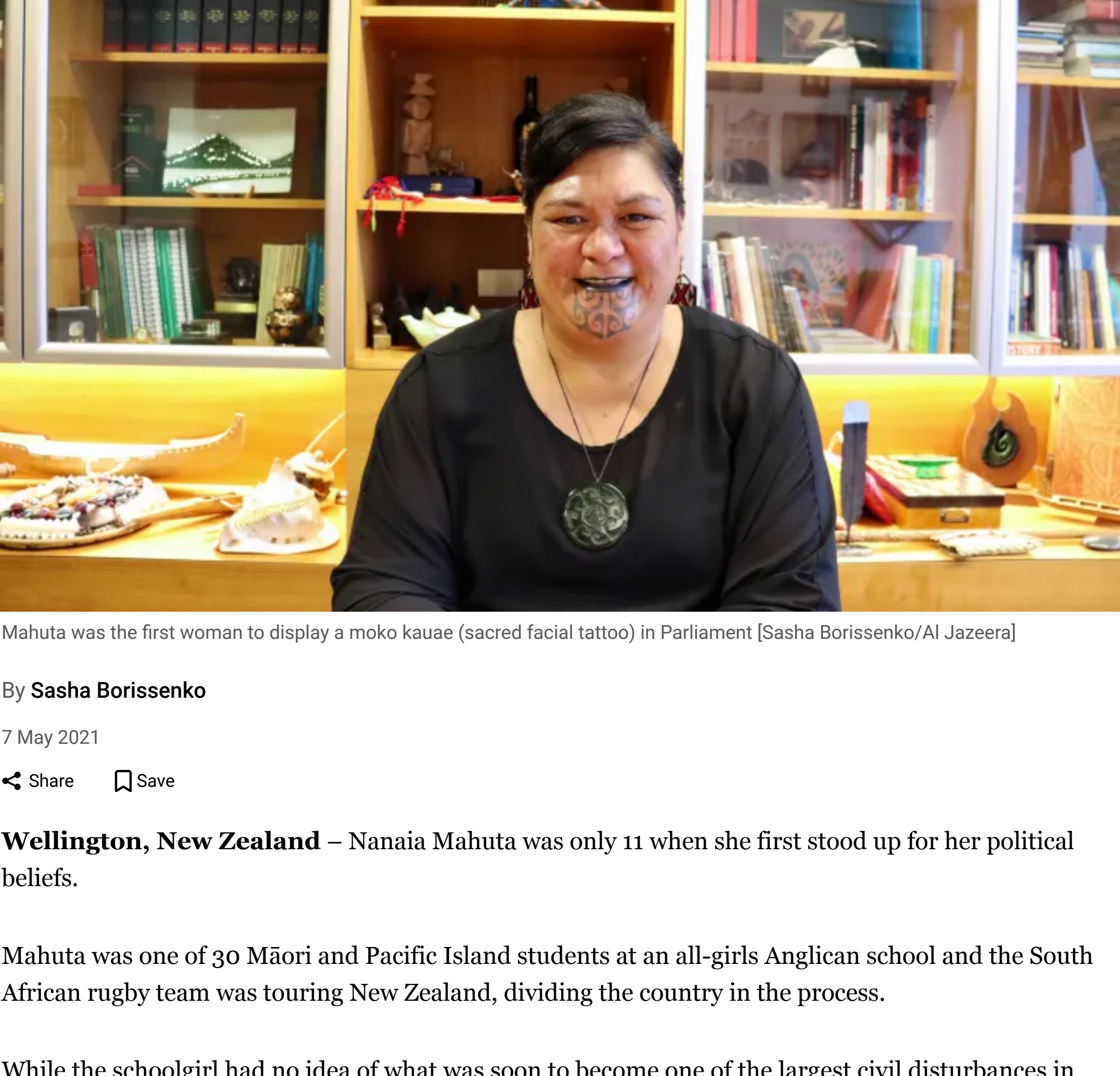


News | Politics

Why New Zealand's foreign minister is her own woman

Nanaia Mahuta, the daughter of Māori royalty who entered Parliament at 26, has been shaped by her Indigenous background.



