

Stand up and be counted.

Parliamentary Reporter Nikitin Sallee.

"Now is the time to stand up and be counted as a Maori," says Southern Maori MP Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, of the Maori option.

The Maori option gives Maoris the chance to choose whether to vote in one of the four Maori seats, or to vote in one of the other 88 seats.

But for Maoris who want to switch from one kind of roll to another, time is running out. The Maori option finishes on the 30th of April.

Tirikatene-Sullivan says the future of the Maori seats could be at risk if Maoris use this year's option to switch away from Maori seats.

"It isn't a referendum on whether the Maori seats should be retained, but it could have that effect," she says.

"It's important for numbers on the Maori roll to be increased. At the moment, the average Maori roll has two-and-a-half thousand fewer voters than a general roll.

"That makes it more difficult to justify the retention of the existing four Maori seats."

Justice Minister Jim McLay denies that the Maori option in any way jeopardises the future of the Maori seats, but he agrees it could be an indication of Maori feeling on their future.

"Historically, the Maori people were guaranteed four seats in Parliament," McLay says. "The government's policy is that those four seats will remain until such time as the Maori people indicate that they want a change.

"They can indicate that in a number of ways," says McLay. "Certainly the interest shown by Maoris in being on a Maori roll is one of the factors which may indicate an expression of opinion on the part of the Maori people."

Meanwhile, Labour wants the number of Maori seats increased to more than four. Tirikatene-Sullivan says with their social and economic problems, Maoris need more MPs.

And, she says, the first step to more Maori seats is increasing the number of Maoris on the Maori rolls.

McLay isn't impressed. "I understand that it's Labour Party policy to increase the number of Maori seats in

certain circumstances. Politically, I can understand why they might want to do that. But I don't think it can be justified.

"While the government will not allow the seats to be diminished below four," he says, "it sees no reason to increase the numbers."

Tirikatene-Sullivan counters by saying McLay is out-of-touch with Maori feeling. "I don't think anything would influence this government to increase the number of Maori seats," she says.

A simple guide to The Maori Option.

If you are enrolled to vote, by now you should have received a Maori Option Card in the post.

The card shows whether you are enrolled in a Maori electorate or in a General electorate.

If you are a New Zealand Maori and you want to change the type of electorate in which you vote, fill in the card and post it back.

If you are happy with the electorate you vote in now, do nothing. You can throw the card away. You will remain enrolled in the electorate you are in now.

If you haven't yet received a Maori option card in the post, don't wait. Go to the Post Office and ask for assistance.

REMEMBER:

Only New Zealand Maoris or part-Maoris can exercise the Maori option. People with no New Zealand Maori blood must enrol in a General electorate.

REMEMBER:

If you want to change rolls, you must return the Maori option card by the 30th of April.

REMEMBER:

You won't have another chance to choose between a Maori electorate and a General electorate till 1986. The decision you make now will last till then.

"They are much less sensitive on this issue. Understandably so: they don't have the support of the Maori people."

Labour has taken out a full-page newspaper advertisement to encourage Maoris to switch to the Maori roll. McLay complains that the ad wasn't clearly identified as being Labour party material — and he says the type-face makes the advertisement look very similar to official Justice Department ads.

McLay says he doubts whether the ad should have been placed in the first place.

Says McLay: "I personally would have preferred that MPs stayed out of the Maori option exercise. Of course, these four people (the Maori MPs) have got their own political interests to serve, and doubtless they thought it was appropriate to do it (place the advertisement). I wouldn't have done it. The government wouldn't have done it. The Labour Party appears to have been content to do it."

McLay and Tirikatene-Sullivan do agree that Maoris should consider carefully when they decide how to exercise the Maori option.

"I wouldn't say to any Maori that they should or should not be on the Maori roll," says McLay. "What I would say is that they should think very carefully about what they want to do.

"I guess they'll address themselves to questions relating to their own Maoriness, and also to issues like the broader question of whether or not there should be Maori rolls.

McLay points out that the Maori voter must live with whatever decision he or she makes. "This decision will take them right through to 1986" he says, "and therefore they must think carefully about which roll they want to be on."

Social Credit has consistently refused to comment on the fine points of the Maori seats.

Sacred leader Bruce Beetham says he won't talk about the present system, because his party's policy is to abolish the Maori seats through proportional representation.

Mana Motuhake leader Matiu Rata was unavailable to comment on the Maori rolls as this issue went to press.