

Mothers in the House: Iriaka Rātana and Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan: Text, Contexts, Resonances¹

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In May, 1854, 37 men were sworn in for the first sitting of New Zealand's House of Representatives.² For the next 79 years, those deep voices were the only ones thought to be capable of public debate in the chamber. The political sphere, the context in which “maiden speeches” are given, was initially reserved for men, and the language was to be English. With the election of the first Māori members of Parliament in 1868, te reo came to be spoken, but only, of course, by men. Absent from the Pākehā parliament was the karanga, “the first cry of welcome on the marae”: the customary task of women.³

My aim here is to compare the entry to the House of the first two Māori women who, I argue, became pathbreakers as mothers with young children. Forty-four year old Iriaka Rātana (1905-1981) entered the House of Representatives in 1949 at a time when the Pākehā orthodoxy was that mothers should be at home with their children. In contrast, she had six children aged twelve and younger and was in the last stage of pregnancy at the time of her election campaign. On entering Parliament, she joined the other non-Māori women MPs, the unmarried Mabel Howard and Hilda Ross, a widow with two adult sons.⁴ Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan (1932-2011) was, at thirty-five, young compared to her fellow women MPs whose average age was 47, when she entered the house in 1967 alongside Iriaka Rātana.⁵ Unlike the three other women MPs who had grown children, she was about to begin her family.⁶ I am interested in the difference between Iriaka Rātana and Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan as individuals and in the social context for Māori in which they operated. Both, as women deeply immersed in the Rātana community, received backing unusual for women politicians of the time. They broke ground internationally as Indigenous women elected to a national parliament.⁷

How did these two women see their voices shaping the nation and the particular role of Māori women within it? They were both Labour members of Parliament: part of the alliance that Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana had forged with Labour which marked a political shift of Māori within Parliament towards a united “class-based grass roots movement”.⁸ Rātana's decisive break with tribalism and demand to honour the treaty was deeply embedded for both women. Iriaka Rātana had an early immersion from her youth in the Rātana community which continued with her marriage to Tahupōtiki Rātana. Whetū Tirikātene was initially brought up at Rātana Pā and her father held an important position as a trusted confidant of Rātana. The political clout of the Rātana movement stood behind their political careers.

Iriaka Rātana was raised in a predominantly Māori world. She was a farmer whose late husband had been much more comfortable in speaking te reo than speaking English. A highly educated woman, Tirikātene-Sullivan pursued a doctorate at the Australian National University. She was the daughter of the first successful Rātana candidate for Parliament, Eruera Tihema Tirikātene, elected in the year of her birth 1932, for Southern Māori.⁹ While both women had been schooled in Rātana politics from an early age, the generational difference of almost thirty years meant very different life trajectories. Iriaka Rātana began public life as a widow with a young family; in contrast, Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan was newly-wed, and had

the full support of her physicist husband who believed they could both pursue careers and have a family.¹⁰

Background

Nineteenth century settler political life downgraded the role of Māori women from public debate in Pākehā forums whereas high-born Māori women had always made their voices heard. As European ideas became imbricated in sections of Māori society, ideas about women's voices changed. The Ngāti Porou leader, Major Rāpata Wahawaha, speaking as a member of the Legislative Council, opposed the enfranchisement of women in September 1891, saying that "Māori women were given to chattering too much altogether like a lot of parrots. They had not the sense of men, therefore, they should not be allowed to vote."¹¹ In contrast, in the Kotahitanga two years later, Mere Te Tai Mangakāhia was called in to explain her request to have women involved in selecting members. She asked that body that women not only be enfranchised but also entitled to sit in the Māori Parliament.¹²

In 1894, all four Māori members of the New Zealand House of Representatives voted in favour of the Parliamentary Disabilities of Women Abolition Bill which would have enabled women to stand for parliament. Hōne Heke Ngāpua (Ngāpuhi; Liberal, Northern Māori) argued that women had "every right to a seat in the House" but it was a measure he would like to see put before the country.¹³

Although all adult women were able to vote from 1893, the removal of Parliamentary disabilities to allow them to stand for the House of Representatives was only achieved in 1919. The upper house, the Legislative Council, clung to its right to exclude women until 1941. Between those two dates a woman's voice was first heard in the House of Representatives when Elizabeth McCombs entered Parliament in 1933. In her maiden speech, McCombs played on a common stereotype, warning the house that "women are never satisfied unless they have their own way. It happens in this case that the woman's way is the right way".¹⁴ A maiden speech has been described as akin to a "ship's first voyage" where a new member holds the floor for 30 to 45 minutes and can outline their aspirations free of interruption. Unlike the usual cut and thrust of parliamentary debate, the new member is usually listened to in respectful silence.¹⁵ Such attention may never be their lot again.

Elizabeth McCombs had only two years in Parliament before her death in June 1935. In the election of that year Rehutai Maihi sought a seat as an Independent candidate, contesting the Northern Māori seat against the National incumbent Taurekareka Hēnare. Mahuika Otene became the "unofficial" Labour candidate while Paraire Paiea stood as the Rātana candidate.¹⁶ A Democrat and two other strong Independent candidates at the election meant that the incumbent, Tau Hēnare, was eventually returned with the six other candidates splitting the vote. Rehutai Maihi polled fifth with 156 votes against Mahuika Otene's 90.¹⁷