Mahuta was the first woman to display a moko kauae (sacred facial tattoo) in Parliament [Sasha Borissenko/Al Jazeera]

By **Sasha Borissenko**

7 May 2021

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Wellington, New Zealand – Nanaia Mahuta was only 11 when she first stood up for her political beliefs.

Mahuta was one of 30 Māori and Pacific Island students at an all-girls Anglican school and the South African rugby team was touring New Zealand, dividing the country in the process.

While the schoolgirl had no idea of what was soon to become one of the largest civil disturbances in New Zealand history, she could not stomach the fact her school had offered to host a group of South African students – a decision she felt validated apartheid.

Rather than simply “dealing with it”, she skipped school in protest.

“As a Māori woman there is an embedded sense of social justice, and striving for equality of opportunity and Indigenous advancement,” she told Al Jazeera.

“If you’ve been brought up in a Māori community you will have experienced some form of mistreatment and at an extreme level – racism.”

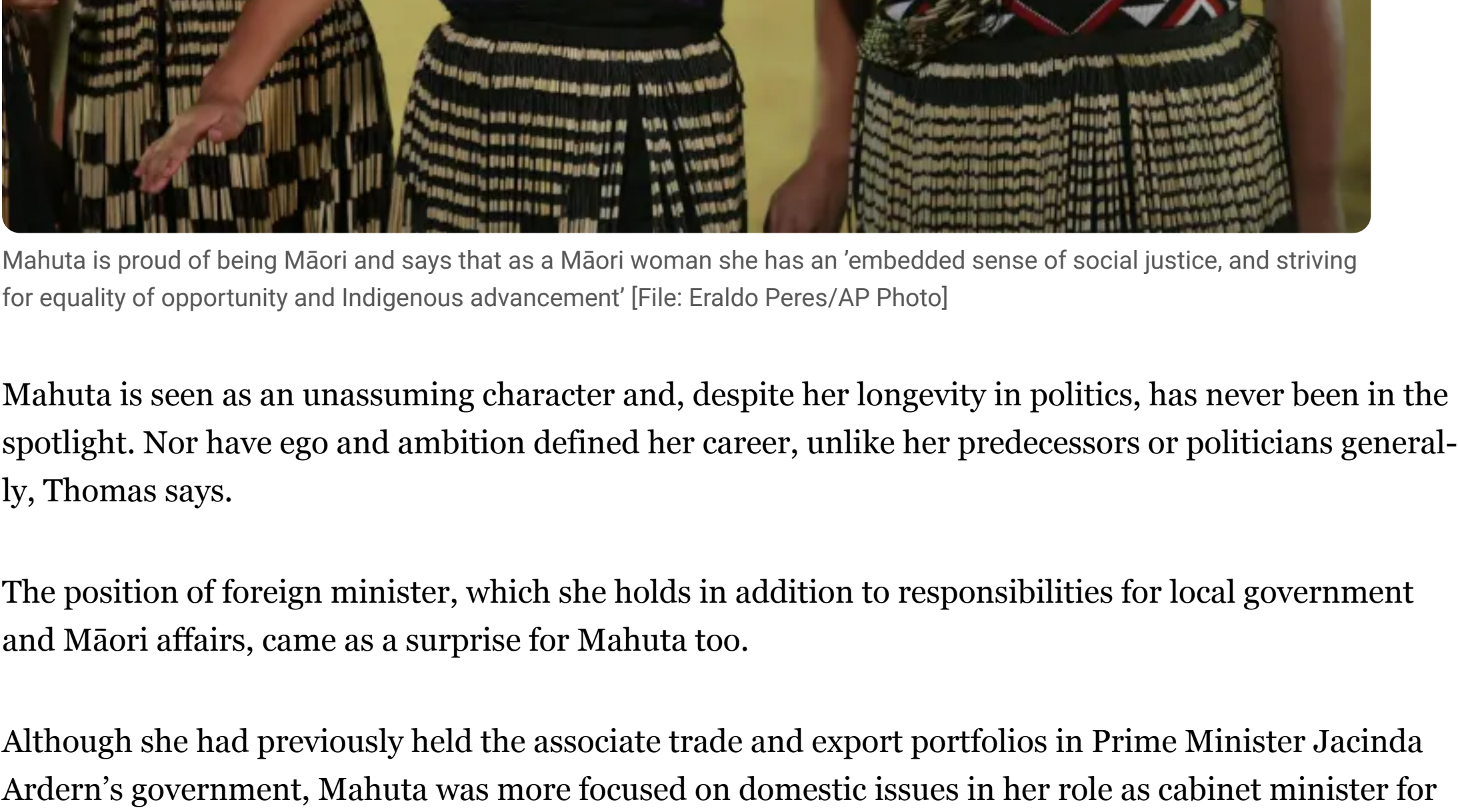
The daughter of Sir Robert Te Kotahitanga – the adopted son of Māori King Koroki – Mahuta grew up assisting her father in key treaty negotiations.

