

‘Ka Hoki a Kupe?’

THE POLITICAL CAREER OF MATIU RATA, 1963–1979



ON 29 APRIL 1980, A THRONG OF SUPPORTERS, family members, Rātana elders and reporters gathered in the corridor outside the office of the Speaker of Parliament, eagerly awaiting the announcement of the resignation of the Northern Maori Member of Parliament, the Honourable Matiu Rata. As Rata emerged, his supporters broke into an impromptu haka, and a korowai (cloak) was placed over his shoulders. Rata announced to the awaiting media ‘I shall return’, quoting the bold words of Douglas McArthur.¹ Instead his words would come to echo the famous final pronouncement of the foundational ancestor for many of the iwi (tribes) of the North whom Rata represented. Ka hoki a Kupe – will Kupe return?

By this stage in his career, Rata had proven himself to be an able and effective Māori MP. He had transcended some of the limitations of Māori political representation that had confounded his Rātana–Labour predecessors, who had struggled to influence Labour policy and ‘remained peripheral to policy decisions on Maori matters’ between 1932 and 1960.² In contrast, Rata was able to wield power in parliament while retaining a critical voice of his own, and had achieved things his predecessors would not have thought possible. But by the late 1970s Rata had hit the proverbial glass ceiling: the National Party held government and were deaf to the pleas of Māori communities, Labour’s leadership was no longer willing to entertain Māori ambitions for reform, and Rata had been demoted within the party’s hierarchy. Challenged by the paradox of Māori political representation, Rata would make the leap of faith that his predecessors had been unwilling to make. In resigning from the Labour Party, Rata broke the 43-year-long Rātana–Labour alliance, and began the process that would see Labour’s monopoly of the Māori seats crumble away.

Rata’s career is worthy of closer inspection, as it marks an important phase in the history of Māori engagement with parliament and represents one of the high points of Māori political achievement. This article will chart Rata’s political career as a Rātana–Labour MP between 1963 and 1979. It begins with a review of the literature on Rata. It continues with a biographical sketch of Rata’s life before entering parliament, followed by an analysis of his career, covering four key periods: his time in opposition between 1963 and

1972, his short stint in office as Minister of Maori Affairs and Lands between 1973 and 1975, the gradual decline of his career in opposition between 1976 and 1979, and his resignation from the Labour Party in 1979.

The existing literature presents Rata as a man of contradictions. Michael King offers us a snapshot of Rata in 1975 as a well-meaning MP sympathetic to Māori concerns over land loss yet at odds with the ambitions of the Māori land march: 'In over two years in Government he [Rata] had worked hard to have Crown Land returned to Māori ownership in cases where it had not been used for the purposes for which it had been taken, and to have land administered by the Department of Māori Affairs returned to the control of Māori owners. He regarded Matakite's existence as a vote of no confidence in his efforts. He felt undermined and discredited by the suggestion of the march.'³

By 1979 we are presented with a view of Rata as a radical, who threw in his job to form the Māori political movement Mana Motuhake. Writers offer various reasons for this sudden and dramatic change from conservative to radical: Ranginui Walker has emphasized that Rata's transformation was politically driven and was evidence of the radical protest activities of the 1970s spilling into mainstream politics.⁴ Kayleen Hazlehurst described Rata's transformation as driven by a combination of 'lost faith' in the ability of Pākehā politics to deliver to Māori, and his own personal anger at being demoted within the Labour Party.⁵

Depictions of Rata's capabilities as an MP embody similar contradictions, portraying an incapable man who left an exemplary legacy. Lyndsay Cox described Rata as an able Minister of Maori Affairs whose contemporaries underestimated his abilities: 'In hindsight, his achievements as Minister are recognized as having had considerable impact at a national level. His contemporaries, however, were slow to accord him his due, the media preferring to portray him as an ill-educated man incapable of finishing a sentence.'⁶ In a similar vein Hazlehurst identified Rata as 'the most influential Maori politician of his generation', yet he was regarded by his colleagues as a 'clumsy, inarticulate ... not well read ... repetitious ... consistently inconsistent' man who spoke in 'unpunctuated gushes – the words just poured out and the listener usually got lost long before he ran out of breath'.⁷

To explain the twists and turns that came to typify the life of this complex and unpredictable figure we must look to his background and his early career. Understanding Rata's personality and his dynamic politics in these early years is crucial to understanding the dramatic decision he made to leave the Labour Party in 1979. A greater awareness of the historical context and of the trend of politicians, historians and the media consistently undervaluing

Māori politicians helps to explain why Rata was able to pursue his goals where others had faltered, and why he was underestimated by his colleagues. Far more needs to be known about the politics, personality and career of this significant and influential Māori politician and leader. Understanding his career in turn explains much about Māori political engagement and the limitations of Māori parliamentary representation.

