

Sir Graham Lattimer leads N.Z. Maori Council again

Hiria Rakete

He's one of Maoridom's most powerful men and yet, at heart he's just a country bumpkin.

Sir Graham Latimer, reigning chairman of the New Zealand Maori Council since 1972, leaves the capital to get some fresh air at his Taipuha farm in Northland.

Back to the good old smell only cows could produce, Sir Graham sloshes around his milking-shed in gumboots.

"Milking is the only therapy I get," he says. And his face, devoid of wrinkles and glowing like a boy with a lollipop, confirms that.

Sir Graham was born rather unceremoniously on the roadside in the Houhora gumfield 71 years ago.

Back then, it was not unusual for babies to be born in the same circumstances considering undeveloped roads, and few hospitals.

But it is unusual for a person to be the ninth Maori knight, president, chairman and vice-president of so many different organisations.

His service to Maori people spans nearly 30 years.

He was a Maori warden in the 1950's before helping to found the Tai Tokerau Maori District Council — the national body's first branch.

And he's been ploughing forward since then.

The Tai Tokerau Trust Board, Maori International, Waitangi Tribunal and even the Tourism Advisory Council are only a few, "off-the-cuff" involvements.

He's been called devious, alert, witty, sympathetic and cunning by some of his peers.

And he admits he is. But these are all contributing factors to his quick business mind and foresight.

He's been labelled "the old man of submissions" in Government circles.

But his own actions spell this out clearly. Sir Graham cannot readily recall the number of submissions NZMC has presented since its 1963 inception — but nearly every Bill tabled since then has his name on it.

But he believes that's irrelevant. It doesn't matter who put them through, just as long as they get there.

Sir Graham says that Maori people have picked up the positive attitude that's been waiting out there for ages.

People are becoming more aware of what's happening.

Initiative amongst the people has

steered maoridom into a fresh direction.

But what of old institutions. For instance, Mana Motuhake?

With a broad smile, he says he views Mana Motuhake as a healthy sign.

However, he stands by the council in support of the retention of Maori seats.

But he says that Mana Motuhake is good for the people — "it makes them aware of politics".

But don't be alarmed, he warns, when people talk of improving the Maori's lot.

Listening is an art perfected by Sir Graham Latimer.

Sir Graham uses this virtue as an aid to all ills — making decisions, easing

sounding boards to help."

He stresses this importance to keep close to the "old ones". "I can travel right throughout New Zealand and know that I can stop in Waikato, Rotorua or anywhere and speak to any of these people."

But he also says it's important not "to wear it on your sleeve".

"What the elders tell me is in confidence. And I respect that." He feels an obligation to the Maori people.

"I'm there for the people, and they're my business."

He tells of a time he was going to a tangi up north. However three people



N.Z. Maori Council 1985.

tension and helping other people.

He feels that the only reason he's hung in there is by going to the old people. And not necessarily from the north.

He refers to them as "sounding boards".

"I'd be arrogant to think I could do it all by myself," he says.

And since he attained his title in 1980, Sir Graham has used his "sounding boards" constantly.

"I think I use them more than anyone else does," he said. Even when urgent decisions have to be made, they are always there to help.

"Sometimes it can cost me four or five toll calls, but it's worth it." He feels that decisions he makes have to be ones he can live with.

"None of the advice given to me by the old ones has ever back fired," he says. And he's never regretted one decision.

"There are some hard decisions to make, but I know I can call on my

travelled up to his farm in Taipuha to see him.

"They needed help. They came all the way up from Auckland (about a two hour drive). I was there so I sat down and listened."

Sir Graham never made it to the tangi. But although he wanted to go to the tangi, he knew he was needed where he was, and right at that moment.

"People don't see me in that light," he says. The only publicity he gets is when he's saying something on behalf of the dozen or more organisations he represents. But he feels he is close to the people.

His wife and he raised 28 children. Four of these are his own, five mokopuna and the rest, whangai.

And under the umbrella of the Tai Tokerau District Council, he is responsible for making 74 jobs for people around Taipuha. But none of these feats are recorded in newspapers.