While campaigning, Rehutai Maihi pointed to the advantages of Labour's Māori policies at a meeting at Hōreke and Upper Waihou. A "chief of no mean order and a fluent orator" congratulated her on the full explanation of her policy and ended by saying "my only regret is she is not a man and only a mere woman." In what the newspaper described as a "very neat reply" Rehutai Maihi said "Who made the Treaty of Waitangi possible? Who was the reigning sovereign then? A woman, Queen Victoria. Look back to our ancestors. Their cherished creed was 'A woman and land: for these two things a man will die'." Her words were met with an ovation, and "there was no further reference to her sex".¹⁸ This "neat reply" obviously caught

the imagination of others. When Rehutai Maihi spoke at Ōkaihau on the 12th of August 1935, a leading rangatira of the district, Tāmāti Hāpimana, quoted a forebear who said that “through a woman the Treaty of Waitangi was effected and it would be through a woman that all of its covenants would be realised.”¹⁹ That meeting offered its support to Maihi should she become the official Labour candidate, a circumstance that failed to eventuate. In the 1938 election fifty-seven year old Labour candidate, Catherine Stewart, became the next woman to enter the House, winning the new Wellington West seat.²⁰ She was followed by four other women before the first Māori woman became a member of parliament in 1949.

Representatives of Rātana

Born in 1905, Iriaka Te Rio, of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi, was raised in Hiruhārama on the Wanganui river and educated there by the Sisters of Compassion. When she was about 16, the musically talented Iriaka joined the community around Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, becoming one of the members of the performing group that accompanied Rātana around New Zealand and in 1924 accompanied him on a tour of Britain, Europe and Japan.²¹ In England, Rātana sought an audience with King George V to lay before him evidence of breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi but the meeting was refused.²²

Rātana, unlike those leaders who saw stronger iwi identification as the way to progress Māori interests, appealed to the culturally unanchored and dispossessed, echoing the stance of King Tāwhaio: “Ko oku hoa, ko te humeka, te parakimete, te watimeta, nga kamura, nga pani, nga pouwaru ... /My friends are the shoemaker, the blacksmith, the watchmaker, carpenters, orphans and widows ...”²³ His movement, which combined an emphasis on the Bible with a commitment to upholding the Treaty of Waitangi, quickly gained adherents among the burgeoning Māori population.²⁴

Encouraged by Rātana’s wife, Te Urumanaao, at twenty years of age Iriaka became a second wife to Rātana, and went on to bear two children, one of whom died of tuberculosis aged around six. Known as Te Whaeaiti (little mother) Iriaka became a powerful leader in the Rātana movement and that movement was engaging with the Labour Party.²⁵ By 1927, about one third of the Māori population (21,500) had joined the Rātana church.²⁶ With his church and community well-established, and his overtures to the British Crown blocked, Rātana decided that participation in politics was essential. To his followers, the established Māori MPs were the educated elite, out of touch with the flax roots, and antagonistic to the Rātana movement.²⁷ Uninterested in running for parliament himself, Rātana chose men whom he believed could capture the four Māori seats in parliament in order to address Māori grievances.²⁸ The men chosen signed a covenant (kawenata) in Māori with four pledges, the third being “That the wives would fully support their husbands in their mission, and that they would be as equally dedicated as their husbands.”²⁹ From the outset, Rātana saw political representation as a community affair and responsibility.

In August 1932, Eruera Tirikātene, Rātana’s right hand man, won the Southern Māori seat in a by-election, with the support of the Labour Party.³⁰ This was the first victory in Rātana’s campaign to win all four seats. Tokouru Rātana, the eldest of Rātana’s sons, won the Western Māori seat in 1935 and by 1943, all four Māori koata were held by Rātana adherents.

After Rātana’s death in 1939, Iriaka married Matiu Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, a younger son of Rātana and Te Urumanaao. The couple worked a dairy farm and Iriaka’s labour was vital to its success, as well as her commitment to raising their six children. Tokouru Rātana died in

October 1944 and, in 1945, Matiu won his brother's Western Māori seat.³¹ Four years later, in 1949, Matiu died from complications of an injury resulting from a car accident. Iriaka, heavily pregnant with her seventh child, made it known that she wished to take his place. Some Labour stalwarts hesitated to support the candidacy of a mother with a large and young family. No Pākehā commentators seem to have noticed the complications of her married life, perhaps because ten years had passed since Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana's death.

Others were interested in contesting the seat and the Labour Party National Executive first chose John Grace, Māori secretary to Prime Minister Peter Fraser, as the candidate.³² Once Iriaka Rātana threatened to run as an Independent, however, the Labour Party realized that it would be perilous to overlook her. The 1946 election had seen Labour and National both win 38 general seats; Labour only continued in power by virtue of the four Māori seats. To alienate Rātana was to increase the risk of losing the election and so Labour duly endorsed Iriaka Rātana as their candidate. The *Taranaki Herald* commented that the "Labour Party had discovered that among the Maoirs [sic], in Western Maori at any rate, it was less a Labour Party than a Ratana party."³³

Historian Tiopira McDowell has suggested that the Rātana movement had a strong commitment to women's rights or *mana wāhine*.³⁴ From the outset, the movement welcomed women in leadership roles, in both the church and the concert party.³⁵ McDowell traces this acknowledgement of women through parliamentary interventions of Rātana MPs. Eruera Tirikātene, for example, argued in 1933 for women's right to divorce men who deserted them by leaving the country and highlighted the plight of deserted wives who had no access to unemployment allowances, given their important role as mothers of "the citizens of tomorrow".³⁶ The Rātana MPs were generous in their acknowledgement of the important role of women MPs as giving voice to the needs of women and children, in acknowledging the work of servicewomen in the Second World War, and later, very supportive of the work of the Maori Women's Welfare League.³⁷

