



# HOUSE PROUD

From beneficiary and solo mum to corporate lawyer and passionate politician – the Green Party's Metiria Turei isn't your average MP. Now she's becoming a force to be reckoned with.  
By Sharon Stephenson

legislation works, so decriminalisation is something I aim to work towards during my time here."

Admittedly, hers isn't the usual political pedigree – a dope-smoking, high-school drop-out turned solo mother who has spent a large chunk of her adult life on a benefit and peppers her speech with words like "awesome", "heaps" and "choice". But such is the paradox of Metiria Turei. The fact that she's also an experienced lawyer with a razor-sharp mind and an abiding passion for the politics of the far-left means she's eminently qualified for eighth place on the Green Party list.

Even if you find politics as appealing as gargling lighter fluid, you'll no doubt have heard of Metiria. Get used to it – you're likely to see her a lot over the next three years. As a political journalist friend of mine commented, "Metiria is a big deal; she may just be the biggest deal in New Zealand politics for some time."

To find the raven-haired politician, you

**M**ost people in the public eye have things they'd prefer not to discuss in interviews. New Green MP Metiria Turei cringes, for instance, if you mention the time she spent as a dope head.

"Oh God, do we have to go there?" she asks, rolling her extraordinary almond eyes. It's no secret that by 15, the list MP for Tamaki Makaurau (Auckland) was a regular cannabis smoker.

"Although I was too poor to smoke

much," she laughs. She gave it up at age 21 when it became as much fun as smoking grass clippings.

"Dope no longer had a positive effect so I stopped. Yet people still have a fixation with my having smoked it." Despite her abstinence, the 32-year-old is a strong advocate of decriminalising marijuana and plans to rattle that particular political cage during the next three years.

"Smoking dope is not a good reason to oppress and fine people or throw them in jail. I'm not convinced that our current drug

travel to the 14th floor of Bowen House, directly across the road from the Beehive, where the expansive harbour views take your breath away. Metiria does admit the view can be distracting. But unlike other 'baby MPs' ushered in last election, she remains undaunted by Parliament's high-octane atmosphere.

"I've worked in law firms that are posher than this place," she jokes, her trademark laugh seeming out of place in the deathly quiet office. "Obviously having a legal background helps with understanding the procedure and language of politics, but there have been times when I've said something to senior officials and then wondered if I sound like a dick! But Parliament is not nearly as stuffy as I'd thought it would be."

Although she says it's only a matter of time before she "gets into trouble". Because getting into trouble is a Metiria thing to do.

The oldest of two girls, Metiria was born in Palmerston North. Her late father was a

her. "I spent hours maintaining the plants in this building. Little did I know I'd end up here with a swanky office!" she laughs.

Metiria returned to Palmerston North following a relationship break-up and eventually gravitated towards the Unemployed Rights Centre. Here she found a platform for her twin passions of fighting both racism and inequality.

"I'd long been aware of both those issues, especially from a personal perspective. I saw how society treated beneficiaries like scum, but the Centre gave me the opportunity to do something about it."

A move to Auckland to be closer to her sister furthered her unemployment advocacy work. It was only a small step from there to the political fringe.

She stood as a candidate for the McGillicuddy Serious Party and the Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party. Her impressive vocal chords also got an airing

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labourer who "took whatever work was around, from deer hunting to baking" while her mother was a stay-at-home-mum. Money was tight but love wasn't. "As a child I was introduced to the concept of sharing resources with others, no matter how meagre your own supply."

Metiria left Queen Elizabeth College without any qualifications, saying she found school irrelevant. "I wasn't naturally bright and the only subject I enjoyed was debating. I just couldn't see the point of the whole thing."

Then followed stints on the dole, interspersed with tours of duty at the DSIR, the Ministry of Works and The Hard Rock Café. She trained as a secretary, delivered singing telegrams and even slept in her car when the money ran out.

She also delivered plants to the Beehive, and today this irony isn't lost on

as a member of the Random Trollops, an anarchist/feminist performance troupe which became a regular feature of the Hero parade.

However, it took the birth of her daughter Piupiu (now aged nine) to refocus her political aspirations.

"I'd been doing that kind of work for a long time and had burned out. I realised it was time to take control of my life."

And to find something that would pay the bills because by now Metiria was raising her child on her own.

Law provided that opportunity. "I was over 21 so was I eligible for university despite having no high school qualifications. I saw law as something that could give me and my daughter a decent life, but also, through my involvement with the protest movement, I'd witnessed too many people treated badly

by the courts so I thought law would give me the chance to help those people."

She spent the next four years juggling law school with raising her daughter. "It was a real slog but I enjoyed being at university and knew that it would pay off in the end."

And so it did when, almost by default, Metiria landed a highly coveted job as a resource management lawyer at top law firm Simpson Grierson. For this radical activist, it was a strange experience.

"Don't get me wrong, it was incredibly exhilarating working with such clever people. But the whole corporate thing didn't sit very well with me."



Metiria loved debating at school, and today she gets to speak her mind for a living.



## SHEpeople



Her first year at Simpson Grierson coincided with a self-imposed "year of silence" from politics.

"Which turned out to be a bummer because that was the year of the 1999 elections. I knew Nandor Tanczos (fellow Green MP) and he asked me to come and help with the Greens' campaign, but I had to say no because I'd promised myself a year off to focus on my new job."

The day her year was up, Metiria signed with the Greens. She put her hand up as a candidate earlier this year, and resigned from the law firm soon after to campaign.

Now she spends Tuesday to Thursday in Wellington, before returning to the rented Kingsland house she shares with Piupiu, her mother, Janice, and husband, Worik, a computer programmer whom she married at Auckland's Waipapa Marae three years ago.

It's obvious Metiria loves being an

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MP, but get her on the subject of her extended whanau and that's when her eyes really light up.

"I'm so proud to be part of a loving and secure family and I love coming home, even if it isn't as often as I'd like. I recently worked out I'd spent a total of three hours at home in 12 days! I can only do this job because I know my daughter is so well looked after, not only by my mother but also by the extended family and friends who pour through our house."

Life may be chaotic right now, but Metiria says family time is non-negotiable. It's usually spent taking her daughter and husband to the movies or playing mini-golf. "We call it 'ass whooping' and the last time we went, Piupiu certainly whooped my ass! If only I could get some time off from work to practise my golf swing..."

### METIRIA IN BRIEF

**Favourite television programme** *Six Feet Under*  
**Books by your bed** *The Diamond Age* by Neal Stephenson (a sci-fi novel I'm loving) and *We Wish To Inform You We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* by Phillip Gourevitch  
**Starsign** Aquarius  
**Favourite colour** Purple  
**Last films seen** *Insomnia* and I took the kids to see *The Crocodile Hunter*  
**Car** A 1980s Nissan  
**Favourite albums** *The Eve's Bayou* soundtrack and everything ever put out by PJ Harvey  
**Heroine** My mother

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