

Ratana Legacy Supercedes Labour

Keith Newman

Without the efforts of Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana and his followers, the Treaty of Waitangi may have remained a 'nullity', a mere curiosity, rather than its growing stature today as the birth certificate and founding document of the nation.

There's no question Ratana helped lay the groundwork for the current renaissance of all things Māori despite the fact a number of modern publications on the subject of the Treaty of Waitangi do not even mention his name.

Seeing T.W. Ratana languishing between pioneering broadcaster Aunt Daisy and the original Tuhoe activist Rua Kenana near the bottom of a 'Top 100 History Makers' list in November 2005, made me realise how little we understand his contribution.

That's probably not surprising, as nothing substantial has been published about his life or the movement he founded since 1972 when Jim McLeod Henderson summarised and re-published his research in the book *Ratana, the Man, the Church, the Political Movement*.

Even Ratana faithful have a hard time getting access to information about the movement's history or material that records the words and actions of the man who was a political visionary and undoubtedly one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most powerful faith healers and Māori leaders.

T.W. Ratana set out on a series of nationwide and world tours between the two world wars, promising to breathe life back into the Treaty of Waitangi and restore Māori mana. The pan-tribal movement he founded had a profound impact, rallying the spirits of the dispossessed and scattered tribes of Māoridom.

During a vision in 1918, at his farm between Wanganui and Palmerston North, he had been told to heal the people and turn Māori away from their belief in the old gods or atua Māori and urge them unite under one God (Ihoa), Jehovah of the thousands (the *Ture Wairua* or the spiritual law). The second part of his mission was the *Ture Tangata* (the physical law), where he gathered signatures for a petition and evidence about land confiscation to convince the government to make the Treaty of Waitangi part of the law of the land.

In 1924, Ratana and a party of 40 followers including musicians and cultural performers paid their own way to England to attend the British Exhibition and try to gain an audience with British Government officials and King George V to present the petition which contained the names of two thirds of all Māori. He had with him a Māori copy of the Treaty of Waitangi and sought confirmation from the Crown that it would be honoured. However everywhere he went, letters from the Aotearoa New Zealand Government had been sent insisting the group did not represent Māori.

From 1928, after he had built the Ratana Temple and allowed the Ratana Church to be established, the prophet and healer said he would divide his body into four quarters, to

win the Māori seats in Parliament. Their main goal would be to have the Treaty of Waitangi honoured and to improve conditions for all Māori. In 1932, his first successful candidate, Eruera Tirikatene, tabled the Ratana petition, which now contained 45,000 signatures and weighed in at 16 pounds (7.25kg). It was requested that the Treaty of Waitangi be entered into the statute books in an effort to “preserve the ties of brotherhood between Māori and Pakeha for all time”. The petition was ignored for many decades, and even today its requests have not been completely met. Ratana entered into the legendary ‘alliance’ with the Labour Party (Ngati Kai Mahi) because he saw that the ideals and goals of Michael Joseph Savage and his ‘Christian socialism’ aligned with his own goals of raising the bar for the carpenters, shoemakers and blacksmiths – the ordinary people, of King Tawhiao’s prophecy. While the Ratana Independent candidates and many of Ratana’s followers joined Labour, their loyalty remained principally with Ratana. The relationship was always predicated on Ratana’s 1936 warning to Savage: “May you never forget your responsibilities to the Māori people, for when you forget this, your government will fall.”

Tirikatene was joined by three other Ratana candidates before the end of the Second World War. Nga koata e wha were backed and informed by an enormous network of advisors from across Māoridom. However, after the death of their greatest advocate Michael Joseph Savage, the Ratana MPs were regularly sidelined, over-ridden and dismissed in their efforts to introduce legislation and establish structures that would bring Māori closer to equality.

The Treaty continued to gather cobwebs until former Ratana youth leader Matiu Rata eventually pushed through legislation in 1974 recognising Waitangi Day as a national holiday, and paved the way for the Waitangi Tribunal to begin investigating breaches of the agreement between the two peoples in 1976.

Despite the Ratana-Labour alliance eventually pushing through significant legislation that recognised Māori concerns, Labour’s efforts to undermine the Ratana ability to ‘block vote’ remained a sore point. This was evidenced even in recent years through the ‘unconstitutional’ actions of the Labour Party in 1999, which deregistered the 4000-strong Maramatanga Affiliate despite their fees and membership being up to date. This effectively shut down the powerful Ratana-based network, which dated back to the 1930s.

Regardless, politicians still turn up in their droves to Ratana Pa every January 24th for Ratana’s birthday celebrations. There are many factions at work seeking to harness the political potential of the Ratana movement. While Māori Party co-leader Tariana Turia was brought up a Ratana, and many Ratana are keen to support her and her political aspirations, Labour continues to hold tenuously to an ancient and much compromised alliance. While Ratana is better known for its political heritage, it remains largely a spiritual movement, strongly influenced by the original Christian-based kaupapa, and the prophecies and sayings of its founder. There is a strong undercurrent within the church and movement to return to its *turangawaewae* or foundation. Pivotal among these are the words T.W. Ratana used frequently during his mission: “In one of

my hands is the Bible; in the other the Treaty of Waitangi. If the spiritual side is attended to, all will be well on the physical side."

Keith Newman has been working on a new book on the Ratana church and movement for 20 years. Reed Publishing will release *Ratana Revisited* in July 2006. Visit Keith's website at [www. wordworx.co.nz](http://www.wordworx.co.nz)

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