She has spent almost half her life in Parliament, having first won a seat at the age of 26.

In 2016, Mahuta became the first woman to display a moko kauae (sacred facial tattoo) in Parliament, and last year chalked up another first – becoming New Zealand’s first female foreign minister.

The 50-year-old’s appointment was a surprise, according to political commentator Ben Thomas.

“Foreign affairs ministers tend to be seen as a ‘gold watch’ for long service, or it’s given as favour to friends and allies,” he said. “Mahuta doesn’t fit into that category and there’s no sort of sense that [the prime minister] owes her anything.”



Mahuta is proud of being Māori and says that as a Māori woman she has an ‘embedded sense of social justice, and striving for equality of opportunity and Indigenous advancement’ [File: Eraldo Peres/AP Photo]

Mahuta is seen as an unassuming character and, despite her longevity in politics, has never been in the spotlight. Nor have ego and ambition defined her career, unlike her predecessors or politicians generally, Thomas says.

The position of foreign minister, which she holds in addition to responsibilities for local government and Māori affairs, came as a surprise for Mahuta too.

Although she had previously held the associate trade and export portfolios in Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s government, Mahuta was more focused on domestic issues in her role as cabinet minister for local government and Māori development.

Thomas says former foreign ministers “have traditionally talked a big game” when it comes to human rights, but they have been notoriously reticent about trading partners, particularly since the country’s biggest free trade agreement with China in 2006.

‘The real deal’

Mahuta made waves internationally by joining Australia, Canada, Britain, and the United States in [condemning the disqualification of pro-democracy politicians](#) in Hong Kong and questioning Beijing’s crackdown in a territory that was guaranteed considerable freedoms and autonomy on its return to Chinese rule in 1997.

She also condemned opposition leader Alexey Navalny’s detention in Russia and [suspended bilateral high-level contacts with Myanmar](#) in response to the military’s February 1 coup, saying that New Zealand did not “recognise the legitimacy of the military-led government”.