While clearly supported by her own community, Iriaka Rātana's candidacy provoked controversy elsewhere and from the opponents of Rātana in particular. Te Puea Hērangi noted that when she had been asked to stand in 1946, she had declined on principle since no "woman should captain the Tainui canoe".³⁸ According to Michael King, this was probably tactical since Te Puea had no hesitation at putting herself forward when needed.³⁹ Te Puea, however, had regarded Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana "as an undistinguished charlatan and usurper of traditional loyalties" fearing that his influence would undermine support for the Kingitanga.⁴⁰

At one election meeting a young man declared that women had no place in tribal councils and asked "how dare a 'petticoat' seek to lead and advise his people."⁴¹ Iriaka adopted the same "neat reply" first used by Rehutai Maihi, that it had been a "petticoat", Queen Victoria who promulgated the Treaty of Waitangi and since a number of important Māori men had signed, "they should also be willing to have a woman represent them in Parliament". Rātana's National opponent sharply criticized her candidacy saying "If the hen crows screw her neck".⁴² In fact, Iriaka was not the only woman candidate for the Western Māori seat. Katariana Nūtana stood unsuccessfully as a Kingite Kauhanganui candidate.⁴³ Countering accusations that Māori women should not put themselves forward, she suggested that King Tāwhiao long ago "established the principle of Maori women having the same privileges as Maori men". Those who opposed such rights were backwards and harming "their race".⁴⁴ In the event, Nūtana polled fifth of the ten candidates for Western Māori with 207 votes.⁴⁵

Described as “a capable platform speaker, and a strong personality”, Iriaka Rātana “spiritedly” responded to criticisms of her candidacy.⁴⁶ At one meeting, “leading chief” Tohuroa (Tom) Parata stated he would not vote for a woman and accused Rātana of breaking “the custom of her ancestors”. Her place as a mother of a large family, he concluded, was “in the home”. In reply, Iriaka firmly stated that she wished she had more children. Asked whether she could stand up to all the shrewd men in parliament, she reminded her audience of the saying “that women have long and broad tongues”, and that “the Speaker will find it very difficult to keep me in order when my tongue gets in the way!”⁴⁷

The 1949 election was the last in which the vote in Māori electorates was held the day before the general election, the latter scheduled for Wednesday 30 November. Labour’s hold on government looked tenuous as the public tired of the maintenance of post war restrictions and the National Party, founded in 1936, offered a new vision while promising to maintain Labour’s welfare initiatives. In a climate of uncertainty, on the Monday before the Tuesday Māori vote, Prime Minister Peter Fraser weighed in on Iriaka Rātana’s behalf. It would be, he claimed, a “progressive step” for a Māori woman to enter parliament. He noted Te Puea’s opposition to Rātana’s candidacy and diplomatically stated that while “old customs are rightly revered” it used to be the case that women were prohibited from taking any part in public affairs. Now the contribution women could make was clearly apparent, “So, with the Māori people, progress demands that women should accept political responsibility, particularly because so much legislation and administration affects the welfare and happiness of home life.” He pointed out that both Te Puea and Mrs Te Ngeaungeu were providing public service as members of the Tainui Māori Trust Board. Such work by Māori women was essential to “make a nation of happy homes for the coming generation.”⁴⁸ In her campaign, Iriaka Rātana had noted that “Maori men and women had worked together in many walks of life and in factories during the war”. It was time, she believed, “for women to take their place in public life” and that by doing so, she could represent Māori women and children because she “knew well their conditions of life”.⁴⁹

Despite the protests from Māori as to customary practice, and from some Pākehā Labour supporters about how a mother of a large family could perform her parliamentary duties, the heavily pregnant Iriaka Rātana won the seat, over 6,000 votes ahead of her nearest rival. She became an opposition MP since Labour lost the election. After she gave birth in December, Iriaka joined the opposition benches while her extended family cared for both her farm and the children. Historian Sandra Wallace has demonstrated how much Iriaka Rātana’s election went against general trends since Māori women were much “less likely than Pakeha women to seek election to Parliament, even in a Maori seat”.⁵⁰ The power of the Rātana movement and the significance of the Rātana name meant that Iriaka Rātana was able to pursue her candidacy irrespective of her perceived duties as a mother, although some within the Rātana movement worried that should she remarry her links with Rātana would disappear.⁵¹

Iriaka Rātana found parliament a bewildering place to arrive, telling the Annual conference of the Maori Women’s Welfare League in 1955:

I didn’t know who was who, I didn’t know my whereabouts. I had never met or discussed anything with the Minister of Maori Affairs.

I felt like packing up and going home, but I thought to myself, “No, I was going to stand on my feet and see if I could do something to help my people.”⁵²

She gave her maiden speech to the House on 12 July 1950, recalling afterwards “it was a great ordeal”. After offering her good wishes for the improved health of George VI and congratulating the other members who had made their maiden speeches, Iriaka asked leave to speak “a few words in Maori”; permission was granted on the understanding that she would provide a translation. In te reo she diplomatically greeted King Korokī, Te Puea and the “remnant peoples” across the land.⁵³ In using te reo Māori, Iriaka followed the pattern of her Rātana predecessors in parliament who used, and promoted the use of, the language.⁵⁴