Rata's background was to play a significant role in leading him to a career in politics. Rata was born on 26 March 1934 in the small Far North town of Te Hāpua.⁸ He claimed whakapapa connections to the iwi of Ngāti Kuri, Te Aupōuri and Ngāti Whātua.⁹ Rata was one of five children: his father, a gum digger and farm labourer, died when he was 10, after which his mother moved to Auckland to work as a Post Office cleaner, taking with her four of his siblings.¹⁰ Rata was left to live with an aunty in Kaitaia, moving to Auckland in 1944 when his mother was offered a state house in Panmure.¹¹ Rata's experiences growing up in a single-parent family in urban Auckland and living in a state housing complex fomented his interest in politics from an early age. In his own words: 'Politics were not academic for us. It was very real. It was on the street. Politics for us represented the means of getting out and into a new opportunity, a new environment, a new home, a new start.'¹²

Rata left school early: he worked as a farm labourer in Taupiri for a spell, and became a merchant seaman in 1950, travelling the southern trade routes of the Pacific.¹³ Rata gained his Able Seaman's Certificate and joined the Seamen's Union at this time: he was involved in the 1951 waterfront dispute, and joined the Labour Party in that year.¹⁴ On returning to New Zealand in 1954 Rata worked a variety of jobs. He was an employee of the New Zealand Railways from 1960 to 1963, working as a spray painter and performing other odd jobs at the Ōtāhuhu Railway Workshops, and rose to prominence through his work as a union organizer for both the Railways and the Seamen's Union and a member of the executive of the Amalgamated Society of Railways Servants in Ōtāhuhu.¹⁵ Rata became chairman of his local branch of the Labour Party, and Labour area organizer in Auckland for Northern member Tapihana Paikea.¹⁶ He married his wife Nellie in 1959 and became the father of three children.¹⁷

Rata was also a member of the Rātana church. In 1957 he was chairman of the Auckland branch of the church, a registered Apostle, and vice-chairman of the Rātana Youth Movement, which numbered some 12,000 members.¹⁸ Rata was an outspoken and at times controversial leader of the movement, challenging the church hierarchy to campaign for the lowering of the voting age to 18, oppose French nuclear testing in the Pacific, and deplore sporting contacts with South Africa.¹⁹

Rata's serendipitous combination of a Rātana upbringing, Labour affiliations, union support, and close connections with the incumbent Northern member Paikea would lead him to parliament. With the sudden passing of Paikea in January 1963, Rata's colleagues from the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants put him forth as a nominee for the Northern seat.²⁰ Rata was selected from a field of 13 candidates and contested and won the ensuing Northern by-election, entering parliament in 1963 at the tender age of 28.²¹

Rata entered parliament at a time of change. By the 1960s Labour control over the seats had waxed and Rātana control had waned. Labour had begun to monopolize the candidate selection process, and Rata himself was the first of many Labour MPs for whom a Rātana affiliation was considered beneficial but entirely optional. Rata and his colleagues inherited a political tradition encapsulating the Rātana–Labour alliance and a commitment to the issues of the Treaty of Waitangi, Māori land rights and social and cultural reform. They were the third generation of politicians who had represented their people with eloquence and dignity in parliament, but for whom powerful oratory was not always matched by positions of power in government. Rata was to play the leading role in the 1960s and 70s; in many ways he conformed to the political tradition he inherited, yet he also challenged and at times transcended the boundaries of Māori political representation.

Rata spoke often and at length on the treaty. He campaigned in 1963 and 1966 for the introduction of Waitangi Day as a national paid holiday, and introduced a private member's bill to rename the proposed holiday 'New Zealand Day' in 1971. Rata played a crucial role in elevating the status of the treaty during his career, yet his attitudes towards the treaty differed markedly from those of his predecessors and courted the contempt of a number of his contemporaries. True to his socialist roots, Rata believed class, not race, was the decisive factor in creating the inequalities that existed between Māori and Pākehā, and could be resolved via socialist reforms. Rata did not regard the Treaty of Waitangi solely as a symbol of Māori rights or tribal grievance; more so he saw it as a potent symbol of New Zealand nationalism, and a means of fostering positive race relations and celebrating multiculturalism. As an example, in 1966 he supported the introduction of Waitangi Day as a way 'to instil nationalism and give recognition to it' at a time 'when relations with Great Britain appear to be strained', arguing that celebrating Waitangi would 'instil confidence in' and 'give reality to the principle of a multiracial society'.²² On introducing the New Zealand Day Bill in 1971 Rata summed up his sentiments: 'The Treaty of Waitangi is not something that is confined to the Maori race; it is something which all New Zealanders should feel they have a part in. Contrary to the feelings expressed by some, that to set aside

Waitangi would simply mean an occasion to celebrate the misdeeds of the past, I think that this would be the first step towards correcting long-standing misdeeds and misgivings.²³

Rata was to be caught up in a maelstrom of activity surrounding Māori land. He viewed Māori land issues as a three-way equation: a lack of government support for Māori land development led to land loss, land loss led to urbanization, and urbanization led to crime, 'deculturalisation', unemployment and social problems.²⁴ Rata believed land incorporations were the most effective means of dealing with fragmented land titles, and suggested the establishment of a federation of land incorporations to pool resources and access finance and expert advice, a vision actuated by the Federation of Māori Authorities nearly a quarter of a century later.²⁵

