


By us, with us, for us: the importance of Pacific political leadership in Aotearoa, New Zealand

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Fa'anānā Efeso Collins was a Pacific leader; a brown voice in spaces in Aotearoa where our voices are traditionally not heard. He believed that Pacific communities deserved political representatives who not only worked for their communities, but who were brave and honest leaders who could inspire “something good and hopeful” (Ikimotu, 2017). This paper explores the history of Pacific political representation in Aotearoa New Zealand and reflects on the importance of diversity of voices in legislatures. It highlights the intrinsic political dimensions of Pacific culture and explores ways we can encourage greater numbers of Pacific people to step into political leadership and to demonstrate the values Fa'anānā championed.

History of Pacific political representation in Aotearoa

From 1853-1993, New Zealand operated under a First Past the Post (FPP) political system. This resulted in pressure on political parties to win electoral seats and so they were more likely to stand candidates who they felt would appeal to the majority of voters (Vowles, 1995). In 1984, the Labour Party's manifesto promised to establish a Royal Commission to examine issues of low proportionality. The report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System was completed in 1986 and recommended Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) as New Zealand's electoral system. One of the most important advantages for MMP was it could increase the number of women, Māori, and ethnic minorities in parliament because of party lists and the chance for political parties to diversify their candidate choices (Royal Commission on the Electoral System, 1986).

Despite significant migration by Pacific peoples to Aotearoa, particularly from the 1960s onwards, there was only one Pacific Member of Parliament (MP) under the FPP system (Mallon et al. 2012). In 1990, Taito Philip Field stood as Labour's Parliamentary candidate for Otago, the first Pacific Island candidate in New Zealand's history, but was defeated. In 1993, he became the elected Member of Parliament for electorate of Otago and the first MP of Pacific Island descent in the New Zealand Parliament. After electoral system change to MMP and the subsequent election in 1996, two more Pacific MPs entered the House: Mark Gosche won the Maungakiekie seat for Labour and Anae Arthur Anae entered via the National Party list. The following election saw Luamanuvao Winnie Laban elected as the first female Pacific MP when she won in Mana and later elections saw the first Pacific MP who was not of Samoan descent, Charles Chauvel, enter the House in 2006.

Even allowing for growth in numbers of Pacific MPs under an MMP electoral system, Pacific people have remained under-represented in the New Zealand parliament (Catt, 1997). Between 1993 – 2024, there have been 26 MPs who identify themselves as a Pacific person. Of these, 17 MPs came from the Labour Party, four from the National Party, two from the Green Party and three from New Zealand First. This preference for Labour as a political home for Pacific MPs is the result of several interconnected factors. Pacific communities in Aotearoa New Zealand have had a historically strong connection to the Labour Party. The immigration of labourers and seasonal workers from the Pacific to New Zealand resulted in strong union connections, and Pacific political representation and leadership were strengthened within the union movement (Salesa, 2017). The links between the unions and the Labour Party and its affiliation with the working class meant many new Pacific migrants established a pattern of political support for Labour which would prove consistent across generations (Iusitini & Crothers, 2013). Patterns of migration and settlement have seen substantial Pacific communities develop in areas of Aotearoa, and the Labour Party has a history of standing strong Pacific candidates in electorates such as Mana, Māngere or Panmure-Ōtāhuhu. It has an active Pacific caucus and is seen to reward its Pacific MPs with Ministerial positions. It is perhaps not surprising then that the majority of Pacific MPs in New Zealand have come from within the Labour Party, but this traditional bond is one that shifts with each new generation.

Political Pacific

The Pacific community in Aotearoa is a distinct and important migrant group, and its political journey is a fundamental part of New Zealand's wider political story. 2018 census data showed that Pacific people make up 8.1% of the population, and that their average age is 23 (Stats NZ, n.d.) which includes young people who may be second, third or fourth generation New Zealanders of migrant origin. Despite a growing population, political turnout for Pacific communities is lower than the general population; Iusitini & Crothers (2013) identified key contributing factors which include lower interest in politics, a young population, lower levels of civic duty and party identification, and socio-economic status.

Pacific people are intrinsically political; the population size of small island nations and the tight bonds of diasporic communities mean that there is always a need for networking, knowledge, respect and 'teu le va', or nurturing the sacred spaces between us (Corbett, 2015; Anae, 2020; Salesa, 2017). Damon Salesa notes that communities who are more likely to be poor, brown, or colonised are not given political power, they "have to discover and recover politics and power for themselves" (Salesa, 2017, p.157). As communities and as a country, we are still grappling with what this looks like for Pacific people. There remains a significant gap in current research of understanding of the ways Pacific people engage in politics in Aotearoa or what they understand as political actions. While it appears that traditional forms of political participation and engagement (such as voting, joining a political party, or donating money to a campaign) are low, there is a need to investigate how Pacific communities connect New Zealand's political system to their own lives as this will influence their feelings of political efficacy, or ability to affect change. Fa'anānā particularly noted the importance of ensuring young Pacific people were inspired by politics, and after his death, young people talked about him as a mentor, a bridge between the world of governance and Pacific communities, and an embodiment of the values he believed in (Xia, 2024). It is this representation of leadership and hope that was his too-short political legacy but one that is an essential model for our communities to continue.

