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# James Carroll – working from the inside

*What's the best way for Maori to make political progress?*

*Work away within the system. Inside a mainstream party?*

*Or keep your distance and put your energy into reaching Maori goals through Maori organisations?*

*It's still a live issue.*

*But for James Carroll, 120 years ago, mainstream was the way to go.*

*DANNY KEENAN takes stock of what he achieved down that path.*

James Carroll was born in August 1857 in Wairoa. His dad, Joseph Carroll, was an Irishman, who had headed to the Bay of Islands from Sydney in 1840 and began whaling, logging and blacksmithing.

Joseph also did a spot of coastal trading, which is how he ended up in the Hawke's Bay – where he married Tapuke, a Ngati Kahungunu woman with rangatira ties.

James lived with his Maori rellies till he was seven, and te reo was his first language. He went to school in Wairoa and Napier, but quit after a couple of years to work on sheep stations, and to ride race horses.

He grew into a big, athletic kid, and as a teenager joined a Maori volunteer force chasing Te Kooti around the Urewera.

After that he headed back to his dad's sheep farm, but then he landed a job with the Native Department in Gisborne.

That's where he caught the eye of Donald McLean, one of the heavyweights on the political scene – who arranged a job for him in the head office in Wellington.

He stayed there for only a year, but made a good impression. Then in 1879, at only 22, James was made interpreter to the Maori MPs in parliament, a job he kept till 1883.

In 1881 he married Heni Materoa of Gisborne. She was a looker who, like James, had impressive connections.

Her parents, however, had been disapproving. They thought James was too footloose and unstable for their girl.

So James and Heni slipped away and tied the knot in the Wellington registry office. They never had children of their own – but over the years took in 30 foster kids.

They later made their married home in Gisborne and James developed ties all over the East Coast in his job as an interpreter for the Native Land Court. He also took up farming, and started his own racing stables.

In 1884, James had a crack at the Eastern Maori seat, then held by Wi Pere of Rongowhakaata. He came within 23 votes of rolling Wi. In 1887 he stood again, this time beating Wi.

James impressed the old hand Pakeha MPs with his command of English, his nous, and his ability to present "a reasonable Maori viewpoint". He moved comfortably in Pakeha circles. He was soon recognised, as well, as one of the best speakers in the House.

That ability, no doubt, shaped James's thinking. If he could succeed in European society, so could other Maori – or so he believed.

James wanted Maori to be more than passive suppliers of land for Pakeha buyers. Maori must do more to help themselves, he thought.

James came into parliament as an



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independent, but after the 1890 election he joined the Liberals.

There he caught the eye of the Prime Minister, John Ballance, who appointed him to a three-man Native Land Laws Commission, to review the Native Land Court, which was in a mess.

James was already aware of the shonky operations of the Land Court. And the commission's report came down hard on some of its actions – individualising titles, for example.

But he was out of step with his co-commissioners on some other aspects and wrote a dissenting report, attacking the commission's call for the return of Crown Pre-emption – the arrangement that made the Crown the only buyer of Maori land.

James believed this left Maori landowners exposed to Crown agents who could pressure Maori to let their land go at pitiful prices. Neither did he think much of the lack of training and



support for Maori to become farmers.

James impressed Ballance so much that in 1892 he added him to his Executive Council – or Cabinet, in today's terms.

In fact, Ballance even thought seriously about making him Native Minister (Minister of Maori Affairs in today's language) but other Liberal MPs – let alone the conservative opposition – couldn't handle a Maori in that job. He might block the land sales. So it went to a Pakeha, Alfred Cadman.

James used his influence to urge Maori to be independent and thrifty – and pushed the party line that called for the abolition of the Native Affairs Department.

This put him offside with other Maori MPs – and out of step with Te Kotahitanga, the Maori nationalist movement that had risen in the north.

The tide, in Maori circles, was running with Te Kotahitanga. By the mid 1890s it had widespread Maori support and had organised a boycott of the Native Land Court.

James, on the other hand, thought Te Kotahitanga – the hardline element of it, anyway – was barking up the wrong tree. Full autonomy, he argued, was impractical and would get Maori nowhere.

