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MEKA'S WAKA SAILS THROUGH LOOPHOLE

In public, Meka Whatiri's departure from Labour sparked constitutional confusion and widespread claims of surprise.

Standing back --- which Labour MPs were not quite ready to do yesterday --- looks likely to be a positive for the centre block in Parliament with a stronger Maori Party ready to go into a future Labour-led government.

But first, the confusion needed to be sorted out, and the bruised egos soothed.

The confusion has been sorted with the discovery of a loophole which renders the waka-jumping legislation virtually redundant.

The egos have not been so quickly assuaged, with even the Prime Minister still not having heard from Whatiri by late last night.

Though she has told the public and media that she has left Labour for the Maori party, the Speaker, Adrian Ruawhe, told Parliament she had advised him only that she wished her proxy vote to be withdrawn from Labour and for it to be cast by her as an independent.

That meant she avoided having to resign as an MP under the waka-jumping legislation.

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WHO REPLACES WHAITIRI

Meka Whatiri has been removed from her ministerial responsibilities, effective immediately, Acting Prime Minister Carmel Sepuloni has announced.

“Prime Minister Chris Hipkins made the decision on confirmation of Meka Whaitiri’s resignation from the Labour Party this morning,” Carmel Sepuloni said.

“As Acting Prime Minister, I have advised the Administrator of the Government to give effect to that decision this morning.

“Obviously, we’re disappointed in Meka Whaitiri’s decision. But we are moving on.

“Decisions on the permanent allocation of the portfolios will be made in the next week.

“Until then, Kieran McAnulty will be the Acting Hawkes Bay Lead Minister for Cyclone Recovery, Ayesha Verrall will be the Acting Minister for Food Safety, Peeni Henare will be the Acting Minister for Veterans, and Damien O’Connor will be the Acting Minister of Customs. All Associate Portfolios will return to the lead Portfolio Minister.

ANDREW HOGGARD TO STAND FOR ACT?

ACT appears to have scored a major coup over National, with Federated Farmers President, Andrew Hoggard, widely expected to be announced as a candidate for the party. ACT leader David Seymour refused to confirm this yesterday, simply saying the party had approved only two candidates so far; himself and his deputy, Brooke van Velden.

He said that the party hoped at its rally in Auckland on June 4 "to announce quite a range of important candidates then, but I can't confirm we're announcing one today."

Hoggard himself, in a statement to POLITIK, said: "I've been the President of Federated Farmers for the last three years, but my term is coming to an end at our AGM on July 5.

“No decisions have been made about what I might do next, but I do have a pile of fencing to sort out back on the farm, and taking care of that is pretty much the only thing I’m certain of right now.

“I’m exploring a few options, but speculation about what they might be is unhelpful.

“In order to protect the independence and credibility of the important advocacy work Fed’s do for farmers, I’ve made the decision to step back from my role as a

spokesperson for the organisation.

“This role will be picked up by our Vice-President, Wayne Langford.”

BIG HOUSING PROTEST IN KERIKERI

A major protest last night in Kerikeri against a proposed Kainga ora social housing development just off Kerikeri’s central business district. The state building agency is king consent the build 20 two and three-storey rental homes. which it says will be modern, stylish, sustainable and much-needed.

The 8500 population town drew 780 to the meeting and another 300 online. Kerikeri is in the Northland electorate, the country's most marginal, but sitting Labour MP Willow-Jean Prime did not attend or join via Zoom. However, her opponents in the election, including Grant McCallum (National) and Shane Jones (NZ First), were both there.



Some of the 780 at the Kainga Ora protest in kerikeri last night

KIWIRAIL

Kiwi Rail has completed the necessary assessments on the Kāpiti Line using the Track Evaluation Car. This will allow Metlink to return train services across Wellington to their normal weekday timetable from this morning.

Kiwi Rail says: "We apologise again for the disruption over the last three days. We are making changes in KiwiRail to make sure the situation is never repeated.

"Over the next few nights, the Track Evaluation Car will be assessing the Hutt Valley/Wairarapa Line, the Johnsonville Line and the Melling Line."

FUNDING TO REMOVE SILT

The Government is providing significant financial support to assist the removal of cyclone-related sediment and debris in the Hawke's Bay and Tairāwhiti regions, Ministers announced today.

"This latest funding will help councils manage the cost of the post-cyclone clean-up. This includes collection, processing, removal, and disposal of sediment and debris," Associate Minister for Cyclone Recovery Barbara Edmonds said.

"It's part of the Government's ongoing commitment to help communities, including farmers, growers, whenua Māori owners and others, recover from the cyclone.

"We know it's important to the regions that the recovery is locally led, supported by the Government. Local authorities will administer the funding and be able to decide how best to direct it.

"Growers have been particularly badly affected, and we've been listening carefully to them to work out how best to structure the assistance they'll need to recover. At the same time, officials have been working alongside local authorities on funding allocations.

"We recognise that this is a huge job and want to continue to support local communities to recover and rebuild.

"Based on official advice, within the funding for councils and commercial properties, \$133.2 million has been allocated for Hawke's Bay and \$38.8 million for Tairāwhiti.

"The exact arrangements for funding for whenua Māori are being finalised, but a

specific allocation has been set aside.

“For commercial properties, funding will be provided through local councils in the form of grants. Criteria have been set, including that the first \$40,000 will be fully funded by the Crown, including any funding already provided through earlier support programmes.

“Funding above that will be cost-shared on a 50:50 basis and capped at \$210,000. Work that businesses have already undertaken through their own funding will be able to be counted as part of their 50 per cent contribution.”

