

New Zealand government, opposition parties glorify deceased M?ori Party founder

Tom Peters
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In a revealing episode last week, the entire parliamentary and media establishment in New Zealand joined in the glorification of Tariana Turia, the founder of Te P?ti M?ori (the M?ori Party), who died on January 3, aged 80.

Turia was one of the country's most prominent representatives of M?ori nationalism, a political tendency that has been promoted for decades by successive governments in order to divide the working class along racial lines, while enriching a narrow layer of the M?ori tribal elite.

Media commentators, "liberal" publications such as the *Daily Blog* and the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation falsely portray Te P?ti M?ori's (TPM) racist politics as progressive. The aim of these middle class layers is to disorient workers and youth who are moving to the left and subordinate them to the capitalist parliamentary system.

TPM has recently received widespread media publicity for leading mass protests against the National Party-led coalition government's Treaty Principles Bill. The legislation proposed by the far-right ACT Party seeks to incite racism against M?ori and divert attention from the worsening social crisis brought about by the government's austerity measures.

The chorus of praise for Turia, however, underscores the fact that TPM does not represent any real alternative to the political establishment. It is a right-wing party that for the past two decades has represented the interests of indigenous capitalists, who control tens of billions of dollars in business assets.

In 2008, under the leadership of Turia and co-leader Pita Sharples, TPM joined Prime Minister John Key's conservative National Party-led coalition government, which also included the far-right ACT Party. Sharples became minister of M?ori affairs and Turia served as minister for the community and voluntary sector and associate minister for health, social development and employment.

Current Prime Minister Christopher Luxon hailed Turia as "a principled leader, never swaying from her values and doing what she believed to be right. She was a tireless advocate for the betterment of M?ori." He highlighted "her work establishing the Wh?nau Ora programme to improve M?ori and community wellbeing."

Wh?nau Ora, introduced in 2011, outsourced the delivery of some social welfare and healthcare services to benefit M?ori tribal organisations. It went hand-in-hand with the Key government's rationing of vital public services and its privatisation agenda. The

scheme was retained and expanded by subsequent Labour and National governments.

TPM remained in an effective coalition with National and ACT for nine years, helping to impose the burden of the 2008 financial crisis on working people through brutal austerity measures. This included mass job cuts, frozen wages, reduced funding for health and education, and an increase in the goods and services tax.

The Key government also repeatedly deployed NZ troops in support of the criminal US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. TPM occasionally made hypocritical calls for withdrawal from these wars, while simultaneously backing the government's military budgets and helping it remain in power.

In return for TPM's support, the National Party expanded the wealth of the M?ori business elite through the Treaty of Waitangi settlements process, handing over \$1.59 billion in public funds to tribal corporations.

The treaty settlements began in the late 1980s under the then Labour government, ostensibly to provide redress for the theft of M?ori land and other crimes of colonisation. Their real purpose was to enrich a M?ori bourgeois layer by allowing tribes to create lucrative business ventures in tourism, agriculture, fisheries, property and other sectors. None of this benefited the M?ori working class, which suffered disproportionately from the austerity regime backed by TPM.

Significantly, ACT leader David Seymour issued a statement describing Turia as "a warm, gracious woman and a brave, principled leader." Since the 2023 election, Seymour and the current TPM leadership have accused each other of racism over the ACT Party's attempts to limit the political influence of the tribes and to stoke racial divisions. Yet for all the rancour, the differences between ACT and TPM are tactical, not fundamental: ACT continues to support the Treaty settlements and the role of M?ori tribes in New Zealand capitalism.

Opposition Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins joined Luxon and Seymour in hailing Turia, stating: "Dame Tariana contributed greatly through the course of successive governments, and her relentless commitment to the betterment of M?ori and the upholding of Te Tiriti [the treaty] was beyond admirable."

In a fawning statement, Green Party co-leader Chl?e Swarbrick called Turia "a formidable leader who carved history with her love, care and unshakeable sense of justice... [and displayed] deep commitments to improving the lives of many in Aotearoa [NZ]."

Swarbrick did not explain how Turia's career had "improved the

lives” of ordinary people. In fact, the National-ACT-M?ori Party government decimated entire communities, privatised publicly-owned assets and engineered a vast transfer of wealth to the super-rich.