Iriaka expressed her “trepidation” at speaking, not least because of the “unseen audience” listening on the radio with “curiosity, praise, criticism or otherwise” – perhaps doubly conscious of this because speaking in English. Not oblivious to the “shafts of criticism levelled” at her “for attaining parliamentary honours”, Iriaka pointed to her source of encouragement across the Tasman in Australia. Dame Enid Lyons, mother of six children by 1922, had played a key part in her husband, Joe Lyons’s initial Labor Party career and stood herself (unsuccessfully) for a Tasmanian seat in 1925. She supported Joe’s move to the United Australia Party and to Federal politics and when he became Prime Minister in January 1932, he wrote to her “whatever distinctions come are *ours* not mine”. Joe Lyons died in April 1939 and in August 1943, Dame Edith Lyons, mother of twelve, was elected member for the Tasmanian seat of Darwin: the first female member of the Federal House of Representatives. At the time of Iriaka Rātana’s accession to Parliament, Edith Lyons became the first woman member of a Federal Cabinet.⁵⁵

Iriaka Rātana noted the ‘troubled waters’ of Māori administration and commended the Labour Party for its land-settlement schemes. The rise of the National Party to power had put paid to the ability of the Rātana/Labour compact to deliver for their people but just how far National would deviate from Labour was yet to be seen. Iriaka took it as a promising sign that the Prime Minister, Sidney Holland, had suggested that the government would view the interest of Māori electors with sympathy. She congratulated Holland for appointing Ernest Corbett as Minister of Maori Affairs as “he was brought up among the Maori people of Taranaki”.

The “number one priority”, Iriaka stressed, was housing for the burgeoning Māori population for in good homes lay “the foundations of Māori wellbeing”. Overcrowding in poor homes led to ill-health and Māori health was in a “shocking state”. The number of houses built annually was “quite inadequate” to meet the demand. She argued that “land-development and human development” were central to the future for Māori. As a farmer herself, she was grateful for the work that Labour had done to advance farming. Iriaka expressed optimism about the dawn of a “spirit of progress” amongst Māori and advocated moving “hand in hand” with Pākehā. This optimism and politeness, according to Angela Ballara, meant that in future years Iriaka “was listened to with respect on both sides of the House”.⁵⁶ Praising Iriaka’s speech, the Minister of External Affairs, Frederick Doige, saw parallels with Shakespeare’s most famous speechmaker, remarking “The Maori people have sent us a new Portia.”⁵⁷ Her popularity was such that in the 1951 and 1954 elections, Iriaka had the highest majorities of any candidate.

The first two decades of Iriaka Rātana’s incumbency were times of great change for Māori as they moved into the cities, pushed by diminishing land resources and pulled by employment and leisure prospects. By 1956 about 38 per cent of Māori women aged between twenty and twenty-five lived in urban areas compared to about 31 per cent of Māori men at that age.⁵⁸ Young women entered apprenticeships and took up jobs as cooks, housemaids, laundry assistants, waitresses and kitchen hands. Those with more education might enter nursing, dental

nursing or teaching.⁵⁹ In the late 1950s, the Māori birthrate was double that of Pākehā and Iriaka Rātana regarded the 1958 Family Benefit (Home Ownership) Act as a great boon to her people.⁶⁰ The Act enabled parents – many of whom found it difficult to raise finance - to capitalise the family benefit in order to buy a new home. The welfare state created by Labour and continued under National led to a marked increase in Māori life expectancy, due to falling infant mortality, fewer child deaths and better health in the 15 to 44 age group.⁶¹

By 1966, 62 per cent of the Māori population was based in towns or cities and half the population were children under 15.⁶² The burgeoning urban population had new needs and encountered inequalities on a daily basis. The kind of patience that Iriaka Rātana had once demonstrated no longer satisfied a younger generation. And even her patience was running out.⁶³ In 1967 she spoke against a motion commending the National government's Māori policy saying "There is only the Pakeha to blame for the standard of education of the Maori people today." In colonizing the country, she suggested, Pākehā were more interested in land than Māori welfare.⁶⁴ The themes of education and welfare were soon to be taken up by Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan.

In 1967, Whetū Tirikātene Sullivan joined Iriaka Rātana on the opposition benches, until Iriaka's retirement in 1969. In her last years, Iriaka was more critical of the government. She attacked the 1967 Māori Affairs Amendment Bill which increased the ability of the Māori Trustee to compulsorily acquire Māori freehold land deemed to be uneconomic arguing that it destroyed "Maori interests and Maori ideals".⁶⁵ In her final "Address and Reply" speech, Iriaka remarked on the rapid pace of change, 'Only a few days ago three brave Americans were flying around the moon.' She continued "Little did they realise that Tane, the Maori god of the forests, put the moon there to give light to Rangī, the sky father and Papa, the earth mother." Holding both to things Māori, yet seeing opportunities ahead, Iriaka Rātana remained optimistic about 'Two races making one nation'.⁶⁶

Whetū Tirikātene Sullivan entered parliament as the result of the Southern Māori by-election occasioned by the death of her father. The Māori mood in the country was no longer as conciliatory as it had been when Iriaka Rātana gave her maiden speech. The Second National government was in power through the whole of the 1960s after a brief Labour interlude from 1957-1960. In those three years, Labour had failed to give the Māori Affairs portfolio to Eruera Tirikātene, making him Associate Minister of Māori Affairs and giving him the lowly portfolio for forestry, which many Māori saw as an insult.⁶⁷ The Party was under attack for its failure to implement policies put forward by the Māori Policy Committee and Walter Nash's refusal to intervene in the Rugby Union's plans to tour South Africa. Still, in the main, Māori remained loyal supporters of Labour: in the late 1960s, National could garner only an eighth of the Māori vote.

