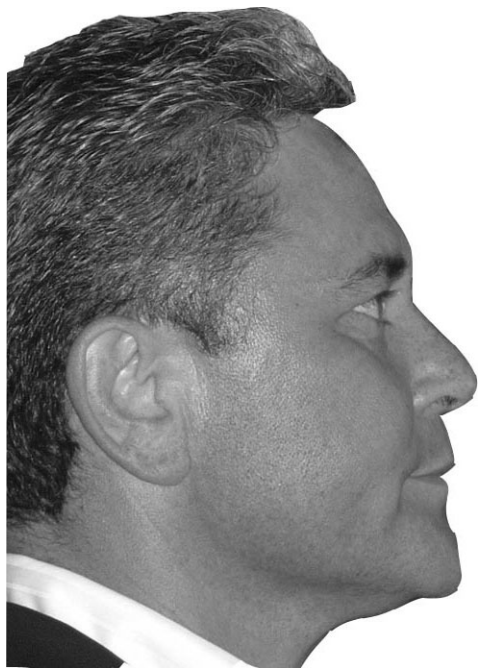


The agony and the ecstasy

Te Waha Nui reports on an emotional changing of the guard in Tamaki Makaurau on election night.



Alexandra Park Raceway was the perfect place to witness the election night horse race.

In the grandstand, straight-backed National Party supporters milled around, mumbling into their sauvignon blancs.

Underneath, in the less grandiose and much cosier Elsu room, John Tamihere's supporters were sitting quietly at their tables, a red helium balloon tied to the back of every chair.

A group of kaumatua sat near the front in a wide arc around their table. In silence they sat watching and waiting.

Behind them kuia lounged at a long table. In contrast to the men, they were colourfully dressed, and leaned across the table, chatting and joking.

The rest of the room was dotted with smaller tables packed with families.

Despite a bit of kidding and the occasional loud laugh, everyone wore their poker faces.

Tamihere arrived with Dover Samuels close to 9pm. All you could see were flashes of Tamihere's grey hair through the media swarm of cameras and microphones.

A beautiful karanga opened the powhiri and Samuels offered the response.

The hongis and the end of formalities brought the room to life.

Tamihere ribbed the nearby men in his high pitched, jocular way and hugged the old ladies.

Every attempt was made to make the evening festive, but it wasn't working.

To add to the incongruous balloons, disco numbers like Celebrate and Blame it on the Boogie blared over the PA. But no one took to the dance floor.

Quiet debate was going on around the room and serious faces were glued to the row of TV screens above the bar.

Tamihere watched them more intently than most. Even during TV interviews, his eyes wouldn't shift.

It was a close race for a while, but by 10pm Sharples had taken the lead.

"The South Auckland boozers are starting to come through now," Tamihere said, almost grimacing as he gripped his Heineken.

Then it was all over. Tamihere took his place before the microphone, his daughter now behind him with her arms round his waist.

"My children wanted me to lose...they're reclaiming a dad," he laughed in that nervous way he has.

The speech was short and direct. Tamihere said the loss was one of the most moving experiences of his life.

Not getting Maori votes was a sign he had let them down.

But he ended on a positive note. "One good thing is Maori woke up. They got off their arses and got out and voted."

And they did this in the rain, somebody added.

After a brief waiata, which was as mournful and wavering as a funeral dirge, Tamihere walked promptly out of the room.

Where to now was the big question? People were prepared to wait and see how the Maori Party would get on in Parliament.

"They're young," a kaumatua said. "Let's see what they can do with the foreshore."

There was a sombre air hanging over the party, but not without hope.

One woman said: "We're sad when our candidate doesn't get in, but we're happy that a Maori got in."

Now they've got to do it...the proof will be in the pudding."

— Britton Broun and Bonnie White

Supporters of the Maori Party began their victory celebrations early last Saturday, hours before incumbent MP John Tamihere accepted defeat.

A cool confidence was hard to ignore among about 100 revellers who assembled at the party's campaign headquarters in Wiri.

The celebrations took place in a large marquee, pitched on a gravel pit car park deep within the southern most part of Pita Sharples' Tamaki Makaurau electorate.

The tent was packed with supporters who anxiously gazed at their electorate's results on large projection screens, while jubilant Maori hip hop blasted out of concert-sized speakers.

Maori Party candidate for Manurewa Rangī McClean was among the early celebrants.

He didn't win his electorate but was still overjoyed at his party's success.

"Whatever happens, we've made history," he said.

Other members of the crowd were hardly able to conceal their excitement.

"Did they tell you that they ran out of Maori ballots 'up north' and had to helicopter more in?" asked one woman.

Cheers rose louder with every preliminary poll result.

Suddenly, the tent fell silent. The night's star had arrived and was welcomed onto the makeshift marae with a traditional powhiri.

Sharples spent election day with his closest supporters and family members who accompanied him.

This was truly a pan-tribal event. Sharples' tribe is from the East Cape, his Tamaki marae is West Auckland's Hoani Waititi, but this was Tainui land and it was a King Country elder who welcomed Sharples.

While the powhiri continued,

Sharples' lead leaped from just 181 to more than 1200 votes within an hour.

By the end of the ceremony, the previously restrained crowd was visibly jubilant as music again got anxious supporters dancing.

By 9pm the result seemed certain.

At 10.30pm, a miserable looking Tamihere appeared on the television screens.

"It's about scoring a try at the right moment and his side did it," he said.

Reporters then swarmed around Sharples, looking for an insight into Parliament's newest member.

But the jubilant new representative of Auckland Maori had little time for the media and soon climbed centre stage to address his supporters.

"You can count on it by knowing that I am in there as your servant and I will take your wishes to Parliament."

As for a coalition, he said: "If we have to stand outside of the ranks, we will."

"Tomorrow we'll go back to our marae and have a meeting."

The victory haka was filled with the political fervour that has driven the Maori Party from its genesis at last year's hiko to its arrival in Parliament today.

Paora Sharples, Pita's son, is joined by a group of eight staunch supporters who danced like devils on the stage in the night's most powerful moment.

The noise became tremendous as members of the crowd joined the battle-cry, stomping madly and flashing the whites of their eyes in immeasurable pride over their leader.

It was a message for Maori Party supporters.

Pita Sharples will take his seat in the Beehive. The political battle is about to begin.

— John Aspden



COMMISERATIONS: Tamihere hugs a supporter after conceding defeat.



CELEBRATIONS: Maori Party supporters cheer on a victorious Sharples.