Most significantly, Rata led opposition to the infamous Maori Affairs Amendment Bill 1967, dubbed by Māori 'the last land grab'.²⁶ Rata feared the government was attempting to 'bulldoze the bill' through parliament, and asked that they take a 'taihoa' or 'wait and see' policy, so that the bill could be circulated widely, studied closely and debated at length before any decision was made.²⁷ He condemned the government's efforts to commandeer unproductive Māori land and uneconomic shares, urging them instead to 'actively pursue a policy aimed at the development of Maori land for the use, occupation and benefit of Maoris'.²⁸

Rata warned the government 'I do not think this country can afford this short-sighted policy', and made it clear during the third reading that opponents of the Bill 'had no option but to oppose it outright, and it will be reviewed by a future Government at the first opportunity'.²⁹ His words proved to be prophetic: the Act was the catalyst that sparked the emergence of Māori activism in the urban centres of Auckland and Wellington in the late 1960s. His leadership on the issue led to his appointment as Minister of Maori Affairs and Lands in 1973, and Rata would spend his time as minister repealing the offending clauses of the Act.

Housing was another issue high on Rata's priority list; he campaigned to increase the number and quality of rental properties and hostels available to Māori and Pacific Islanders, and constantly complained about landlords overcrowding rental properties, charging exorbitant rents and renting out substandard housing to Māori and Pacific Island tenants.³⁰ He supported reforms of the real-estate industry to ensure equitable access to properties, and the introduction of stiff fines of up to \$500 for real-estate agents and landlords found to be discriminating against potential customers.³¹ Rata also campaigned for increased state housing in rural areas as a means of stemming the flow of Māori to the cities, and deplored the fact that the Town

and Country Planning Act prevented Māori from building on tribal lands.³² His efforts complemented the work of the Maori Women's Welfare League, who had campaigned on similar issues under Whina Cooper's presidentship.

Education may not have been a priority for Rata himself, but he regarded it as essential to the futures of young Māori and Pacific Islanders. As a former labourer he was an enthusiastic proponent for trade training, but he was equally supportive of tertiary education and appreciated the need for 'a greater spread of occupational opportunity'.³³ He constantly pestered the government to increase training schemes across a range of trades, and encouraged the government to make courses available in urban and rural areas.³⁴ He was a staunch supporter of Māori boarding schools, noting that they consistently produced better students with higher grades who were more likely to go on to university studies.³⁵ Finally, Rata took much interest in what Māori were being taught. He felt the government was pursuing a policy of 'deculturalisation rather than one of integration' by not teaching Māori language and culture in schools, and that loss of culture was leading to an increase in crime, unemployment and 'unruly elements' amongst urbanized Māori and Pacific Islanders.³⁶

In many ways Rata conformed to his role as a Rātana–Labour MP, yet he also challenged and confounded the stereotype of the typical Māori MP, ranging well beyond the narrower confines of the treaty, land rights, social policy and cultural reform many of his predecessors had focused upon. Rata was the first of the Rātana MPs – and indeed one of the first Māori MPs – to wholeheartedly employ the politics and language of class, and his socialist beliefs dominated his speeches during his first five years in parliament. In line with his views on the treaty, and bearing a striking resemblance to the first Labour government's philosophies and policies, Rata's feeling was that the inequalities Māori faced were the product of economics, not racial ideologies, and that economic reforms were the best solution to these problems, as he explained in his maiden speech: 'The truth is that only since the advent of the first Labour Government has the Maori been placed on a basis of equality. The improvement of economic conditions brought about by the Savage Labour Government was the greatest step in bringing about equality in New Zealand. Before the Labour Party came into power Maoris lived in remote country areas. They were economically inferior because of wage discrimination and lived almost at subsistence level. With the financial improvements gained by Maoris they at last see daylight and live as humans should.'³⁷ Rata spoke often and extensively on labour issues during these early years, campaigning on the need to support rural employment and industrial expansion to meet the needs of an expanding labour force; the rights of workers; the importance

of industrial arbitration and conciliation; and the National Party's failure to manage unemployment and 'maintain industrial harmony' with the unions during its lengthy four terms in parliament from 1960 to 1973.³⁸

Rata's other great passion was, perhaps surprisingly, Pacific Island affairs. For every speech he delivered on Māori issues during his early years in parliament, he delivered three on the Pacific. His interest was partly a product of circumstance: in 1968 the Departments of Maori Affairs and Island territories were combined to form the Department of Maori and Island Affairs, and as shadow minister it was Rata's job to deal with legislation relating to the region in committee.³⁹ With that said, Rata's compassion for the region indicated a deep affinity with Pacific peoples. His interest may have been stirred when he travelled the trade routes of the Pacific as a merchant seaman in the 1950s.⁴⁰ Rata repeatedly addressed parliament on a wide range of Pacific issues, discussing the rights and interests of Cook Island, Niuean, Tokelauan and Western Samoan peoples at home and abroad, the strengths of Hawai'i's radio stations, and the exploitation of Nauru's phosphate deposits.⁴¹ Rata was particularly concerned about French nuclear testing in the Pacific, which he regarded as 'the most crucial issue facing New Zealand and Polynesia at this time'.⁴² He described with obvious horror the thyroid disorders the young people of Bikini Atoll suffered as a result of nuclear fallout, stated in clear unambiguous terms that he would 'support any move or action undertaken voluntarily and lawfully if it leads to the cessation of nuclear testing in the region', and suggested sending a task force of Pacific nations to Paris to protest France's actions.⁴³

