



## CHAPTER 14

Ellen Andersen

### Iriaka Rātana

25 February 1905 – 21 December 1981

1949–1951	MP for Western Maori
1951–1954	MP for Western Maori
1954–1957	MP for Western Maori
1957–1960	MP for Western Maori
1960–1963	MP for Western Maori
1963–1966	MP for Western Maori
1966–1969	MP for Western Maori

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New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.

**Iriaka Rātana** was the first Māori woman to be elected to Parliament. Throughout her 20 years of service as Member for Western Māori she found success as a politician through both the policies she promoted, as well as the support she provided to Members of Parliament across the political spectrum.

Born Iriaka Te Rio in 1905 at Hiruhārama (Jerusalem), a settlement on the upper Whanganui River, her father was Te Rio Te Hihiri of Ngāti Hāua ki Taumarunui and Ngāti Ruru, a hapū of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi. Her mother was Merania 'Delphine' Te Karaute of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi. Iriaka also had affiliations to Ngā Poutama, and Ngāti Uenuku of Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi.

Her childhood home of Hiruhārama was near the convent and school established by the Sisters of Compassion in 1892. Iriaka was educated there and learnt to play the piano.<sup>1</sup> This was of great benefit to her when she visited Rātana Pā with her family for the first time in 1921 and went on to become part of the prophet Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana's touring performance troupe.

In 1925 she became the second wife to Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana. She was known as 'Te Whaea iti', while his first wife Te Urumanaao was known as 'Te Whaea o te Katoa'.<sup>2</sup>



ABOVE: Group associated with the 1924 world tour of Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana. Photograph taken at Rātana. Iriaka Te Rio is front row, third from right, and Te Urumanaao is seated behind her right shoulder. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Tiaki Ref: 1/1-017026-F.

Iriaka had two sons with Rātana, unfortunately losing one to tuberculosis when only six years old.

Following the death of T.W. Rātana in 1939, Iriaka married Matiu Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, a son of the Māngai and Te Urumanaao. The couple farmed a dairy farm at Whangaehu that was established through the Māori land development schemes. It was during these initial farming years that Matiu Rātana entered Parliament in 1945 as MP for Western Māori, replacing his late brother Haami Tokouru Rātana. Matiu Rātana spent four years in Parliament, but on 7 October 1949 at the age of only 36, he died as a result of a car crash.<sup>3</sup>

When news of his death reached Parliament, time was given for speeches,



LEFT: Portrait of Matiu Ratana, MP for Western Maori from 1945-1949. S. P. Andrew Ltd. Ref: 1/4-020126-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23075886

OPPOSITE: *New Zealand Labour Party: Labour and the Maori elector; Te Roopu Reipa me te Maori e Pooti ana.* Printed by Whitcombe & Tombs Limited, 1949. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Ref: Eph-A-NZ-LABOUR-1949-04.

where many praised his contribution, and Keith Holyoake noted that 'we all hope and feel that a man will rise to take Matiu Rātana's place to give leadership and inspiration to the Maori people'.<sup>4</sup>

Following the funeral at Rātana Pā, it was reported by newspapers of the time that discussions were held around the appropriate candidate, and that 'among the names mentioned was that of Mrs Iriaka Rātana, widow of the late member. Other possible women candidates were mentioned by Matamata and Waikato representatives'.<sup>5</sup> Present at these discussions was the Member for Southern Māori, Eruera Tirikatene, and headlines such as 'Maoris May Nominate A Woman To Contest Western Electorate' began to appear in local newspapers.<sup>6</sup>

Selecting a woman as candidate seemed a risky move for the Labour Party, but it was calculated to be a greater risk to go against the wishes of their Rātana supporters in the Māori electorates. As the last surviving adult member of the Rātana family, it was considered that,

'the Government cannot overlook the Rātana movement. To ignore the movement might affect the results in Northern and Eastern Maori'.<sup>7</sup>

Iriaka Rātana already had a deep understanding of the political relationship of the Labour Party with the Rātana movement, and on the last day for submitting candidates for the 1949 election, with only two weeks available for campaigning, she was selected to run alongside Hon. Eruera Tirikatene, Tapihana Paraire Paikea and Tiaki Omana (Jack Ormond).

Maori children at school from their own Maori High Schools.

The Maori men regularly in Maori and English.

Maori in discussion prior to the meeting of the Maori Council.

### Full Equality and Opportunity

Me eke eke te whaka whiwhi whaka whiwhi  
Awhina mo te Maori i te Pakeha

Labour has given reality to the Maori's full equality in a lifetime and equal opportunity in health, education, housing, social security, cultural and economic life.

Labour will encourage still further the progress of the Maori people, encouraging their full adaptation to economic life and the best use of their own lands and opportunities in trades and professions.

### Progress in Maori Education

Nai Atu nga kura i Whaka whiwhi kia whiwhi ki te taunanga mo nga taunanga Maori

I HAKO I TE REIPA

The Labour Government has increased the number and developed the quality of our education facilities for Maori.

School buildings have provided space under the Labour Government and work done at Maori High Schools can truly be said to be a very big step.

There are many Maori children in our schools as did they and the opportunities afforded through scholarships and bursaries have been very considerably increased.

