

Rawiri Taonui: Partnership gives reason for hope



John Key (pictured here at Waitangi) enjoys an approval rating among Maori of 47 per cent. Photo / Brett Phibbs

In recent weeks the descendants of the Maori prophet Wiremu Tahupotiki Ratana gave their blessing to the one-year-old National-Maori Party partnership.

Prime Minister John Key's no-baggage, no-nonsense, straight-talking "let's work together" style is a race relations revelation. He knows what matters and what doesn't (flying two flags is not a drama), and where the boundaries lie - "let the Maori Party deal with Hone Harawira, he is their member".

The twin pillars of the Maori Party leadership, Tariana Turia and Pita Sharples, have also been important. Dignified, thoughtful and strong, they are the best Maori political leaders since Princess Te Puea and Apirana Ngata.

This triumvirate knows that working together is about trust, keeping things simple and the freedom to disagree.

The win over Labour at Ratana belies deeper waters ahead. Waitangi Day looms large with several in Ngapuhi set to fly the St George Cross of the Confederation ensign instead of the newly chosen Rangatiratanga flag. There is room for embarrassment as the debate plays out on Hone Heke Harawira's home turf. Budget 2010 signals the roll out of the whanau ora, with some estimating up to \$1 billion in resources devolved to Maori social service providers. Modelled on successful initiatives in health - where the increase of Maori providers from 0 to 275 in 25 years has had real impact - they understand issues better, know the communities, and don't suffer the ingrained prejudices built up over multiple generations in mainstream institutions. This quiet revolution will be the most effective policy initiative for Maori since World War II.

Changes to the foreshore and seabed legislation are due mid-year. Most Pakeha now accept the 2005 act was a paranoid pre-emptive strike against Maori human rights.

Important components will include guaranteed public access to the beaches, continuing and building on Labour's negotiations with iwi for settlements (which were good) but broadening provisions for joint ownership and management regimes between the Crown and Maori (with appropriate checks and balances) as successfully applies for the Rotorua lakes and Waikato River (both Labour initiatives).

There is also a need to allow for the investigation and/or negotiation and settlement of other residual claims (which Labour excluded) in line with the Sealords deal of 1994. In another real victory for the Maori Party, and following on 20 years after the Bill of Rights, a constitutional review, including consideration of the status of the Treaty of Waitangi, is on the agenda, something Maori have advocated for four decades.

Fundamental questions are at stake. Did the Treaty cede sovereignty in 1840 or was sovereignty acquired over time through the marginalisation of Maori society? Do we enshrine the Treaty in legislation, as the international community via the UN Periodic Review of Human Rights in New Zealand recommends, or, continue to apply the principles of the Treaty, and, if so, who says what they mean?

Sharpley and co need to consolidate their recovery from the Hone Harawira affair with the latest Te Karere poll of Maori voters showing Labour and the Maori Party are now dead even at 38 per cent each after the Maori Party previously held a 46-26 advantage.

Labour will have ample opportunities to strike at the National-Maori Party alliance. However, they need to change tack. Suffering the self-inflicted anguish of rejected lovers, leader Phil Goff's cross-cultural skills aren't convincing, his state of the nation race relations speech and general deliberate negativity may drive more Maori toward the Maori Party than away from it. The Te Karere poll shows 47 per cent of Maori approve of John Key and 59 per cent disapprove of Phil Goff. More tellingly, Labour may need a new leader if it is to recoup ground on race relations - 48 per cent of Maori members of the Labour Party do not support Phil Goff.

The relationship that was no longer exists. But neither is it lost - it has evolved, changed and matured. Labour is no longer the only place for Maori to be.

Maori are no longer the 40,000 desperate and destitute of the 1930s that had just escaped annihilation by colonisation and needed a hand up. They are 800,000 dynamic descendants of a people who through fighting back have earned the right to be co-equals with all Pakeha, working with this National Government and with the next Labour government.

Labour must focus on policy, not rhetoric. There is traction in the arguments that the Maori Party is delivering small kumara, such as the twin flags, but not the big ones, such as seats on Auckland Super City and polytech councils. There are questions about the impact on Maori of the 90-day rule allowing workers to be sacked without appeal, cutbacks in ACC, pay rates not keeping up with the cost of living, a pathetic increase to the minimum wage, and tax cuts that favour the wealthy.

The Maori Party partnership must also defend against the National-Act partnership as it gathers momentum on right-wing policies, such as the one-year review of beneficiaries and three-strikes policies - anathema that impact differentially on Maori.

The full impact of the recession is not over. The OECD suggests just 1.8 to 2.2 per cent growth for New Zealand in 2010. Just 23 per cent of firms are optimistic. Maori unemployment, already at 10 per cent last May, is now probably double the national rate of 6.5 per cent.

Maori suffered worse than non-Maori under Rogernomics and Ruthansia, their incomes not returning to early-1980s levels until 2005.

The real strength of the groundbreaking relationship between Maori and National will be how much they deliver to Maori. The relationship, a stream of Treaty settlements, a larger, better-educated Maori workforce and leadership, and stronger relationships with all Pakeha are the main hopes.

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