

Newest MP expects ruffled feathers

The newest Maori MP expects to ruffle a few feathers with his views on Maori health.

Peter Tapsell is himself a medical doctor — and he plans to make Maori health one of his top priorities in Parliament.

"In the past I've been a single doctor and I could only achieve as much as my pair of hands could achieve," says Dr Tapsell, who has replaced Brown Rewiti as the MP for Eastern Maori.

He has some strong words for Maoris themselves: "I have a special responsibility to say to Maori people, quite clearly and unequivocally, that some of the things we are doing are wrong

"I know it's not going to be a popular thing to say. But, for example, so many Maoris are grossly overweight the answer to that is that Maoris should eat less and take more exercise. Simple as that.

"Building huge hospitals isn't going to make any difference."

Dr Tapsell is equally blunt on other issues — but he can best be described as an "outspoken moderate".

For example, on Bastion Point he agrees with neither the Government nor the protesters.

Hard Government

"I don't understand why the Government doesn't reverse its original decision to sell the land for high-income housing, and allow either low-income housing or allow it to be turned into a public park.

"I suspect that in some ways they're doing it to make the point that they're a hard Government — going to keep Maoris in their place for the red-neck European.

"I'm sorry about that. But that doesn't mean I think the Maori protesters are necessarily right.

"For example, the Ngati Whatua have dissociated themselves from the protest.

"So my position isn't altogether solid one way or another."

On another issue, Dr Tapsell is opposed to ratifying the Treaty of Waitangi. He believes the Treaty is a valuable document signed with goodwill on both sides.

"I accept, of course, that along the way there have been infringements of what Maoris believed would be the case. But that's not unusual. That's the case for any situation where a more powerful group of people have sway over a less powerful group.

"I think we should leave the Treaty as it is. It should be looked upon as a

Parliamentary Reporter Nikitin Sallee.

sacred document for Maoridom generally. But I think we should get on with living. I don't think there's any point in going back to the Treaty."

And Dr Tapsell has no time for the recent protests at Waitangi.

"My biggest objection to the protesters — and I have no bar of them for this reason — is that they desecrate the marae. In my opinion that is utterly inexcusable.

Conform strictly

"On at least two occasions the protesters have infringed the protocol of the marae. We've had unseemly struggling and fighting.

"I think the marae trustees ought to go ahead and hold the functions on the marae at Waitangi, those functions should conform strictly with Maori protocol, and that anyone who infringes the protocol should be dealt with by the police. I think that's very important."

Dr Tapsell had equally strong views on Mana Motuhake and its leader, former Labour MP Matiu Rata.

"He doesn't seem to have gathered round him a lot of responsible Maoris. I suspect he himself is quite sorry to see some of the people he's got around him. Drop-outs and non-performers, really.

"There are good people in Mana Motuhake, and Mr Rata is one of them. But he's got a lot of disgruntled people who haven't done his cause any good."

Dr Tapsell says he agrees with nearly all the aims of Mana Motuhake — but he expects the movement will wither and die after its initial blossoming.

"If they ever win a seat, it will be our fault," says Dr Tapsell. "Certainly, if

they do get a major place in the Maori political scene, then we four Maori members should answer for it."

Not surprisingly, Peter Tapsell is a strong supporter of retaining the four Maori seats in Parliament.

"I'll never convince you," he says, "but that's nothing to do with the fact that I have one of the four seats.

Not restricted

"I believe that the people holding the Maori seats are in a position to say things that very few people can say."

Dr Tapsell believes, for instance, that Maori Affairs Minister Ben Couch is restricted in what he can do for Maoris — because he represents a general electorate.

"We who are responsible to the Maori people can put their point of view without any fear of being chucked out tomorrow."

In his first speech in Parliament, Dr Tapsell made a strong plea for protesting and preserving the Maori language. He even included a waiata in his address. "Not any other Member of Parliament could do that and hold his seat," says Dr Tapsell. "Not one."

Without Maori seats, he says, New Zealand would be left with "a tyranny of the majority".

Peter Tapsell describes himself as "pretty much middle-of-the-road."

He says, "I'm a little to the left of centre on economic issues. I'm a little to the right of centre so far as protocol or morality are concerned.

"For me, stiff Maori protocol on the marae, and I won't shift from that view. For me, a man and his wife and his children — you know, I'm not a supporter of this liberality. I don't believe in abortion for example."

Peter Tapsell says inter-personal relationships (he doesn't like the term "inter-racial relationships" are probably the most important issues New Zealand must grapple with.

"I think in the long term, this might even be a much more important issue than the economy," he says.

"If we have a New Zealand in which everyone has a six-cylinder car, but you dare not walk down the street because of violence and racial intolerance and squabbling — then I think we'll be the worse for it."

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