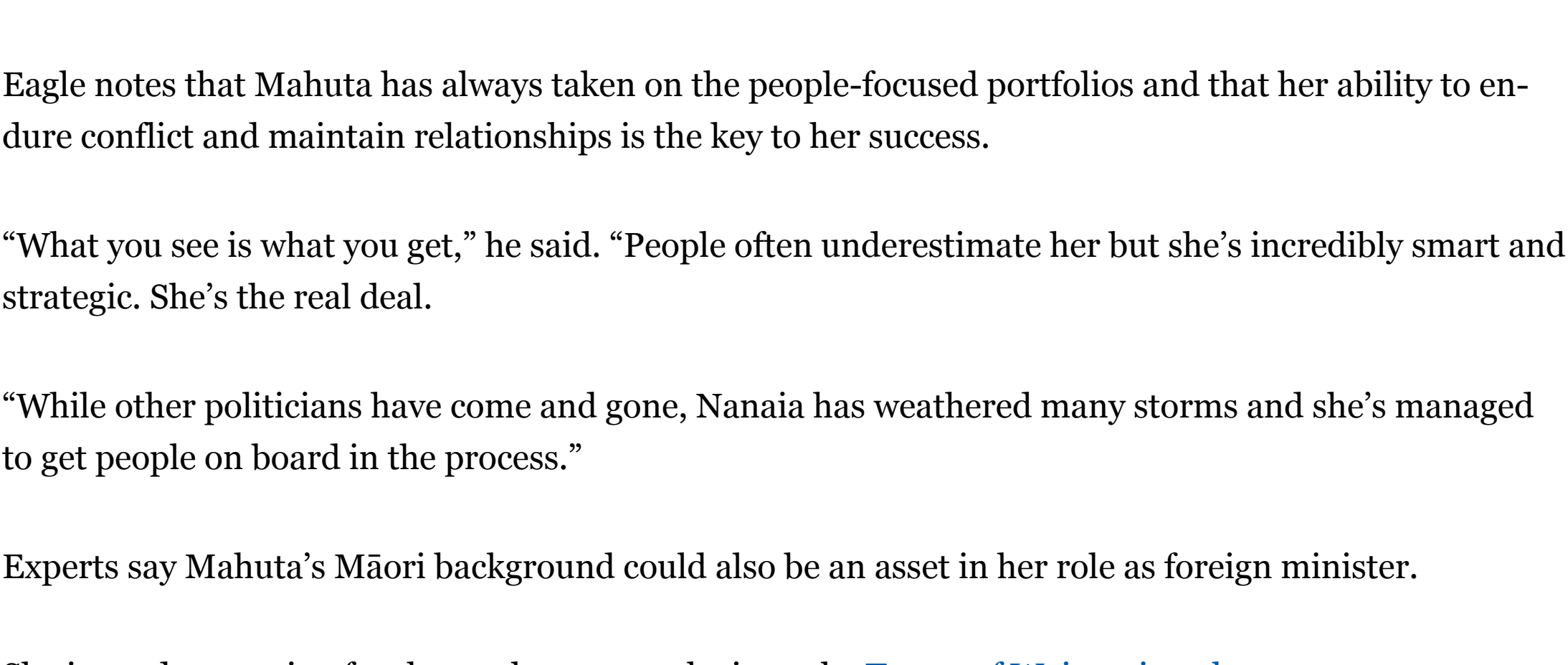
But last month, Mahuta’s comments on the “Five Eyes” intelligence alliance raised eyebrows after she said [she would not let the US-led alliance dictate](#) New Zealand’s bilateral relationship with China.

While she acknowledged China and New Zealand might have disagreements, she said in an April speech at the New Zealand China Council that the country needed to be “respectful” of one of its major trading partners.

“There will be some areas on which it’s useful to coordinate through the Five Eyes platform; but there will be other areas – human rights for example – where we want to look to building a broader coalition of countries to take positions on issues of common interest,” she told Al Jazeera.

“[A]t times we work with a bigger group; other times we join with one or two other like-minded partners; and at times, we make our own statements.”

Fellow Labour Party politician Paul Eagle went to university with Mahuta where she was studying for a master’s degree in social anthropology and Māori business development. They are related and both hail from the same tribe, Tainui.



Mahuta, seen here in Australia, has a background in mostly domestic affairs and was previously minister of Māori development and local government [File: Bianca De Marchi/Pool Photo via AP Photo]

Eagle notes that Mahuta has always taken on the people-focused portfolios and that her ability to endure conflict and maintain relationships is the key to her success.

“What you see is what you get,” he said. “People often underestimate her but she’s incredibly smart and strategic. She’s the real deal.

“While other politicians have come and gone, Nanaia has weathered many storms and she’s managed to get people on board in the process.”

Experts say Mahuta’s Māori background could also be an asset in her role as foreign minister.