He debated fiercely with Hone Heke Ngapua, who was the Northern Maori MP and a Kotahitanga man. Hone warned James that he wouldn't have enough support to hold on to his Eastern Maori seat at the next election.

So James decided not to contest it again. He'd have a crack at the general East Coast seat of Waiapu, instead.

The Pakeha coasters wanted more public works for their area, and more Maori land for settlement – and they saw James as the one who could deliver that for them.

So in 1893 they voted him in, in a Pakeha seat. And Wi Pere won back Eastern Maori.

From then on, James had to satisfy four conflicting goals. Keep his East Coast Pakeha constituents happy. Be an effective Liberal cabinet minister. Push on with his own political career. Advance the cause of Maori.

In 1893, when Ballance died, Richard John Seddon became Prime Minister.

King Dick also thought about offering

James the Native Minister's job.

But he, too, faltered – and opted for a Pakeha. Himself. But, as many photos show, James was often at his shoulder. They had a close political relationship.

In 1898, King Dick and James began promoting a new bill providing for boards to manage Maori land. This draft bill met several Maori grievances.

It would end land purchases and abolish the Native Land Court, and allow Maori to exercise legal powers over their own affairs. But it had its drawbacks, too.

The bill became the main focus of Te Kotahitanga after 1898 – which was evenly divided between pro-government and "Home Rule" groups.

For two years, neither side could command a majority – until James Carroll's young protégé, Apirana Ngata, persuaded the 1900 gathering of Te Kotahitanga that the New Zealand parliament was the only way to go, and that an amended version of the act could be trusted.

So the 1900 Maori Lands Administration and Maori Councils Acts were passed, with Maori blessing.

The first Act restricted sales of Maori land, and allowed Maori to take part in sorting out the title and management of Maori land through special Maori Land Councils, on which they were represented.

The second gave Maori a limited form of local self-government through elected Maori councils. These councils would have some powers to work on improving Maori health.

This was popular legislation – so popular, in fact, that Te Kotahitanga wound itself up in 1902.

These two acts were the high water mark of James's career.

However, the Maori Councils were soon starved of dollars – and Maori were reluctant to vest their lands in the Maori Lands Councils, which embarrassed the Government. They had little to lease.

With opponents baying for access to the "millions of acres" of unused Maori land, the Cabinet decided (in 1905 – an election year) to again start buying up Maori land.

James fought a difficult rearguard action, delaying land sales where he could, substituting leasing for sale

wherever possible.

The 1909 Native Land Act (which was largely the work of Apirana Ngata) was James's final effort at reconciling Maori and European aims.

Buying land was made easier, but safeguards were added to prevent Maori from becoming landless or land purchase officers from leaning too heavily on Maori owners.

The Act also legalised incorporations, opening the way to Maori farming.

In 1911, James was knighted. But by 1912, large-scale land buying was again under way, under the new Massey Reform Government, and it would continue until 1920.

In 1919, he lost his Waiapu seat, for failing to deliver public works on the Coast – although, more than anyone, he'd brought rail to the area.

In 1921 he was appointed to the Legislative Council, and he died in October 1926.

So what's James Carroll's legacy?

I think the jury's still out on that.

He held high office – a cabinet minister for 20 years, Native Minister for 13 years, and twice acting prime minister.

But one study of the East Coast says it's hard "to point to any particular achievement (that survives) from a political life of 33 years".

And on the downside is the fact that, in the 20 years after 1891 – the years of James's greatest influence – another 3.5 million acres of land went out of Maori possession. That was one third of the land Maori had held in 1890.

Maori had also been denied political autonomy.

But James Carroll made headway elsewhere – encouraging Maori to compete in the commercial world, and persuading the Government to do more for Maori health.

Also, for a time at least, he stemmed the settlers' lust for land.

He won support for Maori farming, and he set up the system of Maori incorporations.

I think he served his people. And, perhaps most notably, he paved the way for the next generation of young leaders, such as Apirana Ngata, Te Rangi Hiroa and Maui Pomare.