



By MAGGIE TAIT | Friday, 31 October 2008

Fighting for spiritual South Auckland

The battle for Mangere is being fought in the markets, malls and the churches. There are a handful of candidates but the real contest is between Independent MP Taito Phillip Field and Labour MP Su'a William Sio.

Both are Samoan, with union backgrounds and Christian faith.

Mr Field has baggage - he jumped before being pushed from Labour and is to face trial on corruption charges next year. But he is also well known and was the first Pacific Island MP elected to Parliament 15 years ago and for his service to Otara, which he won in 1993, and Mangere, which he held since 1996.

Mr Sio, 48, is also a familiar face - he was Manukau City deputy mayor before entering Parliament at the start of April on the party list.

"I think by and large the community here is very much focused on who is going to lead government," Mr Sio argues.

"This is a Labour stronghold and Taito's no longer a member of the Labour Party. He's gone, he's the leader of the Pacific Party."

Mr Field says it's the ideal role for him and is actively campaigning against "ungodly" laws supported by Labour such as the removal of the right to use force against children. He wants prostitution outlawed, civil unions dumped and abortion stopped.

"(Mangere) has been held by Labour but first and foremost people are Christians. It's more of a God's-own stronghold than a Labour stronghold."

NZPA spent Thursday with Mr Field. In the morning he saw and gave advice to about 20 people who visited his office for help.

Two were overstayers. Mr Field advised a young man to go back to Samoa and apply to return from there but to a young mother married to a New Zealand citizen he explained how she could appeal her status. In both cases the families had already forked out large amounts of money, \$1200 and \$3000 respectively, to immigration consultants.

Housing was the most common concern.

Many of the petitioners struggled with English and had difficulty with bureaucracy, one couple had different names on their passports, birth certificates and marriage certificates because of changes in chiefly names and partial names being used. Problems that can be fixed but are scary when Internal Affairs writes a letter questioning a citizenship application.

"This is actually part of my campaign - when you see (and help) this volume of people over three years."

Several of the supplicants were not from Mangere but no one is turned away.

"Europeans don't understand Samoan and Pacific people, they prefer to see a Pacific MP."

Mr Field admits that there are fewer people queuing to see him now. When a Labour MP as many as 100 would come in a day.

Many of those who visited this day signed up as members.

"I do work hard. I believe if you serve your people well and help them they will support you."

Down at Mangere town centre his volunteers are signing people on the electoral roll and as party members.

The team say they are getting an overwhelmingly positive reaction and say Labour is never there.

But one, Craig Jones, admits there are tensions.

"I got mangoed the other day," he laughingly tells NZPA.

The team say there are 4000 financial members.

Inside the mall everyone knows Mr Field, people call out to him and kiss and hug him. He gives greetings in Pacific languages and Maori greet him with a hongi. According to the 2006 census about half the 63,000 population are Pacific peoples. A further 10,500 are Maori.

Mr Sio is popular too. His background with the Service and Food Workers Union means he gets into workplaces in the growing industrial part of Mangere and as a former Catholic now a converted Mormon he also has an in to the Christian halls and churches.

But Mr Sio does not think Christian people like what he calls Mr Field's hard line.

"(Former PM from Mangere) David Lange called it the holy city. People here are very religious," Mr Sio says. The census shows over 38,000 identified as Christian.

"But I think he is misreading the community."

Mr Sio says Christians are more tolerant than Pacific Party policy would have them and some have questioned the prominence Mr Field is giving his faith all of a sudden.

Mr Sio took NZPA to visit a Mangere Bridge couple who had complained about not meeting the local Labour candidate. Kenape and Fa'avaoa Faletose showed him a personal letter they received from Prime Minister Helen Clark in response to a letter of support.

"We always write to her and prayer for her."

Mr Faletose had some advice for Mr Sio.

"Your love for people, your humility, your understanding - that's all you need."

Mr Sio needed all of that when he dropped into a dairy to leave fliers on the counter. Harry and Ramila Gosai had strong views on law and order and disagreed that things were not as bad as they thought.

"I will still vote Labour but that's not the point," Mrs Gosai said.

When people see Mr Sio in his Labour emblazoned car they wave and smile.

In Mangere town centre a pair of young men call to Mr Field: "I believe you Taito".

They are referring to the charges that he is to face over allegations Mr Field accepted work done on several of his properties by Thai nationals in return for immigration assistance.

The controversy has hung over Mr Field since the last election.

"The eighth of November is really the first opportunity they (the electorate) get to show how they really feel about it," Mr Sio says.

"I think so far people are being polite ... that's not an endorsement of his actions."

Mr Field says "there's an element of concern" but that media coverage has been unrelentingly negative and from a Palagi (European) perspective.

"Just because someone makes an allegation and police/Crown Law decide to charge, that doesn't mean it's correct."

Much was made of the practice of lafo, the Samoan equivalent of koha, by media during the controversy.

That very morning in Mr Field's office a woman offered him money for his immigration advice but he turned it down, saying he was an MP not an immigration consultant.

So where is the money for the party coming from now Mr Field doesn't have the backing of the Labour machine? It is rumoured that the Exclusive Brethren are helping. Mr Field says they are getting backing from all kinds of Christians. Fliers and the party's website give bank account details.

"We don't make it our business to decipher all that. These donations appear in our account and we just thank the Lord for it."

At party headquarters Mr Field's wife Maxine is about to drive a couple to cast their special vote. This is her seventh campaign. Has she noticed anything different? Just one issue, she says, people think if they vote Labour they are still voting for Mr Field. That's something they are working on educating supporters about.

- NZPA

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