Rata was equally passionate about South African apartheid and New Zealand's sporting ties with the nation. He first took interest in the issue as leader of the Rātana Youth Movement in the 1950s, and during the 1960s and 70s he was one of the few MPs the anti-apartheid movement could call on to voice their dissent in parliament.⁴⁴

Rata regarded South African apartheid as 'by far the sharpest and most acute racial problem that the world has to face'.⁴⁵ He advised that a withdrawal of diplomatic relations, a sporting ban, an embargo on the trade of arms with South Africa, and a healthy critique of any political propaganda from South Africa were all solid steps towards showing the nation's disapproval.⁴⁶ Rata even threatened to resign over the issue, offering his resignation to Kirk in 1969 in a bid to bring the issue of the 1970 Springbok tour to a head and gauge public opinion in his Northern electorate: 'I was strongly against the tour. I got nowhere publicly, so I told Kirk that the matter could be brought to a head by a by-election. Kirk said no.'⁴⁷

Rata was not your typical Rātana–Labour MP. His leadership and critical voice echoed that of Eruera Tirikatene before him; his congeniality and energy shared shades of similarity with Paraire Paikea, Tiaki Omana and Iriaka Rātana; and his affable ‘everyman’ persona may well have rubbed off from his relationship with Tapihana Paikea. Yet the issues he campaigned on during his early years in opposition varied greatly from those of his colleagues and predecessors, and he spoke far more often on non-Māori issues. The fact that he was re-elected five times unchallenged indicates his constituents were satisfied with his performance as an MP. Rata did not neglect their needs, but in parliament he spoke more frequently, and often more passionately, on these wider issues.

If Rata’s eyes were turned to the world at large, events closer to home would bring his vision back into focus: the rise of what he called ‘Maori militancy’ in the form of radical activists and Māori and Pacific Island gangs in urban centres in the late 1960s and early 1970s was to have a significant impact upon his career. Rata believed New Zealand had experienced ‘uniquely harmonious race relations’ due to full employment and welfare measures, which he believed had bought ‘dramatic improvements in Maori housing, health, education and incomes’.⁴⁸ Rising unemployment threatened this relationship, and he was fearful that ‘a minority group could become suspicious and unco-operative’ and express their resentment through violence or dissent.⁴⁹

By 1970 Rata’s predictions had come to pass: a new breed of radical, articulate, university-educated Māori began to emerge from the urban centres.⁵⁰ He placed the blame for the rise of Māori militants and urban gangs on the government, society, Māori leaders and parents, and he acted as an advocate for these groups, defending their positions and demanding more be done to alleviate the social conditions that had spawned what he regarded as antisocial and militant behaviour.⁵¹

In 1970 he delivered a lengthy address in parliament on ‘The rise in thuggery and plain delinquency among some young people, particularly in new housing areas’, mentioning the emergence of Māori and Pacific Island gangs, including the Storm Troopers and Black Power.⁵² Rata viewed their members as ‘socially and racially deprived people’; he urged the government, society and parents to take greater responsibility for their youth by providing more public facilities and social activities.⁵³ Rata was critical of the government’s reactionary responses to Māori activists and suggested they take time to listen to their grievances: ‘I cannot believe these groups really want to destroy this nation. We should invite them to assist in rebuilding this country, and putting it back on the right road.’⁵⁴

It appears that by the early 1970s, Rata had grown into his role as a relatively conservative voice of support in parliament for the considerably more radical realities of Māori activists and the gangs. While no comment on the process was made at the time or since by political commentators, historians, his colleagues or Rata himself, the transformation is evident in his politics and his contributions to parliament. He had spent the early years of his career warning of the consequences of ignoring the rising social problems in new housing areas. When, as he had predicted, the gangs and radical groups did begin to emerge, he was quick to hear them out and plead their cases publicly. The effects of their efforts were to turn Rata away from the wider issues that had dominated his parliamentary work, and back towards the concerns of his people. In the process they rejuvenated Rata's career, transforming him from an open-minded socialist of the 1960s to the conservative voice for radicalism of the 1970s.