Tahupōtiki Rātana had prophesied before her birth that Tini Whetū Marama Tirikātene would become a political leader.⁶⁸ Whetū, the seventh of twelve children and the eldest surviving girl, was born at Rātana Pa. There she spent her early years in the care of her grandmother, Amīria Solomon, a designer and seamstress who had a lasting influence on her. After attending High School in Rangiora and spending her sixth form year at Wellington East Girls' College, Whetū developed exceptional shorthand and typing skills which were to prove invaluable. Her move into the workforce took her into the Public Service in a variety of secretarial roles, including acting on the staff for the 1953-4 Royal Tour, a much sought-after position. Wi Hapi Love commented that Whetū's stenography skills, her excellence in the sport of fencing (one of the

top four in New Zealand), her New Zealand amateur Latin-American ballroom dancing title, and her modelling experience, combined with her knowledge of Māori culture, made her an excellent choice.⁶⁹

The Royal Tour job turned out to be an exhausting and challenging position.⁷⁰ During convalescence afterwards in sanatorium care with tuberculosis, Whetū became interested in social work which led to her employment as a welfare officer. In that role she saw the barriers Māori faced in pursuing higher education, their housing and employment problems, and their lack of access to legal aid. Like her siblings, she served voluntarily as secretary to the Māori Policy Council and accompanied her father around his electorate. In 1958 she began part-time study at Victoria University of Wellington and quickly involved herself in student politics. In 1960-1, she became the first Māori elected to the University Students' Association. As Vice-President, she occupied the highest role available to a woman. She became President of a new organisation, the New Zealand Māori Students' Federation which lobbied for Māori language and Māori Studies teaching at the Victoria University.

Graduating with distinction, Whetū won a scholarship to Canberra in 1965 to work on Māori politics since 1900, with the goal of becoming an academic. Her father's death on 11 January 1967 led to a call for her to succeed him when her brother proved ineligible because he was on the general electoral roll. After consultation with her Australian fiancé, Denis Sullivan, her name went forward. Ten male candidates also stood but Whetū won selection and gained a large majority in the by-election. Following the election, Whetū returned to Canberra and married Denis who then followed her to New Zealand.⁷¹ Whetū, aged 35, was at that time, the youngest woman ever elected to New Zealand's parliament.⁷²

In her maiden speech as a member of the opposition Rātana/Labour Alliance, Whetū expressed her feeling of humility "in the face of the immense responsibilities reposing upon [her] shoulders" of representing Māori, along with the other three Māori members.⁷³ She expressed a "high sense of urgency" in the glaring "disparity in socio-economic levels as between Maori and pakeha New Zealanders." This disparity had to be eliminated for New Zealand to take its "rightful stand in the international forums of the world". She suggested that the Governor-General's speech from the throne was little more than a platitude when he said "there should be no closing of the doors of opportunity". The socio-economic position of Māori, "the sad legacy of New Zealand's social and economic history" suggested that doors had indeed been closed for them in a number of ways. First, by "predatory land confiscation", second by an education system that discounted the needs of Māori children, and third by "second-class citizenship" which saw Māori paid half as much as Pākehā, subject to "lesser" benefits and the lack of rehabilitation entitlement of Māori servicemen after the First World War.

Part of Whetū's speech paid tribute to the achievements of her father who she described as "an apostle against social injustice and a fighter for civil rights". The latter phrase had gained currency in the 1950s and 1960s with the development of the civil rights movement in the United States which created a new climate for the discussion of rights internationally.⁷⁴

Whetū reminded the House of Sir Eruera's continual striving for Māori equality through his work for land claims; his advocacy of trade training for school leavers; and his promotion of the Māori Social and Economic Advancement Act. Whetū called upon the House to marshal its "fullest resources" for a "massive and all-pervasive programme [directed] towards elevating the level of Maori education". Such a programme needed to include an "autonomous pre-school system". Māori culture should be taught throughout "primary, secondary and tertiary

educational establishments”. In addition Māori language teaching was required, with correct pronunciation; condoning mispronunciation was “to condone ignorance”. Language and cultural studies were crucial, she suggested, “to engender mutual respect between Māori and Pakeha”, as was an understanding of New Zealand’s “social and economic history”. Whereas Iriaka Rātana was conscious that her voice would be heard over the radio, Whetū looked forward to greater use of television in the educational system.

Drawing on her experience as a welfare officer, Whetū suggested that individual counseling (preferably with a Māori counselor) be provided for children to advise of potential for future directions whether in further study or vocational training. A policy of economic decentralization and regional development could assist Māori to remain in their traditional areas.

For Iriaka Rātana, the prime emphasis had been on housing – for the burgeoning young Māori families. Her time in the House saw the flowering of the Māori Women’s Welfare League which emphasised the importance of improving conditions of home life, and she had done important work toward improving conditions at Rātana Pā. By the time Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan entered Parliament, the men of the New Zealand Māori Council, supposedly created to garner “flaxroots” opinion, were “subjected to considerable official pressure”.⁷⁵ By the late 1960s, Rātana leaders were wanting to “resuscitate” the idea of a separate Māori Parliament and urban leaders were leading campaigns against racism reflected in poverty, discrimination, and gang culture. Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan planned to address discrimination through education, providing young Māori with the tools to survive, if not thrive, in a Pākehā dominated society. She ended her speech by putting the country on notice:

There is a glaring disparity between the apparently harmonious situation in New Zealand’s race relations and the real socio-economic levels, a disparity which must be eliminated if we are to take our rightful stand in the international forums of the world.

