



CHAPTER 16

Sophia Newton

Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan

9 January 1932 – 20 July 2011

1967–1969	MP for Southern Māori
1969–1972	MP for Southern Māori
1972–1975	MP for Southern Māori
1975–1978	MP for Southern Māori
1978–1981	MP for Southern Māori
1981–1984	MP for Southern Māori
1984–1987	MP for Southern Māori
1987–1990	MP for Southern Māori
1990–1993	MP for Southern Māori
1993–1996	MP for Southern Māori
1974–1975	Minister for the Environment
1972–1975	Minister of Tourism

From: Andersen, Ellen (ed.) (2022)
"Matangireia: a Space for Māori in
Parliament." Wellington: Heritage
New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.

The Hon. Tini Whetu Marama Tirikatene-Sullivan ONZ was New Zealand's first Māori woman Cabinet Minister. After 10 terms in office, she is also the second longest serving woman Member of Parliament and represented the Southern Māori electorate for the Labour Party from 1967–1996. As a staunch advocate for Māori rights, Tirikatene-Sullivan was a crucial figure in establishing the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975 and developing the Māori Language Act 1987. Almost as memorable as her political achievements, was her distinctive and signature style, which included Māori customary patterns in modern fashion.

Tini Whetu Marama Tirikatene was born at Rātana Pā in 1932. Her mother was Ruti Matekino Horomona (Solomon), who was of Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu, Danish and Jewish descent.¹ Her father was Eruera Tirikatene, of Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Toa and English whakapapa. Having just lost his bid for the Southern Māori seat at the election a month prior to her birth, he would go on to win the seat through by-election when baby Whetu was only six months old.

Her parents were required to travel extensively due to her father's parliamentary service, and she was raised in the Rātana faith by her grandmother, Amiria Solomon, who was a dressmaker and tailor. She excelled at school, first attending Rangiora High School and then Wellington East Girls' College, where she developed interests in fencing and Latin American ballroom dancing.

Following her secondary schooling she worked as a stenographer for the Royal New Zealand Airforce in Wellington from 1949. She was seconded from her work with the RNZAF to support the royal entourage when Queen Elizabeth II toured the country from December 1953.² Unfortunately she contracted tuberculosis during this time, which took her four years to recover from.³

WHERE THE QUEEN WENT SHE FOLLOWED

WI HAPI LOVE

The exciting post of secretary to the Assistant Director of the Royal Tour, advertised in 1951, drew a large number of applications, some from specially recommended Public Service stenographers. The choice fell on then 19-year-old Whetu Marama Tirikatene.

In spite of her youth, she had all the qualities for the job—ability, appearance, deportment and personality. In stenography Whetu had passed the Highest Public Service Stenographers' Examinations (called the Special examination) with a shorthand speed of 150 words a minute, and a typing speed of at least 55 words a minute. She had done her Junior Chamber of Commerce Examination (in 5 subjects), Senior Chamber of Commerce and, of course, University Entrance. That she was one of the Dominion's four top women in the graceful sport of fencing, holder of the New Zealand Latin-American amateur ballroom dancing title—along with her Australian partner, Kevin Mansfield—and also did fashion modelling, would bear out her qualifications in appearance and deportment. And Whetu's personality and charm had been easily detected in a previous interview.

So, as well equipped as one could wish, this talented young lady was seconded from her position at R.N.Z.A.F. Headquarters to the Royal Tour Office of the Department of Internal Affairs.

On December 23 of this year, Whetu Tirikatene—now 21—was one of New Zealand's official party to be presented to the Queen. As if this were not thrill enough for any young British subject, Whetu then travelled around New Zealand as a member of the Royal entourage.