It is important to understand this transition as it helps to explain the decisions and transformations Rata would make later in his career. Rata had always displayed a radical streak, a wider vision of the world and a passion for certain issues. He also believed strongly in the voice of youth: he had been a leader of the Rātana youth movement and regularly called on the voice of youth groups during his early years in parliament.⁵⁵ The combination of youth, radicalism and an internationalist perspective displayed by Māori activists captured Rata's attention, and although his relationship with the radicals was often turbulent, he believed in what they had to say, and supported their right to say it. Māori activists were to be Rata's 'Dark Lady', tormenting but nonetheless inspiring some of his greatest efforts as a parliamentarian. The existing literature strains to explain how it was that Rata could be at loggerheads with the Māori land march in 1975, only to throw his lot in with the radicals just four years later.⁵⁶ By understanding Rata's early career, we see continuity in his actions and his politics.

With Labour's election win in 1972, Rata was primed for action. He was appointed Minister of Lands and Minister of Maori and Pacific Island Affairs and introduced a raft of new policy reforms. This short, sharp flurry of activity led by Rata from 1973 to 1975 represents one of the high points of Māori political engagement, and is worth investigating.

Rata was most active in regards to land legislation. In 1973 he passed the Maori Purposes Bill (No. 1) that repealed sections of the Maori Affairs Amendment Bill 1967, extended the deadline for the payment of estate duties and reached a limited settlement of \$20,000 per annum with the Ngāi Tahu Trust Board to settle their historical land claims.⁵⁷ That same year the Maori Purposes Bill (No. 2) repealed further sections of the 1967 Act and increased

Māori control of their lands.⁵⁸ The Bill also provided for the return of some Crown lands to Māori, secured Ngāi Tahu access to the tītī (muttonbird) islands, and made provisions for Māori housing.⁵⁹

The Maori Affairs Amendment Bill introduced in 1973 and passed in 1974 was even more extensive. It repealed the most distasteful sections of the 1967 Act, allowed Māori landowners to restore the status of their lands to Māori title, and stopped the compulsory acquisition of uneconomic interests in Māori lands.⁶⁰ The Act provided for far more besides: it separated the Department of Maori Affairs from Pacific Island Affairs, changed the official definition of what constituted a 'Māori' from blood quantum to descent from a Māori ancestor, provided for trade training, improved Māori representation on the Board of Maori Affairs, established Māori land advisory committees, introduced new measures to deal with the succession to Māori land and gave official recognition to the Māori language.⁶¹ Rata hoped the Act would repair 'the invasion of the rights of the Maori people brought about by that legislation of 1967' and would offer Māori 'a greater and more personal role in their own affairs'.⁶²

The Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 was to be Rata's most ambitious piece of legislation. The Act established the Waitangi Tribunal, enabling Māori to lodge claims over any act or omission of the Crown that contravened the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. Initially the tribunal was only empowered to hear modern-day claims arising since 1975: Rata had reservations over the fact the tribunal would not have retrospective powers, but saw the Act as 'a move forward' and expected the need for retrospective powers 'could be examined at a future time'.⁶³ Rata described the Act as a landmark victory for Māori: 'The Bill is a major document of social and political progress, and I foresee that its enactment will do much to settle the deeply felt and long-standing grievances of the Maori people over the treaty, which they regard as the very foundation of their rights.'⁶⁴

Rata also passed the New Zealand Day Act 1973 which renamed Waitangi Day 'New Zealand Day' and introduced a paid national holiday to celebrate the signing of the treaty. He hoped the legislation would 'foster a sense of nationhood' and 'promote a greater awareness of the meaning of the Treaty of Waitangi as a symbol which embraces all New Zealand citizens and which should strengthen the contract of mutual respect and understanding'.⁶⁵ Rata wanted to address the growing tensions around Waitangi Day and the demands of Māori activists. Instead his efforts drew immediate criticisms from activist group Ngā Tamatoa, who deemed the naming of the holiday 'New Zealand Day' to be an affront to Māori and an effort to whitewash the nation's colonial past.⁶⁶ In response Rata passed the Waitangi Day Amendment Bill 1975,

renaming the holiday 'Waitangi Day'. However, he remained unapologetic about his stance, stating the name had been 'designed to foster a multicultural accord'.⁶⁷

Housing was another area where Rata was able to make significant ground. By 1974 he was reporting back on the successes of Labour's housing schemes, stating that by December 1973, 931 houses either had been purchased or were under construction, and celebrated the progress in building blocks of flats for elderly Māori in Ahipara, Ruātoki and Manutuke.⁶⁸ The government also reduced the size of the deposit required for rural housing loans and increased loans for renovations.⁶⁹ In 1975 Rata celebrated record levels of spending on Māori and Pacific Island housing, announcing that 772 houses had been built and 351 purchased the previous year, making a considerable dent in the 2032 applications for state housing that had awaited the government in early 1973.⁷⁰

Rata also celebrated victories with regards to Māori culture and language. The Maori Affairs Amendment Act 1974 gave some official recognition to the Māori language and provided government ministers the powers to 'encourage the learning and the use of the Maori language'.⁷¹ Rata helped to introduce the teaching of Māori language in primary schools and the establishment of one-year crash courses in Māori language at Teachers Training College to meet the shortfall of Māori language teachers available in 1975.⁷² The Broadcasting Bill 1973 provided programming for Māori and Pacific Islanders in their own languages, particularly in Auckland.⁷³ Rata further recognized marae as significant sites for the retention and protection of Māori language and culture, boosting spending on urban marae and almost doubling subsidies for rural marae in 1975.⁷⁴