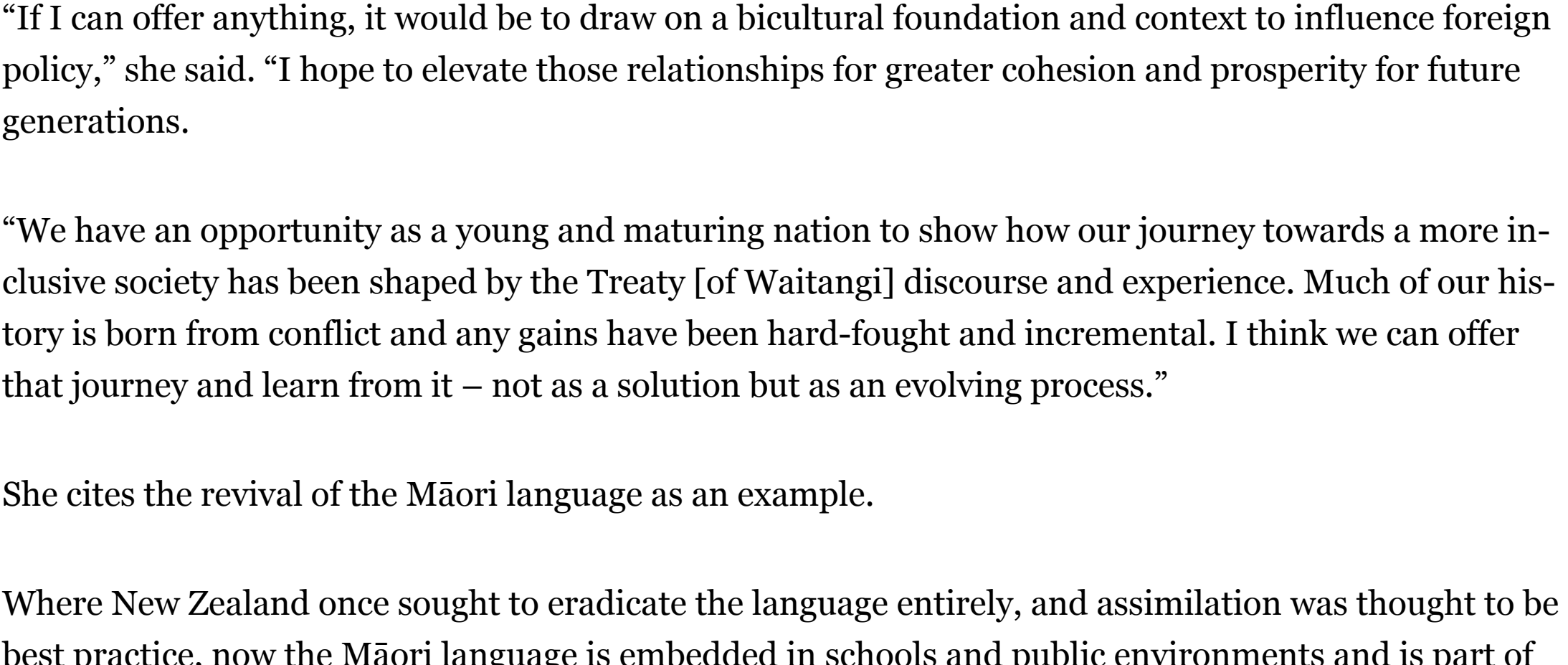
She is used to arguing for the weaker party – be it on the [Treaty of Waitangi settlement](#), or representing the Māori caucus – a minority in the ruling Labour Party, and has honed her powers of negotiation.

“Anything achieved has to have been done through diplomacy and she doesn’t have delusions of grandeur like her predecessors who pledged to bring peace in the Middle East and dominance in the Pacific,” Thomas said.

“One of the defining characteristics of New Zealand is its own relationship with indigeneity. All things being equal and outside of tokenism, I think it’s a benefit to have a Māori woman representing the country on the world stage.”

No compromise

Mahuta says she did not expect to get such a significant portfolio so soon but was “delighted” to have the job.



“If I can offer anything, it would be to draw on a bicultural foundation and context to influence foreign policy,” she said. “I hope to elevate those relationships for greater cohesion and prosperity for future generations.

“We have an opportunity as a young and maturing nation to show how our journey towards a more inclusive society has been shaped by the Treaty [of Waitangi] discourse and experience. Much of our history is born from conflict and any gains have been hard-fought and incremental. I think we can offer that journey and learn from it – not as a solution but as an evolving process.”

