

## Hon Sir Peter Wilfred Tapsell

*KNZM, MBE, FRCS, FRCSE, LLD(Hon)*

Peter Tapsell was born on 21 January 1930 to a farming family who scraped a living from a small Maketu farm in the Bay of Plenty.



His father an honourable, hard-working Maori, his mother an ex-school teacher, a non-Maori. His secondary education was in Rotorua, where he lived for 5 years with family friends.

It was never Peter's way to accept only what seemed possible in life but rather to aim for the apparently impossible dream. For him that was to become a Doctor.

It was fortunate that his rugby skills (First XV and Bay of Plenty rep, while still a school boy) and his people skills (Senior Prefect and Regimental Sergeant Major) were noted by the teaching staff of Rotorua Boys' High School. At that time the school's 6th form subjects did not include University Entrance level in physics or chemistry.

Both were offered to Peter, as a single student, by the co-operation of the school's teachers. This gave him the background to study for the Medical Intermediate exams at Otago University, which he passed and gained entry to the medical school at his first attempt.

Peter was a good student, but not an outstanding one. He was, however, an outstanding rugby player and once he had passed the 3<sup>rd</sup>-year 1st Professional exams he returned to the game with the same ability and enthusiasm he had demonstrated as a high school student. His immediate placement in the University A side was rapidly followed by his selection in the Otago team (the outstanding provincial side of the 1950s), the NZ Universities side, and the 1954 Maori All Blacks of which he was the vice-captain. Subsequent to his qualification in 1954 he played in Waikato and was selected for the Waikato representative side, while doing his first-year House Surgeon's job at Waikato Hospital.

A year as an anatomy demonstrator and 2 years as a registrar in orthopaedic surgery with the Professorial team in Dunedin, saw the completion of Peter's New Zealand training. In the UK he continued with his surgical training first in general surgery and later in orthopaedics. Much of his latter training was at Oswestry under the tutelage of Sir Reginald Watson-Jones, considered by many as the outstanding figure of his generation in orthopaedic surgery in the UK.

His basic training complete and his Fellowships behind him, Peter returned, in 1961, to his home area of Rotorua as the first ever Maori surgeon and with a brief to develop an orthopaedic department in the rapidly expanding Rotorua Hospital and the associated Queen Elizabeth Rheumatology Hospital.

His dexterity as a surgeon, supported by his surgical results, were considered by many who worked with him or who observed his work, as being quite exceptional. Especially this could be said of the techniques he developed for the surgical treatment of the hands and feet of chronic rheumatoid arthritics. Techniques that are still practiced in many orthopaedic centres worldwide.

Early in his time in Rotorua Peter became interested in the Maori side of his ancestry. From being a non-speaker of Maori he taught himself to speak the language. In 1966 he was elected as the chairman of the Ngati Whakau Tribal Lands Incorporation, and the following year the chairman of the Maori Arts and Crafts Institute.

In 1968 he was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), for his services to medicine and the Maori people. In the same year, and for much the same reasons he was selected as one of three outstanding New Zealanders, representing New Zealand on a 3-month tour of the United States, under the auspices of the American State Department.

Peter served 2 terms as a Councillor, Chairman of Works and Deputy Mayor of Rotorua. With this as his initiation into the political scene, and despite his increasing reputation in the field of orthopaedic surgery, he stood as the Labour Party candidate for the Rotorua electorate in 1975 and 1978 but was not successful in entering Parliament until the 1981 election when he stood as the candidate in Eastern Maori. At various stages of his parliamentary career Peter served as the Minister of Internal Affairs, Arts, Police, Civil Defence, Science, Forestry and Defence.

After the 1993 election, with the National Party having a majority of only one seat, the Prime Minister, Jim Bolger, chose Peter to be the speaker of the House. Jim Bolger later told me that his choice was an easy one to make, as Peter was the only MP who every other member, from both sides of the House, endorsed (with the exception of Winston Peters). He was the first ever Maori Speaker of the House of Representatives, and only the second ever Speaker to hold office while not a member of the governing party.

As Speaker of the House he hosted Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth when she formally opened the refurbished Parliament House in 1995. He was awarded the KNZM the following year.

In the 1996 election Peter lost his electoral seat, prompting his complete retirement from politics. He returned full time to his 720 hectares farm at Ruatoria, on the East Coast. He assisted several medical charities, became the Patron of the Monarchy in NZ, and was appointed as an independent chairman to a number of resource management hearings where Maori concerns were the basis of the appeal process. The University of Waikato awarded him an Honorary Doctorate in 1997.

Peter died quietly in his sleep on 5 April 2012. No major illness or symptoms preceded his death. His was a life of service and there would be few who could equal his contribution to his communities and the country as a whole.

He remained always a humble man without guile or pretention. He was renown for his immaculate suits, his buttonhole and his courtly behaviour, but sometimes ran into trouble for his plainly expressed views. He told me only a few days before he died “I have never regretted anything that I have done, but I do regret some of the things I have said”.

He is survived by two daughters and two sons; his wife Diane died in 2008.

Dr Arthur Hackett, a friend and colleague, wrote this obituary.