built in the 1950s when the old Department of Māori and Island Affairs had trade training schemes and builders, and our young ones were trainees on their way to becoming tradesmen. And that, by the way, was a scheme that should be brought back.

My father, Bill Barber, was an Englishman. My grandfather, Charley Johnson, lived with us. So did my great-grandfather who was born in 1874, Tame Whakamaua Pihawai, from Kaiapoi Pā, until he passed away.

It was a very warm, loving home. We were poor, but we never, ever went hungry. The boil-up pot was always on, and my uncle Cyril, who was a fisherman, was always topping it up with crayfish. We had plenty of kai and plenty of laughs.

Along the street was a large number of relations from our pā in Arahura – kaumātua, kuia, aunties and uncles. There was another satellite in Upper Hutt where there was the Weepu family, the Tainui family, and others, too.

We used to gather regularly and often. And the grown-ups would have intense discussions, especially about our Māori land. There’d be people coming from the Māori Affairs department. Timber millers, too.