

New Zealand: Maori Labour MP delivers vicious attack on social welfare

John Braddock
17 March 2003

The New Zealand Labour government has been forced over the past fortnight to shut down the controversy that following a highly publicised anti-welfare speech from one of its key Maori ministers.

John Tamihere, Minister of Youth Affairs and a leading member of Labour's Maori caucus, was required by Prime Minister Helen Clark to apologise after criticising the government's welfare policies, saying they were "killing Maori with kindness". Having forced the apology, however, Clark made it clear that Tamihere's message was by no means anathema to the Labour leadership, and that aspects of it were already being implemented.

Tamihere's speech was one of the "highlights" of the second "Knowledge Wave" conference, held in Auckland in late February. Co-sponsored by the government, Auckland University and major corporations, it was set up to provide a forum for advancing the right-wing social and economic agenda demanded by big business. The theme of this year's gathering was "Leadership"—a euphemism for deliberations on how, in the face of intense public resistance, to proceed with cuts to taxes and welfare and move on with the privatisation of health, education and other essential public services.

Tamihere was speaking in his role as a local MP for one of the Auckland Maori seats, and as an authority on the "Maori" question. The Maori, the country's indigenous inhabitants, constitute just under 20 percent of the population. They make up the most oppressed layers of the working class, and are disproportionately represented in a range of social statistics—poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment, poor health, teenage pregnancies and suicides and rates of imprisonment.

Far from demanding policies to address the grinding poverty and social inequality faced by Maori people, Tamihere used the occasion before the well-heeled audience to call for the privatisation of social welfare. He said that beneficiaries were getting "something for nothing", and that this was eroding their "self-worth". "Welfare in New Zealand is delivered in a charitable and benevolent way and

that charity and benevolence actually crushes you because it teaches you to put your hand out," he claimed. Beneficiaries should, he moralised, accept "obligations" in return for "state support".

According to Tamihere, the Department of Work and Income (Winz) should assess beneficiaries' entitlements and then pay the money over to private trusts—such as the Waipareira Trust, where he was the CEO before entering parliament. The trust would work out a budget for each beneficiary and pay essentials, including rent, power and basic food items, rather than "handing over the money for them to spend at will". Only residual money would be transferred into a bank account for "discretionary" spending.

According to Tamihere, privatising the benefit system would enable private sector managers to negotiate "bulk discounts" for their clients, similar to a \$3 discount on medical prescriptions negotiated by the Waipareira Trust. An alternative would be for the benefit to be paid directly to social service agencies such as the Salvation Army.

Pursued by the media in the wake of his speech, Tamihere went further. In an interview with the *Sunday Star Times*, he launched a salvo at the Blairite "Third Way" politics promoted by Social Welfare Minister Steve Maharey, saying they were failing. "He is going to have to get away from statism and bulls***ting under the name of Third Way-ism because he is not practising Third Way-ism. No, no, he is practising old left."

Parading an intense anti-working class prejudice, Tamihere described the typical beneficiary in the following terms: "All I need to do... is to beat my case-load worker at Winz, pull my \$160 unemployment benefit, get on the p**s over there and grow a bit of dope over here. That's a wonderful lifestyle but what values does that teach the children in the house?"

Tamihere also criticised the government's policy on state housing, specifically its decision to set the rental ceiling at 25 percent of income. Labour was forced to make this concession after criticism that the previous policy of market-related rents was one of the chief contributing factors to

widespread poverty. Further, it was becoming the source of resistance among state house tenants to government austerity measures. Tamihere claimed that the rents should be reviewed annually. Everyone going into a state house, he asserted, “should understand that it is not a lifetime entitlement. Because what you are doing is incentivising (sic) them to either cook the books or stay on their arse at 25 percent of gross [income]. Dumb, dumb, dumb.”

Demonstrating that Tamihere’s views have significant support within ruling circles, the *New Zealand Herald* applauded them as an example of “creative thinking”.

Despite giving what Clark called a “comprehensive apology” to the cabinet, Tamihere made it quite clear that he did not resile from anything in his speech, insisting that both Clark and Maharey had vetted it beforehand. He said that the only “issues” his superiors had with its contents were to do with his right to speak on welfare matters but maintained that he had a “right to speak because social issues are huge in... every Maori constituency”.

While Clark disagreed with Tamihere’s version of the discussion, she defended her initial attempts to downplay the significance of the speech, saying it could have been read in either a “malign or benign light”—and she had chosen the latter interpretation. Her direction to Tamihere was simply that he should “stick to his portfolio and not attack his colleagues”.

In a statement to the *Sunday Star Times*, Clark denied the speech was a direct challenge to government policy. Labour in fact had been “trying to distribute more funding to providers who were more responsive to the needs of their communities”. According to Clark, all governments aim to “devolve welfare provision out to communities”, the only problem being that “accountability and transparency” need to be “worked upon”. Clark said she would like to move “more quickly on such initiatives”, so long as the “structures” could be got right.

Not a single Maori political figure—including from among the self-styled “radicals”—has come forward to denounce Tamihere’s attacks on welfare beneficiaries. This is because he speaks for an entire layer of Maori entrepreneurs and businessmen recruited and promoted by Labour prior to assuming government. During the 1999 elections, Labour was determined to regain control of the Maori parliamentary seats which it had traditionally dominated, but lost in a landslide to the rightwing populist New Zealand First party in 1996. Labour sought out a number of leading figures within the Maori communities, offering rapid political promotions. A key pre-requisite was proven influence in circles dominated by the politics of Maori nationalism.

These elements have much to gain from the privatisation of public services and their turning over to Maori business

interests in the name of “self determination”—as Tamihere’s own career demonstrates. Tamihere established a name for himself as chief executive of the Waipareira Trust, which runs a collection of job schemes and social services for Maori in West Auckland. He then won pre-selection for Labour, despite the fact that his credentials were called into question on the grounds that the Waipareira Trust’s job programs were based on low wages and anti-unionism.

None of this has proved a hindrance to his rise through Labour’s ranks. Once in parliament Tamihere quickly emerged as one of the leading lights of the Maori caucus, and was elevated, after just one term, to the cabinet. As Minister of Youth Affairs he has assumed particular responsibility for a deepening assault on the social and economic position of young people.

According to a recent United Nations UNICEF report (1), an entire generation of New Zealand’s children and youth has suffered under the reforms launched by the Labour government of 1984-90. It concluded that Maori and Pacific children in particular have been “disproportionately affected” by growing inequality and levels of poverty.

Figures cited in the report show consistently high rates of unemployment among young people—20 percent in 1996—and massive increases in poverty and deprivation. Household incomes fell in real terms between 1981 and 1998, with those having dependent children most likely to be in the bottom two-fifths of income distribution. As a result of such policies, New Zealand now has among the worst indices of OECD countries for youth suicides, births to teenage mothers, poor child health and low rates of access to tertiary education.

Tamihere’s speech provides more evidence of the thoroughly anti-working class nature of the Labour government and its supporters among the Maori petty bourgeoisie. That he was able to deliver it at such a forum is an expression of how far entrenched the attacks on the social position of working people have become. That he has emerged with his political position intact is a sure sign that Labour is preparing to move even further to accommodate the most extreme demands of big business.

(1) Blaiklock, A. et al., *When the Invisible Hand Rocks the Cradle: New Zealand Children in a Time of Change*. Innocenti Working Paper No. 93, UNICEF, July 2002.



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact