

# Newman Weekly

By Dr. Muriel Newman  
12 November 2005



The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

## The Referendum Option

Next year's census will be held on March 7th and it will be followed by the Maori Electoral Option. This five-yearly survey gives electors of Maori descent an opportunity to choose whether they want to be registered to vote on the Maori roll or the general roll.

At the present time there are seven Maori electorate seats and 113 general seats made up of 16 South Island electorate seats, 46 North Island electorate seats, and 51 Party list seats. If more Maori exercise their option to enrol on the Maori roll, then there will be more Maori electorate seats in Parliament and fewer general seats. If all Maori electors enrolled on the Maori roll there would be 13 Maori seats and 107 general seats.

The Maori seats were first established in 1867 as a temporary measure to give Maori the vote. While New Zealand's 1853 electoral franchise was theoretically 'colour-blind', giving the vote to men over the age of 21 who held individual title to their land, the problem was that very few Maori qualified because their land was communally owned.

In spite of an expectation that the seats would be abolished after five years - it was thought that Maori land would be split into individual titles - they remained to become an anachronism from the past.

When the Royal Commission on the Electoral System was established in the mid 1980s, they investigated the wisdom of retaining the Maori seats. In the end they recommended

that the seats be abolished, believing that under the proposed MMP system of voting, the representation of Maori and other minority groups would be greatly improved through inclusion in Party lists.

However, Maori objections led to the present system whereby the number of seats increases or decreases according to the Maori Electoral Option. This has resulted in an increase in the number of Maori seats to five in 1996, and seven in 2002.

The Maori Party has already announced that it intends to campaign hard next year to increase the number of Maori electorate seats. They believe that winning more seats would make it harder for them to be abolished. At the same time they acknowledge that many Maori will be reluctant to move from the general roll to the Maori roll.

After the census and Maori Option exercise are completed, the Representation Commission will make the final determinations on seats and boundaries. With these results expected in mid 2007, it seems to me that the time is now right to ascertain whether New Zealanders are supportive of the concept of a Citizens' Initiated Referendum (CIR) to abolish the Maori seats.

The CIR Act was passed unanimously by Parliament in 1993, but since that time, although 39 referenda have been proposed on matters as diverse as outlawing battery hens, saving forests, and changing the flag, only three have been successful. They were the 1995 firefighters

*Next year the Maori Party will campaign hard to increase the number of Maori electorate seats.*

referendum, supported by 87.8 percent of voters, and the 1999 proposals by Margaret Robertson to reduce the number of MPs and by Norm Withers to introduce tougher sentences for violent crime. They gained 81.5 and 91.8 percent support respectively.

Although all three referenda received overwhelming public support, because in New Zealand citizens' referenda are not binding, governments do not have to do much more than pay lip service to them.

It is concerns such as this that drives the Direct Democracy movement and led its founder Steve Baron to propose a CIR in 2003 to make citizens' referenda binding on the government (Steve is this week's guest contributor). Sadly, as with the majority of other referendum proposals, the task of obtaining some 400,000 signatures within a twelve-month period - the hurdle that must be overcome for a CIR to be able to proceed - proved too great.

That is why I am using this column to test public support for a CIR to abolish the Maori seats. An NZCPD poll just a few weeks ago showed an overwhelmingly majority of respondents believed the continuing existence of the Maori seats is a wedge that promotes

racial division. 98 percent wanted the seats abolished.

The power of the Internet now makes a CIR more achievable. Gone are the days when petitioners had to sit outside the post office asking passers-by to sign their forms.

Now, once the wording of a referendum question has been officially approved (a process which takes some three to four months), petition forms can be emailed out to interested parties, signed and posted back.

This week, I am asking readers to say whether they would be prepared to sign (and distribute) petition forms, and provide the contact details of others who may be prepared to do the same.

If I gather enough support I will begin the CIR process, so that New Zealand can decide whether the Maori seats should be retained.

But I also need to be realistic. To be successful I will need to receive around 50,000 email addresses from people who will be prepared to help. If you feel strongly about this issue, then please send this request onto as many other people as you can so that they too can register their willingness to help.

## Supporting the NZ Centre for Political Debate

If you enjoy reading Newman Weekly and value independent political discussion then I'm inviting you to consider becoming a supporter of the New Zealand Centre for Political Debate.

I'm confident the recently established NZCPD think tank will become an influential political force and provide a much needed independent voice on political issues. But life is all about reality and the NZCPD relies on the support and goodwill of others to continue. Contributions both big and small are most welcome.

The support levels range from a subscriber who receives Newman Weekly and has an opportunity to participate in our discussion forums, to those who would like to be foundation supporters or benefactors.

Thanks so much for your interest in Newman Weekly and taking the time to read this message. To find out more about how you can support us visit [www.nzcpd.com](http://www.nzcpd.com).