It is indeed gratifying to know that, whilst Whetu has had time to accomplish all this—as well as, at stages in her 21 years, take lessons in piano, violin and 'cello playing, and



Miss Whetu Tirikatene

many forms of dancing; gain her driver's licence, and design and make most of her clothes—her parents, the Hon. E. T. Tirikatene (M.P. for Southern Maori) and Mrs Tirikatene, have trained her in all phases of Maori culture. Even in her very early 'teens, Whetu was the first to give the traditional 'Karanga' to the Maori Battalion on the occasion of their arrival in the South Island after the cessation of hostilities, when, in the absence of her mother, she accompanied her father at the welcoming ceremony. Also, in similar fashion, Whetu led the Maori welcome to the overseas delegates to the Pan-Pacific Women's Conference, brandishing a patu with grace and dignity as she supported her father's presentation of the performing of the wero.

Both the North and South Islands can claim a part of Whetu's genealogy; Ngāti-Kahungunu, on her mother's side, for the North, and Ngaitahu, on her father's side, for the South.

Kia ora a Hine!

11
 ABOVE: Wi Hapi Love wrote the feature 'Where the Queen Went, She Followed', in the Department of Māori Affairs publication *Te Ao Hou*, Summer 1954.

Following her recovery she worked for the Department of Māori Affairs as a welfare officer in Wellington and undertook social work in Rotorua. She undertook further study, and graduated from Victoria University of Wellington with a Diploma in Social Science and a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and Public Administration. She was awarded a postgraduate scholarship to attend the Australian National University in 1965. Her doctoral thesis detailed the New Zealand Labour Party's alliance with the Rātana faith and movement. During her doctoral studies, she met fellow PhD student Dennis John Howard Sullivan, and the two married in 1967.⁴

In January 1967, her father The Hon Sir Eruera Te Āika Tihema Tirikatene died while still a Member of Parliament. Tirikatene-Sullivan returned home and became the Labour candidate for the March by-election. She won, becoming the youngest female member of the New Zealand Parliament at the time. Her maiden speech laid out her intentions to deliver for Māori and the importance of closing the gap on Māori-Pākehā achievement. While in opposition, she advocated against aspects of the Māori Affairs Amendment Act 1967 that would diminish the rights of Māori landowners. She supported the Ngāi Tahu Māori Trust Board in its opposition to the Electoral Amendment Act 1969, and took a feminist stance on many issues relating to women in Parliament.

In 1970 her first child, May-Ana, was born, making her the second woman to give birth whilst an MP. Her second daughter, Lisa-Marie, was born in 1973 but died during infancy. Her son, Tiri, was born in 1974, making Tirikatene-Sullivan the first woman cabinet minister to give birth in office in the British Commonwealth. At the time, almost a quarter of the voter population were mothers of young children, and as a new mother, Tirikatene-Sullivan felt strongly that their voices should be represented in Parliament.

She represented New Zealand at the tumultuous United Nations International Women's Year conference in Mexico in 1975, where she railed against the lack of concern for feminist issues on the agenda. She opposed the Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Bill 1977, stating that abortion was 'fundamental to a woman's ability to participate equally in society'. She was vocal about the inequalities evident in the House itself, especially the rules excluding women from Parliament's Bellamys Bar and the visitor area. While women do not traditionally speak on the marae, Tirikatene-Sullivan is still one of the few women to speak at Rātana Pā and became the first woman to speak at Tūranga-waewae Marae in Ngāruawāhia. Tirikatene-Sullivan noted in a

documentary that it was 'interesting' that she and Iriaka Rātana, the only two Māori women to have been elected at the time, 'came on the background of [the] Rātana movement, where women are accepted in every way'.⁷

After five years in opposition for Tirikatene-Sullivan, Labour won the 1972 general election, and she became the first Māori woman Cabinet Minister, as Minister of Tourism and Associate Minister of Social Welfare.⁸ She also became Minister for the Environment in 1974. As Minister of Tourism, she advanced the use of Māori arts and crafts in the design of New Zealand souvenirs.