The importance of Pacific political representation

Political representation of Pacific people has descriptive and symbolic importance. Descriptive representation is where the representative shares a similar background or characteristics such as

gender, ethnicity and occupation with their constituents. The assumption is that when this occurs, the representative's views are more likely to be similar or the same as the constituents (Griffiths and Wollheim, 1960). Symbolic representation sees the representative as a symbol which has meaning beyond itself; people view themselves in the representative and they understand themselves to be represented (Pitkin, 1967). Research on ethnic minority groups and political engagement indicates that groups are more likely to vote, participate politically, and to feel politically empowered when they can see people like them in legislatures (Bobo and Gilliam, 1990; Banducci, Donovan & Karp, 2004). As a migrant population with historical tuakana-teina relationships to Aotearoa, Pacific peoples sit as both insiders and outsiders in the political landscape. Visible representation of Pacific faces on councils or in parliament demonstrates not only a commitment to supporting Pacific people but to amplifying Pacific voices. This contributes to helping Pacific people feel recognised, valued, and politically empowered which results in greater voter turnout (Lusitini, 2013).

The growth of Pacific political representation is also vital because "Pacific Peoples" are not a homogenous group. The Pacific region is vast and the Pacific population in Aotearoa New Zealand encompasses people from a wide range of culturally distinct nations. In order to be understood as more than a generic mix of brown skin and flowers, it is essential that political spheres have representatives who speak from a number of different Pacific perspectives, both culturally and individually. Fa'anānā Efeso Collins was a rare Pacific MP from within the Green Party, but his leadership and example will undoubtedly inspire other Pacific leaders who feel they do not fit within the traditional Labour fold and that is as it should be. The Pacific community deserves to have representatives who differ on social, cultural, economic and political issues because we are a diverse community. Scarcity of political representatives can lead to a lack of diversity because of the increased pressure on minority group representatives to act as spokespeople for the entire group (Cook, 2008). Individuals can be promoted by political parties as Pacific representatives via high party list rankings or safe seats and thus may be encouraged to act primarily in this role. An increase in numbers of Pacific political representatives allows Pacific people to exist and represent in all their intersectional glory: as Pacific LGBTQIA+ / MVPFAFF+, religious or secular, confident in their language and culture, or beginning to learn their mother tongue, and as members of many Pacific nations, not only those from the Polynesian region.

Even more importantly, what Pacific people can bring to political leadership, spaces, and power are the values which we hold as a collective members of our 'sea of islands': respect, humility, warmth, kindness, and love (Hau'ofa, 1994). These are not words commonly used in discourse around political representation, and often they are values not commonly demonstrated inside halls of power. But Efeso Collins stood in the New Zealand Parliament for his maiden speech and he talked of social justice, he talked of raising up the ones who were left behind, and he talked of love. Love as an action; a means of righting injustices and overcoming oppressions. In her tribute poem to Fa'anānā, Tongan poet Karlo Mila wrote "Pakeke of Parliament/you deserved to stand upright there/voice of the voiceless/heralding the hushed/into hallowed halls" (Mila, 2024). This bravery demonstrates what leaders can do when they speak for the collective; not just their own communities but all who are in need. Drawing on thinkers such as Paulo Freire, Fa'anānā contributed his own Pacific perspective to how politicians should seek to liberate the oppressed and to flourish as a society which looks out for one another.

The loss of this leader is not just a personal grief but a loss of a potential for change in how politics is understood and enacted in Aotearoa New Zealand. Before he was elected to parliament, Fa'anānā was a youth mentor, a civil servant, a city councillor for the Manukau ward. He was "unapologetically Sāmoan and Tokelauan, and South Auckland through and through" (Chapman, 2024). He consistently advocated for his communities, even when it cost him relationships with other councillors and he believed he could "represent a community which had been sidelined or on the periphery" (Kilgallon, 2024). He notably changed his position on same-sex marriage and worked to support takatāpui and fa'afafine young people, even while acknowledging his Christian faith and

upbringing (Donnell, 2023). He faced death threats and racism while campaigning for mayor but noted that “even if I was to walk from politics, I would probably end up in a role where I’d still be speaking my mind. I’ve always chosen to speak what I believe in” (Manhire, 2022). His experiences in the political arena demonstrate the challenges for Pacific people in public-facing political roles but also how vital it is for Aotearoa that Pacific faces are seen, and Pacific voices are heard in politics.

Fa’anānā Efeso Collins was an exciting force in the New Zealand parliament. He was a community leader, a youth worker, an academic, a local boy, and his loss shattered the collective Pacific community. Not just because of who he was but because of what he promised; a politician who wanted to fight for the whenua and the future of his people. In his wake, we must ask ourselves questions about the kind of country we want for our Pacific communities and how we can fulfil the dreams of our ancestors. This may be challenging conventional understandings of politics to demonstrate the skilful way we navigate ‘the political’ daily. It may be asking our young people about their dreams and aspirations for the world they will inherit. It may be stepping forward as a leader in local or national spaces. But it will always be about lifting each other up and forward, as Fa’anānā did, blazing the way for a bright future for us all.

collectivity in your bones,
justice in your stride.
By us, with us, for us.
Without compromise.

Karlo Mila, ‘Beyond the Reef’

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