Her following years in Parliament saw that disparity boil over into protest: the rise of the young radicals in Ngā Tamatoa; the 1975 Land March led by Dame Whina Cooper and the negotiations around setting up the Waitangi Tribunal. Tirikātene-Sullivan worked on the Bill for the latter and supported the right to claims stretching back to 1840, a position not reached until a decade later.⁷⁶ Always convinced of the importance of te reo, Whetū lobbied for it to have official status (achieved in 1987), and for more Māori content in broadcasting, including the creation of a Māori television unit.⁷⁷ The influence of her grandmother’s interest in design came to the fore when, as Minister for Tourism from 1972-75, Whetū promoted domestic tourism and Māori crafts and design. Helen Brown has written how Whetū “was keenly aware of the political statement she made through her design choices” citing the red, black and white kōwhaiwhai patterned dress, designed by Kura Ensor, which she wore to meet the 1975 land marchers arriving at parliament.⁷⁸ She dressed for success for things Māori and emboldened a new generation to be confident in the patterns of the past represented in new ways.

Resonances

Both Iriaka Rātana and Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan broke barriers for women as working politicians with young children. What factors made it possible for them to do so? First, and probably most important, was the support of the Rātana movement who wanted their own trusted representatives in Parliament. This meant, in effect, that the close affiliation of each woman to the movement, Iriaka through her successive husbands and Whetū through her father, was in the end more important than their gender and both women enjoyed lengthy terms.

Iriaka Rātana served for 20 years while Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan served for nearly thirty. Once both women had received the endorsement of the Rātana movement on the basis of their family affiliation and training, their political support was secure no matter what their family situation. Pākehā women at the time had trouble being nominated for selection and had they been pregnant or the mothers of young children, it was unlikely that they would have been regarded as suitable candidates by selection committees.

Iriaka Rātana's parliamentary career was made possible by the support of her whānau. No other woman with such young children had entered Parliament before her. Of the five women that preceded Iriaka, one – Mabel Howard - was single and childless, and the other four had school-age or adult children. Iriaka's community rallied around and cared for her children in support of the larger Rātana cause. Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan became the first sitting MP to give birth during a Parliamentary session in 1970. Most first-time mothers in New Zealand that year were aged between 20 and 24, Whetū was 38 – what was known at the time as an “elderly primigravida” – and this may have been the reason that she gave birth by caesarian section.⁷⁹ In spite of this, Whetū was absent for only six working days since she did not want to be accused of not doing her job properly. Women had to perform like men in order to be taken seriously; the idea that difference might be catered for through maternity leave (let alone parental leave) was not yet on the agenda. Whetū took her baby everywhere for the first five months, including tours of her large electorate. After that, the daytime care of her daughter was entrusted to a member of the extended family. In a September 1971 *Woman's Weekly* interview, Whetū pointed out that “mothers of young children made up 23 per cent of the adult population” and therefore deserved representation in the House.⁸⁰

Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan went on to have two more children while in Parliament and led the Commonwealth as the first woman Cabinet Minister to have a baby. Whetū's second daughter, born prematurely in 1972, tragically died aged three months. Appointed Minister of Tourism in 1972 and Associate Minister of Social Welfare, she carried a heavy workload but was undeterred from having a third child, a son, born in 1974. May-Ana Tirikātene-Sullivan remembers the house of parliament as her playground where the wide corridors provided the space for her to learn to skate and ride her bike.⁸¹ But it was not until Ruth Richardson pushed for change to accommodate breast-feeding mothers in 1983 that a special room near the chamber was provided for women to nurse their babies.⁸²

Over Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan's time in Parliament, the power of the Rātana movement declined as other activist groups and parties arose and the voting system changed to Mixed Member Proportional Representation in 1993. In the spirit of Rātana, Whetū supported pan-tribal developments and was dismayed by the reassertion of iwi interests which led her at times to be at odds with her own iwi, Ngāi Tahu.⁸³ In 1996 the Rātana movement withdrew its support from Labour and Whetū was narrowly defeated by Tutekawa Wyllie of New Zealand First which captured all five Māori seats in that election.⁸⁴ Her retirement gave her more time for family but she kept her eye on former constituents and on politics, calling “the Hīkoi mo te Takutai (foreshore and seabed hīkoi) onto the forecourt of Parliament”.⁸⁵

The maiden speeches of Iriaka Rātana and Whetū Tirikātene-Sullivan were made with the consciousness that they were representing constituencies of women and men who had suffered through dispossession and the dishonouring of the Treaty of Waitangi. Rātana stressed the importance of decent housing for her people while Tirikātene-Sullivan stressed the centrality of education for young Māori and for all New Zealanders in te reo. The wider responsibility

resting on their shoulders had the unintended consequence of making them feminist foremothers to a later generation of women who sought both to participate in politics and bear children.

The two pioneering Māori women in parliament paved the way for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to give birth in office. They were women whose loyalty to the Rātana community came first and that community supported them irrespective of their family commitments. Ann Hercus, running for the Lyttelton electorate in 1978, faced accusations that she “was deserting her husband and children”.⁸⁶ As in this instance, Pākehā women candidates with families were often accused of abandoning their responsibilities whereas Iriaka Rātana and Whetū Tirikātene Sullivan were seen to be fulfilling theirs to the Rātana constituency. Since they led by example, we have had and now have a number of mothers of young children in Parliament. In September 2017, seven-week-old baby Heeni accompanied her mum, Northland Labour MP Willow-Jean Prime into the new Labour-led Parliament. Baby daughter of East Coast Labour MP Kiritapu Allen and her wife Natalie Coates arrived just before the 2017 election. According to Kiritapu, having a young child “makes you better because you are more focused on what you want to do and why”.⁸⁷ Motherhood no longer means exclusion from the public sphere – and, as many women politicians hoped – the voices of mothers can now be central to reshaping New Zealand society to be a place where all people are valued.