Today the Maori child has not only all the opportunities given to his Pakeha brother, but distinctive training in special Maori schools. The increase in the number of Maori students in Teachers College and in the University is proof that these opportunities are being availed.

### These are your CANDIDATES

HON. E. T. TIRIKATENE  
Northern Maori

JACK ORMOND (TIAKI OMANA)  
Western Maori

### Full Rehabilitation for the Maori Ex-Servicemen

Nai atu nga awhina ki nga kura Maori i nga mahi, me te whaka whiwhi ki nga kura i te Whenua

I HAKO I TE REIPA

In respect of education and training, the Maori ex-servicemen receive exactly the same benefits as all others. They have been given considerable assistance in housing, trade training, education and farm settlement and more than 5000 Maori have received one or another of these rehabilitation benefits while over 100 ex-servicemen have been settled on farms.

TAPIHANA PARAIKE PAIKEA

MRS. IRIAKA M. RATANA

There were seven women who stood as candidates in the 1949 election, and two of them stood in the Western Māori electorate, the other being Kataraina Nutana, representing the Kauhanganui Independent Māori Party.

Rātana was elected on 29 November 1949 with a clear majority, 6,317 votes ahead of the National Party candidate Hoeroa Marumarū, although National was to form the government. She gave birth to her youngest child in December that year, and with support from her extended family for childcare. She entered Parliament, giving her maiden speech on 12 July 1950. \*

The future of our Māori people lies in good homes and good houses.<sup>8</sup>

Her primary focus while in Parliament was on issues relating to Māori welfare, for both the young and old, advocating for kaumātua housing, as well as hostels and trades training for young Māori moving to the cities.

Iriaka Rātana was also a foundation member of the Māori Women's Welfare League, which was established in 1951 and provided a significant national platform for advancing Māori women's causes by Māori women themselves.

During her time in Parliament, she was also a member of the Māori Affairs Committee, the Ngārimu VC and 28th Māori Battalion Memorial Scholarship Fund Board, the Māori Purposes Fund Board, and was elected to the Aotea and Waikato-Maniapoto District Māori Land Boards.

In 1957 Labour came to power for the first time in her parliamentary tenure, but she did not seek a position in Cabinet. She instead became an advisor to Prime Minister Walter Nash who held the Māori Affairs portfolio. In 1959 a car crash left her with injuries, and unable to attend to parliamentary duties for over a year.

In 1969 Rātana retired from Parliament, reflecting in her valedictory that 'the future of race relations in New Zealand depends on our growing faith in one another'. She was appointed OBE in 1971 for her service to Māori. She returned to her farm in Whangaehu, to garden and continue her weaving work, for which she was well accomplished in the art of korowai. She died in 1981 at the age of 76, survived by nine children and many grandchildren.

Her portrait was added to Matangireia in 2016. At the ceremony to recognise her inclusion, her grandson Adrian Rurawhe, who was elected as Member of Parliament for Te Tai Hauāuru in 2014, said of his grandmother:

I feel quite privileged that I spent a lot of time with my grandmother, and learnt lots of lessons that she was determined all her grandchildren would learn, ...to work for the people, and not just go straight to the front, you have to do the hard yards first.

BELOW: Iriaka Rātana with other Labour Party members, speaks on Manukorihi marae, Waitara, in 1966. Archives New Zealand Ref: AAMK W3495 21 21B



## Further Reading

Angela Ballara. 'Rātana, Iriaka Matiu', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000. In *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/5r7/ratana-iriaka-matiu>

Jaren Fox. *Māori and Aboriginal Women in the Public Eye: Representing Difference, 1950-2000*. ANU Press, Canberra ACT, 2011

Helen Leahy. *Crossing the Floor: The Story of Tariana Turia*. Huia Publishers, Wellington, NZ, 2015.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Angela Ballara, 'Rātana, Iriaka Matiu', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2000. In *Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed at: (give link)

<sup>2</sup> Helen Leahy, *Crossing the Floor: The Story of Tariana Turia* / by Helen Leahy Wellington, Huia, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> 'Deaths', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 10 October 1949.

<sup>4</sup> Leahy, *Crossing the Floor*.

<sup>5</sup> 'No W. Maori Labour Candidate Yet', *Northern Advocate*, 14 October 1949.

<sup>6</sup> 'Maoris May Nominate a Woman to Contest Western Electorate', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 14 October 1949.

<sup>7</sup> 'Labour Still Has No Candidate for W. Maori', *Northern Advocate*, 15 November 1949.

<sup>8</sup> Iriaka Rātana, 'Maiden Speech, in New Zealand Parliamentary Debates', Wellington, House of Representatives, 12 July 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Angela Ballara, 'Rātana, Iriaka Matiu'.

<sup>10</sup> Iriaka Rātana, 'Valedictory Speech, in New Zealand Parliamentary Debates', Wellington, House of Representatives, 29 May 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Ripeka Timutimu, 'Portraits of Honourable female Māori MPs unveiled at Mātangireia', *Te Kōwhiri*, Māori Television, 11 February 2016, accessed at: [www.teaomaori.news/portraits-honourable-female-maori-mps-unveiled-matangireia](http://www.teaomaori.news/portraits-honourable-female-maori-mps-unveiled-matangireia)