In just three years Rata had reformed Māori land policies, elevated the status of the Treaty of Waitangi and Waitangi Day, increased government spending on housing and education and initiated a small but significant shift towards the protection and recognition of Māori language and culture. The Waitangi Tribunal he was instrumental in establishing would be his most lasting and significant contribution to the nation's political history. Rata's achievements during the single term of the third Labour government were impressive, marking his time as Minister of Maori Affairs as a high point of Māori political history. These victories were not his alone to celebrate: Labour's support of policy reforms and the efforts of public servants to aid their minister in the development, drafting and implementation of these policies were crucial to Rata's success. In comparison to his Rātana predecessors, Rata proved to be a highly effective Māori MP. He was able to wield power by holding positions of power and passing legislation. He achieved a range of positive outcomes for Māori, and was able to develop

these policies and guide them through the House himself, a feat not achieved by the Rātana MPs of the earlier twentieth century.

If Rata was so successful in his role as minister, why did his colleagues question his abilities? The answer lies partly in the lack of sufficient research: The one in-depth piece on Rata, Hazlehurst's *Political Expression and Ethnicity*, establishes clearly that Rata was an exceptional MP.⁷⁵ The closer study of his career undertaken here proves Hazlehurst's point. The underestimation of Rata is also part of a wider historical trend: Pākehā politicians, historians and the media have consistently undervalued the contributions and questioned the abilities of the Māori MPs, and Rata was no exception.⁷⁶ Ngā mātāmua, the first wave of Māori MPs, were regarded as 'old-fashioned' old-timers who were unable to follow or contribute to debates without translators; the Rātana–Labour MPs were 'not of the calibre and quality to make unwarranted demands of a government, nor did they have sufficient political acumen to capitalize upon the "opportunity"'; and in turn Rata was regarded as 'clumsy, inarticulate ... not well read ... repetitious ... consistently inconsistent'.⁷⁷

A brief comparison with the careers of the Young Maori Party members helps to explain why Rata was able to transcend some of the paradoxes of Māori representation that had frustrated his Rātana–Labour predecessors, who had struggled to influence the direction and implementation of Labour policy. Part of Rata's success can be attributed to the fact that he was a member of a Pākehā political party. Rata shared this circumstance in common with Carroll and Ngata, who were members of the Liberal Party, and it is no coincidence that the trio were the only Māori MPs to gain the coveted Maori Affairs portfolio. All three were loyal, outspoken party supporters; in turn all three gained the support of their party and party leaders, and were entrusted with ministerial positions.

Party leadership was equally important here. When the Labour leadership supported Māori ambitions, reforms were forthcoming; when the party's leaders resisted Māori ambitions, reforms ground to a sudden halt. In the 1930s and 40s, Labour leaders Michael Joseph Savage, Peter Fraser and Harry Holland were sympathetic to Māori needs, resulting in the social reforms of the first Labour government. When Walter Nash replaced Fraser the reforms were cut short abruptly. Rata's experiences were similar: under the party leadership of Kirk, Rata was empowered to make reforms.⁷⁸ With Kirk's death in 1974 and the appointment of Bill Rowling as party leader, reforms again stalled.

The other striking similarity between the careers of Ngata and Rata was that both saw relations with the government sour as they reached the

limitations of Māori political representation. Ngata pushed the boundaries of his ministerial position by expanding the budget of the Native Affairs Department and playing a hands-on role in the administration of his portfolio. Subsequently Ngata was embroiled in controversy surrounding his land development schemes and offered his resignation as Native Minister. Rata too had pushed the limits of his powers as Minister of Maori Affairs and Lands – subsequently his relationship with his Labour colleagues began to decline from 1975 onward. This was the glass ceiling of Māori political representation that every successful Māori MP had to confront.

Rata's relationship with the Labour Party declined steadily in the wake of the 1978 election, but the seeds of dissension were sown several years earlier. In July 1973, just months into his term as minister, Rata suffered from a heart condition and was forced to take leave from parliament for two months.⁷⁹ His Labour colleague Arthur Faulkner assumed the Lands portfolio in his absence, and continued to take on the portfolio at different intervals in 1974.⁸⁰ According to Rowling, one of Rata's colleagues, presumably Faulkner, discovered 'financial irresponsibility evidenced in his handling of his portfolios', and found 'Mat's desk was piled high with unactioned files'.⁸¹ According to Kirk's secretary, Kirk had misgivings over Rata's performance, and was faced with the difficult decision of whether or not he should strip his old friend of his duties.⁸² Kirk was not forced to make the decision: he died in August of 1974 and was replaced by Rowling.⁸³ Rowling regarded Rata as incompetent: following Labour's defeat in the 1978 general election he reduced his status and positions within the party.⁸⁴ Rata retained his seat as a Labour frontbencher for the time being, but was limited by the fact that he was no longer spokesperson on Māori affairs.

