

Disagree On Maori Seats

Nikitin Sallee

tinue, don't agree entirely on their future.

The disagreement centres on the "Maori option" — that is, how and when Maoris choose between voting in a Maori seat or a General seat.

This year's Electoral Amendment Act makes a major change to the Maori option.

Instead of exercising the option at the census earlier this year, Maoris will now choose between rolls in February, 1982.

Labour's Koro Wetere believes Maoris should have had the chance to exercise the Maori option before this year's election.

"It's acknowledged that the rolls were in chaos at the last election" says Wetere.

"Despite their talk about cleaning up the rolls, you've still got Maoris on the General roll who prefer to be on the Maori roll.

"They're victims of the government's lack of good administration. To really clean up the rolls, the option should have been given this time."

Nothing sinister

But Justice Minister McLay says there's nothing sinister in waiting till after the election to offer the Maori option.

He says that under the old rules set up by the last Labour Government, a Maori option exercised at this year's census would not have applied at this year's election.

"Understandably," says Mr McLay, "anyone who exercised an option in the 1981 census would have been confused if on election day they found themselves on a roll they had opted for at the previous census, which was in 1976.

"Obviously, the Maori option had to be separated from this year's election. There would have been great confusion."

All register

Meanwhile, Labour is promising a fundamental change to the Maori option.

Wetere says if Labour is elected, all Maoris will be required to register on a Maori electoral roll.

They would then be given the chance to switch to a General roll if they wish.

Under Wetere's plans, the num-

Nikitin Sallee is a parliamentary reporter for Auckland's Radio Pacific.

ber of Maori seats would be decided by the number of voters left on the Maori roll after this re-registration process.

It's likely that would mean more Maori seats.

"Maori voters should start from a Maori base," says Wetere.

Stacked roll

But McLay rubbishes Labour's plans.

"For Labour, forcing all Maoris onto the Maori roll as a starting point makes political sense. They will stack the Maori roll with anybody who has any Maori blood at all, and then say to them 'You can move back to the General roll if you want to'.

"Obviously, they believe that the majority of people will stay on the Maori roll — and they'll end up with more Maori seats."

At present, of course, all four Maori seats are held by Labour.

"We will guarantee the Maori people four Maori seats," says McLay. "It will not be allowed to diminish."

"Under the present rules, Maoris will be able to go onto whatever roll they wish," says McLay.

"Every New Zealand voter will be contacted in February and invited to exercise the Maori option if they have any Maori blood at all.

"We simply believe that it is our responsibility to provide people with the opportunity — and we shouldn't force them onto a Maori roll, nor should we force them onto a General roll."

Time reduced

There is yet another controversy over the Maori seats.

This year's Electoral Amendment Act reduces the length of time for exercising the Maori option from a minimum of three months to two months.

Mr McLay says that change was made on the advice of top government officials.

"We have to operate a very tight

36-month timetable after this year's election," says McLay.

"The major tasks include a roll compilation, the Maori option, and the drawing of the new electoral boundaries.

"The timetable is so tight that no time can be lost. Two months is the maximum period of time within that timetable which can be allowed for the exercise of the option."

Under-represented

Another point of contention is over the number of people represented in the Maori seats.

Wetere says if you count the Maori voters and their children, the four Maori seats are twice or three times as big as General seats.

This means, says Wetere, that voters in Maori seats are under-represented: "our kids don't really count in Parliament."

But McLay points out that there are fewer registered voters in the four Maori seats than in any other electorate.

"Certainly, it takes fewer Maori votes to elect a Maori member — and thus a Maori vote is worth more than a vote cast in a General seat."

Abolish seats

Social Credit's Bruce Beetham won't participate in the squabbling over the fine points of the Maori seats.

"I don't want to talk about the present system," he says.

"I only want to talk about what our policy is, and our policy isn't to keep the present system.

"If I were to give an attitude which relates to something other than proportional representation, I would be giving you two policies."

As long as we have Maori seats, they will be controversial. But Justice Minister McLay believes they are necessary.

"We don't now talk of one nation of light-brown people," he says. "We talk of a variety of cultures, in which Anglo-Saxon and Maori are but two. Thus there will always be racial and cultural groupings which we will want to preserve.

"At present, Maori want to retain the seats — presumably partly because they see them as part of the total preservation of their Maoriness."