¹ Many thanks to the members of the Wellington History Writers’ Group whose input was invaluable. Thanks also to Karen Fox for commenting on the draft paper.

² “First sitting, 1854”, URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/house-of-parliament/first-sitting-1854>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 19 Aug 2014.

³ Rawinia Higgins rāua ko Paul Meredith, “Te mana o te wāhine – Māori women – Waiata, karanga and whaikōrero”, Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://TeAra.govt.nz/en/te-mana-o-te-wahine-maori-women/page-4> (accessed 27 April 2022).

⁴ Janet McCullum, *Women in the House: Members of Parliament in New Zealand* (Wellington: Cape Catley, 1993), 36-47; 48-57.

⁵ Pauline Horn, Margaret Leniston and Pauline Lewis, “The Maiden Speeches of New Zealand Women Members of Parliament,” *Political Science* 35, no. 2 (1983): 231. For biographies of both women see: Angela Ballara, “Rātana, Iriaka Matiu”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5r7/ratana-iriaka-matiu> (accessed 5 April 2019); Helen Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan, Tini Whetu Marama”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2018. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6t6/tirikatene-sullivan-tini-whetu-marama> (accessed 5 April 2019).

⁶ The other three were Ethel McMillan (Labour, 1953-1975), Esme Tombleson (National 1960-1972) and Rona Stevenson (National 1963-1972).

⁷ The first Canadian Indigenous woman, Ethel Blondin, was elected to the Parliament of Canada in 1988. Linda Burney was the first Aboriginal woman elected to the Australian House of Representatives in 2016.

⁸ M.P.K. Sorrenson, *A History of Māori Representation in Parliament*, Royal Commission on the Electoral System, Appendix B, H-3, p.B-40. <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/what-is->

[new-zealands-system-of-government/report-of-the-royal-commission-on-the-electoral-system/](https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4t18/tirikatene-eruera-tihema-te-aika).

⁹ Angela Ballara. “Tirikātene, Eruera Tihema Te Āika - Tirikatene, Eruera Tihema Te Aika”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1998. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4t18/tirikatene-eruera-tihema-te-aika> (accessed 27 April 2022)

¹⁰ “MP leaves legacy of style,”

https://www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/news/article.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=11299700 (accessed 27 April 2022).

¹¹ “Random Shots”, *Auckland Star*, September 19 1891, Supplement, 10.

¹² Angela Ballara. “Mangakāhia, Meri Te Tai” *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1993. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2m30/mangakahia-meri-te-tai> (accessed 9 May 2022)

¹³ Katie Pickles, “‘Fossilised prejudices’ and ‘strange revolution’: Commemorating the Women’s Parliamentary Rights Act 1919,” *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 53:2 (April 2019): 112.

¹⁴ Cited in Horn, et al, “Maiden Speeches”, 233.

¹⁵ Horn, et al, “Maiden Speeches”, 232.

¹⁶ For Otene’s listing as “Unofficial Labour” see *Thames Star*, November 25, 1935, 2.

¹⁷ *Evening Star*, November 27, 1935, 8.

¹⁸ “A Mere Woman,” *Northern Advocate*, July 24, 1935, 2. See also April 12, 1935, 6.

¹⁹ *Northern Advocate*, August 20, 1935, 2.

²⁰ Liz Gordon, “Catherine Stewart,” *The Book of New Zealand Women. Ko Kui Ma Te Kaupapa* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 1991), 625.

²¹ Ballara, “Ratana, Iriaka”.

²² Karen Fox, *Māori and Aboriginal Women in the Public Eye: Representing Difference, 1950-2000*, (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), 181.

²³ Richard Hill, *State Authority, Indigenous Autonomy: Crown-Maori Relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa 1900-1950* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2004), 141.

²⁴ Hill, *State Authority*, p. 144.

²⁵ Ballara, “Ratana, Iriaka”.

²⁶ R. Ngatata Love, “Policies of Frustration: The Growth of Maori Politics. The Ratana/Labour Era,” (PhD Diss., Victoria University of Wellington, 1977), 243.

²⁷ Love, “Policies of Frustration,” 183.

²⁸ Hill, *State Authority*, p. 146.

²⁹ The other three pledges read:

1. That the four Quarters would totally dedicate themselves to their mission to take their place in Parliament.
2. That they would accept no bribes, nor payment for their work and that they would not be motivated by any thought of personal gain.
3. That they would work “Mote Iwi Maori” for the whole of the Maori race without concern for tribe or other affiliations.

Love, “Policies of Frustration,” 251.

³⁰ Hill, *State Authority*, p. 159.

³¹ Angela Ballara. “Ratana, Haami Tokouru - Rātana, Haami Tokouru”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 1998. Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4r6/ratana-haami-tokouru> (accessed 16 April 2022)