BELOW: The Labour Shadow Cabinet, photographed 17 December 1979 by the *Evening Post*. Standing (L-R) Fraser Colman, Russell Marshall, Koro Wetere, Joe Walding, Mick Connelly, Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, Michael Bassett, Roger Douglas and Frank O'Flynn. Seated (L-R) Sir Basil Arthur, Bob Tizard, David Lange, Bill Rowling and Arthur Faulkner. Alexander Turnbull Library /records/22837675





Labour was in opposition again in 1975, and Tirikatene-Sullivan changed her focus to broadcasting and media. She supported the movement for Māori content on television and radio, and was crucial in establishing New Zealand's first Māori television channel. She was a critical figure in the development of the Waitangi Tribunal Act 1975, as well as the Māori Language Act 1987 which sought the official status of te reo Māori.

Fashion was a long-time interest of Tirikatene-Sullivan's that was fostered by her grandmother from an early age. Her style became an identifying feature of her image, with the incorporation of Māori customary patterns, like the koru embedded in her styling choices. As a seasoned politician she understood the importance of public image in her role, and like political leaders before her, she used fashion as a political statement. She commissioned several garments from contemporary Māori artists, including Paratene Matchitt, Cliff Whiting, Frank Davis and Sandy Adsett. Her outfits were some of the first modern garments to include traditional Māori patterns and designs. During the 1975 Māori Land March, she wore a dress designed by Kura Ensor with red, black and white kowhaiwhai print. She stood proudly at the front of the march, one of the most important events in Māori rights history, wearing a distinctly and unapologetically Māori design. Many of her garments are immortalised in collections by Te Papa and the Hawke's Bay Museum.

In 1993 Tirikatene-Sullivan's service was formally recognised when she was appointed a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit, the highest civilian award granted by the New Zealand Government. After 30 years of public service, she retired in 1996 after a narrow loss to New Zealand First's Tu Wyllie.

On 20 July 2011, Tirikatene-Sullivan passed away following a stroke. A public memorial was held at the Cathedral of St Paul in Wellington, with hundreds of mourners in attendance. In 2016 her portrait was raised in a special commemoration in Matangireia, alongside the portrait of her father Sir Eruera Tirikatene. Whetu Mārama Tirikatene-Sullivan was survived by her husband, two children and two mokopuna.

OPPOSITE: Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan with husband Dennis Sullivan and others at "Fashion Spectacular 73", Wellington. *Evening Post and Dominion*. Ref: EP/1973/1048/12-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22683483

Further Reading

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>

Johnsen, Meriana, 'He wāhine, he manawa titi: ngā rangatira o Ngāi Tahu', *Te Karaka*, issue 80, Summer 2018/19. Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu.

Boon, Kevin. *Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan*. Kotuku Publications, 2006. •

References

Helen Brown, 'Tirikātene-Sullivan, Tini Whetū Maramā', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, first published in 2018. In *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed at: [\(give link\)](#)

'Where the Queen Went, She Followed', *Te Ao Hou*, Summer 1954, p 11.

Helen Brown, 'Tirikātene-Sullivan, Tini Whetū Maramā'.

'New M.P. Secretly Married', *The Press*, 15 April 1967, p 1.

New Zealand Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), 19 August 1977, 412: 2367, quote in Brown, 'Tirikātene-Sullivan, Tini Whetū Maramā'.

Johnsen, Meriana, 'He wāhine, he manawa titi: ngā rangatira o Ngāi Tahu', *Te Karaka*, Summer 2018/19, 80: 18. Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu.

Sandra Coney et al., *Standing in the Sunshine. Power* / Director, Judy Rymer, Power, Auckland, Isambard Productions, 1993.

Karen Fox, *Māori and Aboriginal Women in the Public Eye: Representing Difference, 1950-2000*, Canberra, A.C.T., ANU E Press, 2011, p 31.

Smith, Natalie, 'Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan – Travel in Style', *Textile History*, 46(2015): 266–68.

³ Wratislav, Elizabeth, Lucy Hammonds and Tryphena Cracknell. *Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan: Travel in Style*, 4TG Hawke's Bay (Museum), Napier, 2014.



ABOVE: Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan beneath the portrait of her father in Matangireia. Photograph for the *Evening Post*, 25 October 1996. Alexander Turnbull Library, /records/22397649