Behind the scenes Rowling ignored the growing tension, rejecting the attempts of the Maori Policy Committee to appoint a Maori Affairs spokesperson at the party's annual conferences in 1978 and 1979.⁸⁵ According to Rata, Rowling had also planned to rename the Maori Affairs Committee the 'ethnic relations committee', undermining the status of Māori as tangata whenua.⁸⁶ Rata took serious offence at the suggestion and indicated it was a prominent reason for his decision to leave Labour.⁸⁷ The final straw came in November 1979, when as part of a party reshuffle Rata was demoted from the front benches and David Lange replaced Bob Tizard as Labour's deputy leader.⁸⁸

Rata's efforts in parliament reflected this turmoil. With the resumption of parliament in 1976 Rata was on the offensive, firing barbed criticisms at the government over its stance on apartheid sport, its decision to allow nuclear-armed American naval vessels to visit New Zealand, the continuation

of the controversial ‘dawn raids’ policy, its attitude to women’s rights and its demotion of Māori affairs.⁸⁹

Rata’s speeches and demeanour changed dramatically in other ways too. The most striking change was that he began to do away with the socialist rhetoric he had employed for so many years. Instead his speeches resounded with the type of ornate language that had echoed in the speeches of his predecessors like Tame Parata, Ngata, Hone Heke Ngapua, and Eruera Tirikatene. In short, Rata began to speak with the voice of a Māori parliamentarian of old. Rata delivered the most powerful example of this in the wake of the forced eviction of occupiers from Bastion Point in May 1978. A sense of historical significance and disgust permeated his speech, as seen in the first lines: ‘I turn now to Bastion Point. The date 25 May 1978 will be remembered as one of the most shameful days in our country’s history. I hope we will all examine now the losses as opposed to the gains made as a result of the action taken.’⁹⁰ Rata compared the event to the invasion of Parihaka in 1881: ‘The last time the heart of the country bled from internal conflict was in 1881 ... On that occasion force was used, and, as a result, the nation gained a shameful reputation.’⁹¹

Rata’s speech echoed those of ngā mātāmua nearly a century earlier, calling on the lengthy history of state abuse and Māori grievance. He continued with rhetorical questions and historical recriminations, making use of the worn cliché of ‘harmonious race relations’ to appeal to his predominantly Pākehā audience: ‘When will the Government learn from the mistakes of the past? ... In one short period of 3 hours the Government has prejudiced 130 years of progress in the harmonious relationships of our peoples. What price New Zealand’s racial harmony now? What price the understanding we have had in the past of the patient tolerance of the Maori? All for 69 acres!’⁹²

From mid-1978 onwards Rata’s speeches declined markedly in frequency, due in part to his demotion within the Labour Party. When he did speak, it was with a sense of foreboding and premonition. For example, in June of 1978 he painted a bleak outlook of the state of Māori youth in society, pointing to poor performance in education, the low wages and limited industries open to Māori youth in the economy, and inadequate access to housing and health. Māori continued to experience.⁹³

By the first week of November 1979 it had become too much for him to bear. On 2 November, a Thursday, Labour announced that Lange would be replacing Tizard as deputy leader, and Rata was demoted from the front benches.⁹⁴ Rata made the decision to resign the following day.⁹⁵ On the afternoon of the Sunday he announced his resignation to his colleagues of the Northern electorate committee, though the meeting did not have full

attendance due to petrol rationing.⁹⁶ On Monday morning he informed the general secretary of his decision and he handed in his resignation that afternoon.⁹⁷ By Tuesday the newspapers were filled with news of his resignation and he returned to parliament accompanied by applause from the opposition.⁹⁸ Between Wednesday 8 December and the following Sunday he held a series of five hui in the North to explain his resignation to the electorate.⁹⁹

Rata delivered his final speech in parliament on 6 December, explaining that after being a member of the Labour Party for more than 28 years, of which 16 had been spent in parliament, he had decided to leave Labour to address the more pressing needs of his people: 'I have, as a result of a personal decision, set aside my personal ideological convictions for what I regard as the most important need, which is to reassert and re-establish the rights of the Maori and of those I represent in Parliament.'¹⁰⁰ Revisiting the theme that had dominated many of his speeches over the previous 12 months, Rata predicted hard times to follow as social issues and racial tension came to a head: 'No one knows better than members of Parliament that over the last few years New Zealand has been sitting on a potential time bomb, and the position has become more precarious each year ... The issues of the future will be social ones, and the place of the Maori in New Zealand society will figure very highly.'¹⁰¹

The time had come for a degree of Māori independence. Without it, Rata warned, race relations would sour even further: 'The Maori looks forward to the day when he can be self-sufficient, meet his own needs, and make his own decisions as a member of the New Zealand community. Unless he believes that he will be able to do that in the reasonably near future, I venture to suggest that the times ahead will be even more difficult than they have been.'¹⁰² He ended by telling his colleagues that the days of peaceful race relations were over: 'Once upon a time New Zealand could boast of racial harmony that had a world-wide reputation. I think we will have to earn that reputation again, and earn it with a great deal more vigour and commitment.'¹⁰³

The speech had an air of dignity, but was perhaps poorly timed and delivered mixed messages: Rata had not yet decided on his future plans and did not have the full support of his electorate, so the speech was speculative, lacked a clear direction and was full of vague warnings and threats. The speech was not a fitting ending for such a lengthy and significant career, but it was symbolic of the abruptness of his decision to resign and the outcomes of his decision that would unfold in the following years.