"Silt and debris removal is a complex and time-consuming task. Once it's been removed from properties, it needs to be processed and disposed of safely at council facilities," Minister for Local Government Kieran McNulty said.

“This funding ensures there is somewhere for material to go. It will cover eligible related clean-up costs councils have already incurred.

"Councils can choose to use the funding to remove debris from residential properties, particularly if silt and debris are blocking access.

“Cyclone-rebuild will be an important driver of investment in coming years. We know more support will be needed.

“We will also continue to work with communities outside of these regions that have been impacted by the Cyclone with the clean-up and recovery process to help them get back on their feet,” Kieran McNulty said.

UNEMPLOYMENT REMAINS LOW

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 3.4 per cent in the March 2023 quarter, unchanged from last quarter, according to figures released by Stats NZ yesterday.

The underutilisation rate – a broad measure of spare labour capacity that includes those unemployed, underemployed, and in the potential labour force – decreased to 9.0 per cent from 9.3 per cent last quarter (revised).

“Unemployment and underutilisation rates, as measured by the Household Labour Force Survey, have been sitting at or near record lows for more than a year,” work and wellbeing statistics senior manager Becky Collett said

MARRIAGE BACK IN FASHION

The number of marriages celebrated in New Zealand increased in 2022, following lower numbers in the previous two years, according to annual figures released by Stats NZ.

In 2022, 18,858 marriages and civil unions were registered by New Zealand couples, up from 15,657 in 2021. However, the number remains lower than in the period before COVID-19 impacted New Zealand (there were, on average, around 20,200 marriages and civil unions registered each year between 2017 and 2019). "Rules around gatherings in response to the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in a large drop in the number of marriages celebrated, especially in the warmer months when it's more popular to tie the knot," population estimates and projections manager Michael MacAskill said.

MORE SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

New Zealand is significantly extending its defence commitments as well as humanitarian, legal and economic support for Ukraine as part of the ongoing international response to Russia's illegal war of aggression, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins has announced.

The Prime Minister announced the package of measures while visiting NZDF personnel training Ukrainian troops at the Salisbury Plain Army Training Area outside of London.

"For more than a year, New Zealand has stood with the people of Ukraine as they have been subject to a brutal, unrelenting and illegal invasion by Russia," Chris Hipkins said.

"Since February last year, New Zealand has taken significant and unprecedented actions to support Ukraine, including the deployment of NZDF troops into Europe and passing the Russia Sanctions Act that has enabled us to impose targeted sanctions for the first time outside of the UN framework.

"Over the past year, New Zealand has contributed more than \$78 million of financial and military support to Ukraine, as well as our support for Ukraine's legal

case against Russia, sanctions targeting more than 1500 Russian and Belarussian individuals and entities, and trade measures.

"Today's package shows our resolve has not waned, and our ongoing support for Ukraine and the international response has not diminished.

"Unfortunately, the conflict appears set to continue for some time. We and like-minded partners will not back off and allow Russia to impose their might on the innocent people of Ukraine," Chris Hipkins said.

"NZDF has had personnel in Europe for nearly a year, and New Zealand's deployments have been highly valued by Ukraine and our key partners," Defence Minister Andrew Little said.

"So far, 440 NZDF personnel have been deployed to Europe to support Ukraine, with 327 directly involved in the artillery and infantry training delivered in the UK. "Infantry training teams deployed to the United Kingdom have trained more than 1000 members of the Armed Forces of Ukraine so far. Last year the NZDF artillery team trained almost 300 Ukrainians on the L119 Gun.

"The extension of this deployment of 95 personnel providing training and supporting for the Ukrainian armed forces for a further year demonstrates both our ongoing commitment to the defence of their homeland as well as the value of this commitment.

"In addition to the infantry training, the NZDF has been invited by the United States to support the training of Ukrainian personnel in western-led space operations and increase their interoperability with like-minded partners. This work may also include the training of Polish Armed Forces personnel," Andrew Little said.

NZDF personnel deployed to Europe will not enter Ukraine.

The NZDF will conclude its contribution of New Zealand-based open-source intelligence capability, which commenced in March 2022 to support the UK and other European partners' intelligence requirements. More than 12 months on from the start of the invasion, this intelligence area no longer requires New Zealand support.

"New Zealand is putting in place further sanctions targeting a total of 18 entities and nine individuals that are supporting Russia's war against Ukraine," Foreign

Minister Nanaia Mahuta said.

“These sanctions cover senior leaders of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia’s internal security and intelligence service, the FSB itself, as well as other Russian individuals and entities who develop and procure weapons, technology and communication systems, and provide services such as transport and insurance - all vital to Russia’s ability to wage war.

“Iranian individuals and entities are also being sanctioned for providing direct military support to Russia for its illegal war in Ukraine.

"These sanctions are working. Our comprehensive trade sanctions have effectively decoupled the New Zealand and Russian economies. Since our trade sanctions were put in place, total imports have fallen by almost ninety-nine per cent.

“We continue to condemn Russia’s egregious and illegal actions. We repeat our call for President Putin to cease Russia’s war against Ukraine, withdraw troops and then enter diplomatic negotiations to resolve this war,” Nanaia Mahuta said.

ANOTHER NEW POLITICAL PARTY.

From helen Houghton, Leader of the New Conservative Party in letter to members:

"It has been decided that I will continue to lead New Conservative Party and Ted Johnston will focus on leading an umbrella called the Unity Party. Ted has a vision that he believes will bring smaller parties to reach the 5% threshold and if you would like some input on this or give some feedback we welcome your thoughts.

"You are welcome to be involved with the Unity party if that is what you would like to do or you can simply remain a New Conservative member. We will send you more details when Ted has the constitution ready for perusal."