



of the four Maori elections been challenged in an electoral court they would have been declared invalid.

But how many “guesses” did officials make? How many names were unilaterally placed on the Maori rolls?

Up until 1972 the usual increase in the number of enrolments was about 3,000. Between 1972 and 1975 the increase jumped by about 14,000, when the voting age was reduced. Yet between 1975 and 1978, the increase suddenly moved up to about 40,000, even though there was no other exceptional circumstance — except that officials improperly enrolled people on the Maori rolls.

Yet the percentage of Maori voting has progressively dropped over the last three general elections, from 79.67 per cent of registered Maori voters in 1969, to 77.1 per cent in 1972, to 62.04 per cent in 1975 and the all-time low of 42.65 per cent in 1978. In contrast, about 80 per cent of eligible non-Maori voters turned out in 1978.

But the most clear-cut evidence indicating that Maoris want the Maori seats abolished is seen by comparing voting and population statistics. The 1976 census showed that there were 144,898 New Zealanders of Maori descent aged twenty or over entitled to be registered on the Maori rolls. Yet just 33.71 per cent actually voted on the Maori rolls. It leaves the possibility that at least 66.29 per cent of Maori people voted on the general roll or were not interested.

Quite apart from the huge administrative injustice over Maori voting thrown up by the Hunua Electoral Court evidence, the present system is archaic. It is contributing to New Zealand’s growing racial problems. Separate Maori representation was initiated last century. The aim was to give enhanced political voice and protection to the Maori people over their serious land questions.

While Maori land problems remain, there is no strong voice from the Maori MPs suggesting that this is still their dominant concern. They are like other MPs, concerned to look at all issues as need arises. Also, the Ratana church no longer has the “hold” on Maori parliamentary representation and Maoridom that it once did.

Instead, as New Zealanders, Maoris and non-Maoris now have the same basic economic, social and cultural needs and concerns.

All MPs, Maori and non-Maori, should be concerned over the needs of the young urban Maoris. This group now comprises about 60 per cent of new Zealand’s Maori population. National’s three MPs who happen to be Maori

*The four Maori Members of Parliament. From left to right: Koro Wetere (Western Maori); Matiu Rata (Northern Maori); Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan (Southern Maori); and Paraone Reweti (Eastern Maori).*

likewise have a duty to represent the non-Maori people and their issues.

In today’s world, it is not race *per se* which counts, but identity with or attitude towards culture. A person’s ability to do a job, not his or her race or cultural background, should be the primary requisite to becoming a parliamentary candidate. An MP like Ben Couch, who happens to be Maori, is as effective, surely, at looking after non-Maori electorate issues, as many non-Maori MPs would be at forcefully pressing Maori land and marae issues.

Under the existing set up, both Labour and National can safely ignore the collective and special problems of the Maori people. National has no incentive to pursue seats which it apparently has no hope of winning. Likewise, Labour can virtually take them for granted.

In short, Parliament’s system of setting aside four seats exclusively for Maori representation may be helping to keep the races apart. The system represents an officially blessed line of demarcation between the races.

It is even undemocratic to the extent that Maoris, as a major group in New Zealand, have no capacity to “make or break” a Government — as they should — as do the farmers, manufacturers, teachers or trade unions. In the United States, the Black voters are widely regarded as the key “pressure group” responsible for President Carter’s election.

In contrast, separate Maori parliamentary representation is keeping the Maori population impotent as a political force. It is certainly hampering the building of a strengthened “all New Zealand” identity among both Maoris and non-Maoris alike.

Clearly, the strengthened competition for Maori support that would result under abolition of the Maori seats, would demand and ensure that all parties put up quality Maori candidates in winnable seats.

Yes, abolition of the Maori seats would be a good thing. It would be a positive step towards improving New Zealand’s race relations, by “forcing” — through political reality — non-Maoris to come to the party and learn, really learn the true spirit that is Maoritanga. It would make New Zealand, ultimately, a much better place in which to live.