Rata's resignation was the ultimate expression of frustration with the status quo: under the leadership of Prime Minister Robert Muldoon the

National government refused to address the social problems Māori faced. Labour was little better: fearing a Pākehā backlash against the activities of Māori activists, Rowling followed suit, placing Māori issues on the back burner and relegating Rata to the back benches. Rata's response was also about mana, the spiritual power and authority bestowed upon him by God and his ancestors in accordance with his earthly deeds, and the respect he commanded amongst his people. By the late 1970s Rata was a rangatira in his own right, both within his electorate and at a national level. Though he never made the point publicly, his demotion was a trampling on his mana, and his response, resigning abruptly and returning to the marae of the North, was apt. Rata had reached the limits of Māori political representation; unlike Ngata or the Rātana–Labour MPs before him, he was unwilling to accept these setbacks and toe the party line in the hope of future gains once his party regained government.

Rather than follow in the footsteps of others, Rata chose to chart his own path. In the wake of his announced resignation Rata toured the marae of his electorate, soliciting support for his own independent political movement, Mana Motuhake. Rata failed to win the ensuing northern by-election in June 1980, losing his seat to Labour candidate Bruce Gregory.¹⁰⁴ After three failed attempts to regain his seat, Rata indicated that he would step aside in 1987.¹⁰⁵ Rata's resignation brought his political career to a close, but new doors had already begun to open. He guided his iwi through the lodging and hearing of the Muriwhenua land claim and fisheries claim by the Waitangi Tribunal from 1985 onward, and played a leadership role in the settlement of Māori fisheries claims in 1992. Tragically, Rata died in the service of his people, passing away in July 1997 from injuries he sustained in a head-on collision travelling home from a land claims meeting in the North.

You will not find Rata's face on the nation's currency. There is no Rata Cup in the sporting world, though if there was it would be for horse racing. His name lives on in the history books, but the entries are brief, and the impression given is that Rata was just one of a long line of Northern leaders who agitated for change, with flashes of brilliance and moments of incompetence. And yet he was one of the great Māori politicians and leaders of his time. Rata was a highly effective Māori MP and he was the third Māori to have held the coveted position of Minister of Maori Affairs. The reforms he introduced are comparable to those of Ngata and the first Labour government, as they represent such a departure from the norm of detrimental government policy for Māori. The legislation he introduced was perhaps not as drastic a change in direction as those introduced by Ngata, but it achieved things Ngata had been unable to implement in his time. His efforts did not impact as directly

and immediately as those of the first Labour government, yet they were unique and significant in that they were developed and led by Rata himself. The Waitangi Tribunal was Rata's most lasting contribution to the nation, and this single piece of legislation, more than any other before or since, has helped to address historical tribal grievances, and in turn impacted upon the hearts and minds of New Zealanders. His resignation from the Labour Party and decision to form Mana Motuhake brought his political career to a close, but opened up new doors and gave a glimpse of new pathways that future generations would follow. Rata is not held in the same regard as luminaries such as Ngata or Carroll. After all, he was a state-house-raised South Auckland spray painter, who rose to the heights of national prominence, only to sink back down into political obscurity. His is not the noblest of tales but it is impressive and important; his name is not mentioned in the same breath as Ngata, Carroll, Te Rangihiroa or Māui Pōmare, but perhaps it should be. Kupe did not return, but future generations followed the star path he charted: Winston Peters, leader of the New Zealand First Party, claimed the first full sweep of the Māori seats in 1996, and on election night 2005 Tariana Turia, founder of the independent Māori Party, paid tribute to Rata with the words 'people like Matiu led the way for people like me'.¹⁰⁶ What this article hopes to have shown is that a deeper understanding of Rata's background, politics and personality is needed to comprehend the twists and turns of his career, and the dramatic decision he made in 1979 to leave the Labour Party and stake out a place for Māori political independence. This study reveals that Rata always had a radical streak, a wider view of politics, and a willingness to hear out the voice of the youth. Perhaps most importantly, Rata was a dynamic and flexible politician whose views and interests changed with the times. Rata had a huge capacity for learning and observation, and was willing to change his own beliefs if it suited the greater good of his constituents. By understanding the many facets of the man, we are able to knit back together the two figures we are presented with in the literature, Rata as the well-meaning minister at odds with Māori activists, and the radical Rata who resigned from Labour to form Mana Motuhake.

Finally, Rata is just one of a lineage of Māori parliamentarians spanning 147 years, whose important contributions to the social, cultural and political landscape of New Zealand have been forgotten. While their faces still stare out from portraits lining the corridors of power, their deeds remain obscured by time and condemned by historians.

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