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- ³² Keith Newman, *Ratana Revisited: An Unfinished Legacy* (Auckland: Reed Publishing, 2006), 401.
- ³³ “Western Maori Ferment,” *Taranaki Herald*, November 26, 1949, cited in Love, “Policies of Frustration,” 431.
- ³⁴ McDowell, 192. Full details needed for first appearance of this item.
- ³⁵ McDowell, short title, 196.
- ³⁶ McDowell, short title, 193.
- ³⁷ McDowell, short title, 194.
- ³⁸ Ballara, “Ratana, Iriaka”.
- ³⁹ Michael King, *Te Puea: A Life*, 4th edition (Auckland: Reed Publishing, 2003), 241.
- ⁴⁰ King, *Te Puea*, 116; 137-38.
- ⁴¹ Sandra Wallace, “Powder-power politicians: New Zealand Women Parliamentary Candidates” (PhD diss., University of Otago, 1992), 50.
- ⁴² Wallace, “Powder-Power”, 311.
- ⁴³ Sorrenson, “A History of Māori Representation”, B-48. Full details for first appearance.
- ⁴⁴ Wallace, “Powder Power,” 312.
- ⁴⁵ *The Wanganui Herald*, November 30, 1949, 6.
- ⁴⁶ *Wanganui Chronicle*, December 2, 1949, 8; Fox, *Māori and Aboriginal Women*, 189.
- ⁴⁷ *Evening Post*, November 28, 1949, cited in Fox, *Māori and Aboriginal Women*, 189.
- ⁴⁸ *Wanganui Herald*, 28 November 1949. Please add page reference
- ⁴⁹ *Wanganui Herald*, 28 November 1949. please add page reference
- ⁵⁰ Wallace, “Powder-Power”, 79-80.
- ⁵¹ *Wanganui Herald*, 28 November 1949. Please add page reference
- ⁵² Tui MacDonald, “Iriaka Ratana,” citing an address to the 1955 conference of the Māori Women’s Welfare League, *The Book of New Zealand Women*, 549.
- ⁵³ All the following points from Ratana’s address come from: *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol.289, 12 July 1950, 335-37. The term “Mōrehu” (remnant, survivor) was also used to refer to Rātana adherents.
- ⁵⁴ McDowell, short title 201. Ironically, it was Apirana Ngata in 1938 who reintroduced te reo into Parliament when he tabled a Ngāti Porou haka chastising the Labour government for not allowing Māori to benefit from income from petroleum mining. Ngata provided his own translation, breaking protocol that Māori could not translate their own speeches, McDowell, 188).
- ⁵⁵ Diane Langmore, “Lyons, Dame Enid Muriel (1897-1981),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 18 (2012). Publication details and page reference
- ⁵⁶ Ballara, ‘Ratana, Iriaka Matiu’.
- ⁵⁷ Hon. Mr Doidge, *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol.289, 12 July 1950, 337.
- ⁵⁸ G.V. Butterworth, *Māori in the New Zealand Economy* (Wellington: Department of Industries and Commerce, 1967), 42.
- ⁵⁹ Barbara Brookes, *A History of New Zealand Women* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2016), 311.
- ⁶⁰ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, 26 July to 7 September 1962, Vol.331, 812.
- ⁶¹ Alistair Woodward and Tony Blakely, *The Healthy Country? A History of Life and Death in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2014), 144.
- ⁶² Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris, *Tangata Whenua: An Illustrated History* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2015), 395; K. Hunn, Report on the Department of Maori Affairs, Wellington, 1961, 18-19; Ian Pool and Natalie Jackson,

“Population change – Māori population change”, Te Ara – the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/population-change/page-6> (accessed 15 May 2022)

⁶³ Janet McCullum, *Women in the House: Members of Parliament in New Zealand* (Wellington: Cape Catley, 1993), 67.

⁶⁴ McCullum, *Women in the House*, 67.

⁶⁵ Cited in Ballara, ‘Ratana, Iriaka Matiu’.

⁶⁶ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol.369, 29 May 1969, 369-70.

⁶⁷ Newman, *Ratana Revisited*, 403.

⁶⁸ McCullum, *Women in the House*, 93. Biographical details that follow are based on this source.

⁶⁹ “Where the Queen went she followed,” *Te Ao Hou*, no.7 (Summer 1954): 11.

⁷⁰ This paragraph draws on McCallum, *Women in the House*, 94.

⁷¹ McCullum, short title, 95.

⁷² Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan”.

⁷³ All the following points from her speech may be found here: *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol.350, 16 May 1967, 548-52.

⁷⁴ “The Long History of the Phrase ‘Civil Rights’”, Merriam-Webster.

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/civil-rights#:~:text=While%20the%20modern%20civil%20rights,Americans%20since%20the%2019th%20century>. Accessed 20 April 2022.

⁷⁵ Richard Hill, *Māori and the State: Crown-Māori Relations in New Zealand/Aotearoa* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2009), 115.

⁷⁶ McCallum, 97.

⁷⁷ Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan”.

⁷⁸ Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan”.

⁷⁹ John F. Sullivan, “The Elderly Primigravida,” *Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, April 1960, <https://obgyn.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/j.1471-0528.1960.tb06989.x#accessDenialLayout>

⁸⁰ Cited in McCallum, 97.

⁸¹ “Mothers in Parliament: The women who paved the way for Jacinda Ardern”, Newshub. <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2018/06/mothers-in-parliament-the-women-who-paved-the-way-for-jacinda-ardern.html>

⁸² “Breastfeeding babies in the debating chamber becoming normalized”, Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/parenting/baby/breastfeeding/98704752/breastfeeding-babies-in-the-debating-chamber-becoming-normalised>

⁸³ Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan”.

⁸⁴ Philip A. Joseph, *The Māori Seats in Parliament* (Wellington: New Zealand Business Roundtable, May 2008), 13.

<https://www.nzcpnr.com/wpcontent/uploads/2014/08/TheMāoriSeatsInParliament.pdf>

⁸⁵ Brown, “Tirikatene-Sullivan”.

⁸⁶ McCallum, short title, 139.

⁸⁷ “Ardern’s baby already has friends in high places”, Stuff. <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/parenting/baby/100748953/Arderns-baby-already-has-friends-in-high-places>