Turia founded the M?ori Party in 2004 after breaking away from the Labour Party in opposition to its legislation that removed the right of tribes to establish ownership over the foreshore and seabed, thus eliminating lucrative business opportunities in areas such as aquaculture. Turia retired from politics ten years later. In 2015 she was made a Dame in recognition of her services to New Zealand capitalism.

After nearly a decade of collaboration with National, TPM was deeply discredited in the working class and failed to win a single seat in parliament at the 2017 election.

In 2011, MP Hone Harawira had split from TPM and founded the rival M?ori nationalist Mana Party, which he falsely said would give a voice to “the poor, the powerless and the dispossessed.” Mana’s political agenda was the same as TPM’s: it wanted larger Treaty of Waitangi settlements and more political power for the tribes, but Harawira warned that the coalition with National was eroding support.

The ISO and other pseudo-left organisations and union officials immediately joined Mana and campaigned for it as a “left” alternative, despite its anti-immigrant policies and its electoral alliance in 2014 with the openly right-wing Internet Party founded by multi-millionaire Kim Dotcom. Mana collapsed in 2017 after Harawira launched a racist campaign for the death penalty to be reintroduced for “Chinese drug smugglers.”

After the debacle of 2017, TPM embarked on a rebranding exercise to distance itself from National. In 2020, former Labour Party MP John Tamihere—now the highly paid chief executive of the Waipareira Trust charity—became TPM’s president. The party’s new co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer declared that joining another National-led government was now “untenable.”

The party returned to parliament in 2020 despite receiving just 1.2 percent of the votes, which represents less than one tenth of M?ori. In 2023, it increased its support to 3 percent, campaigning in an alliance with Labour and the Greens.

Following Turia’s death, however, TPM has unequivocally endorsed her political career—sending a clear message that the party remains open to supporting a future government led by either of the main big business parties. Ngarewa-Packer told the media: “She is the absolute epitome of strength and steadfast determination and leadership our people needed at a time of great uncertainty.” Co-leader Rawiri Waititi said that Turia’s “legacy will be forever etched in the fabric of our nation’s history.”

The party’s middle class “left” supporters have made similar comments. Robert Reid, former leader of the FIRST Union, posted on X that Turia was “My boss, my mentor, my guide, my friend.” The *Daily Blog’s* Martyn Bradbury called TPM’s coalition with National “a deal with the Devil” but praised Turia’s “courage, her legendary fearlessness” and intellect.

The embrace of Turia exposes the lying claims by the pseudo-left promoters of TPM, such as the ISO, which campaigned for the party in the 2023 election. It stated in October that year that Ngarewa-Packer and Waititi had “steered the party back to the

left” and “adopted policies which reflect the interests of working class people.”

The fact is that TPM advances a thoroughly reactionary agenda, based on divisive racial politics. While advocating a few cosmetic reforms such as a token increase in taxes on corporations and the rich (which will never be implemented under any capitalist government) the party’s central demand is for a vast increase in power and wealth for the tribal elite through the further expansion of Treaty settlements.

It also calls for the establishment of “parallel systems of government and management systems,” including a separate M?ori parliament, and justice and healthcare systems run “by M?ori, for M?ori.” TPM demands M?ori ownership of water and other natural resources and the “return [of] all land currently held by central and local government to mana whenua [M?ori],” i.e., to the tribes.

Such policies—as well as TPM’s openly racist claims that M?ori are a genetically superior people—serve to disorient and divide the working class, while providing grist for the government’s anti-M?ori demagoguery.

Those who want to fight against the National-led government’s far-right agenda—its support for US imperialist war against Russia and China and the Gaza genocide, and the gutting of public health, attacks on jobs and wages, and efforts to whip up racism—must reject the divisive politics of M?ori nationalism represented by TPM and promoted by all the parliamentary parties.

The oppression of the M?ori working class will not be alleviated one iota by giving more wealth and power to the tribal capitalists who are every bit as ruthless and reactionary as their non-M?ori counterparts. What is required is the unified struggle of workers—of every race and nationality—to put an end to the source of inequality and imperialist violence: the capitalist system itself. This means taking up the fight for the program of socialist internationalism represented by the Socialist Equality Group, the New Zealand supporters of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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