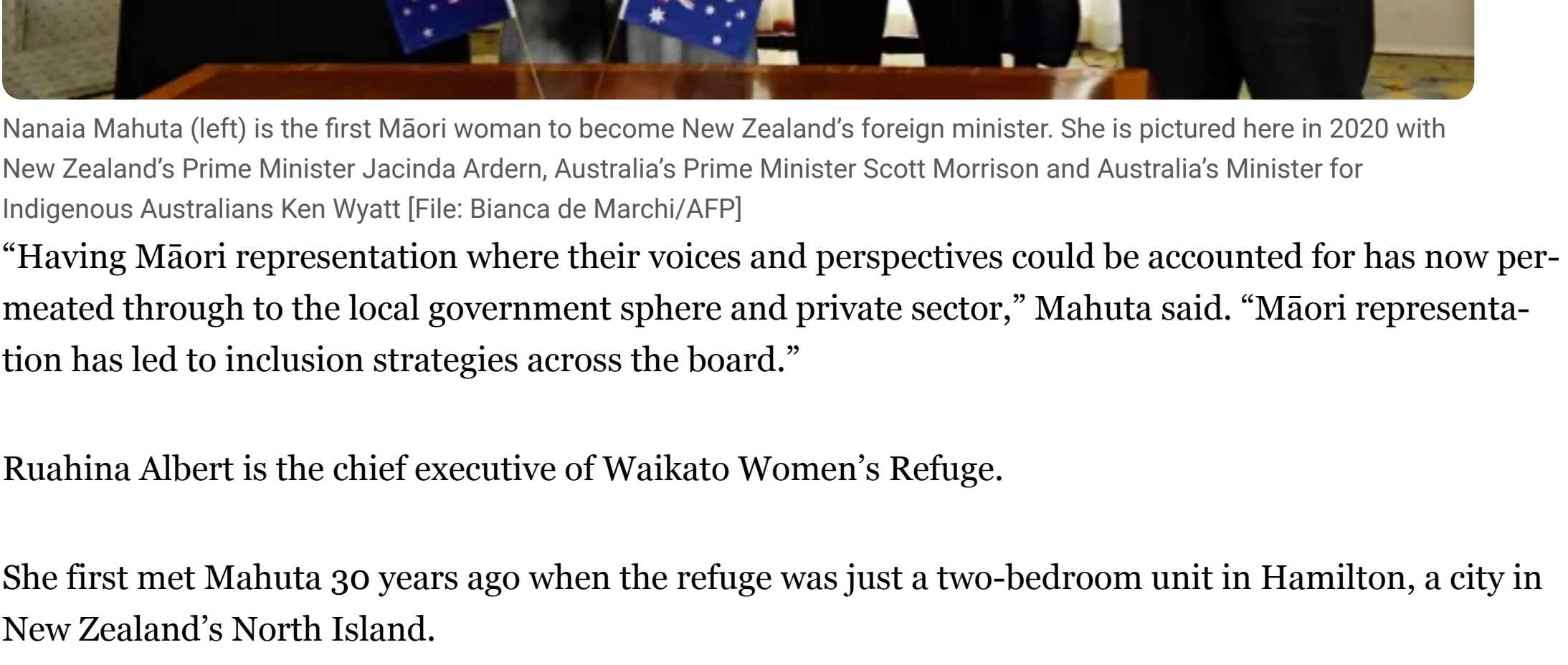
She cites the revival of the Māori language as an example.

Where New Zealand once sought to eradicate the language entirely, and assimilation was thought to be best practice, now the Māori language is embedded in schools and public environments and is part of the fabric of New Zealand identity, she says.

Māori were only given the right to vote in 1879.

In the current Parliament, 15 of the 120 representatives – colloquially known as the “First 15” – are Māori, and the house is more diverse than ever, she says.

In her role as local government minister, Mahuta is also looking to extend Māori representation in local councils, with her “Māori ward” policy under which the government will support municipalities that want to establish specific Māori representation, abolishing a law that allowed such decisions to be vetoed in a referendum.



Nanaia Mahuta (left) is the first Māori woman to become New Zealand’s foreign minister. She is pictured here in 2020 with New Zealand’s Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, Australia’s Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Australia’s Minister for Indigenous Australians Ken Wyatt [File: Bianca de Marchi/AFP]

“Having Māori representation where their voices and perspectives could be accounted for has now permeated through to the local government sphere and private sector,” Mahuta said. “Māori representation has led to inclusion strategies across the board.”

Ruahina Albert is the chief executive of Waikato Women’s Refuge.

She first met Mahuta 30 years ago when the refuge was just a two-bedroom unit in Hamilton, a city in New Zealand’s North Island.

“When she came in to meet us in the 90s we weren’t sure who she was, but we were struck by how compassionate, helpful, and bubbly she was,” Albert said.

Twenty-five ministers over 36 years have visited the premises but Mahuta has been one of the most effective, she says.

Mahuta was a member of the board for three years before being made a minister, and Albert hopes she will return once she leaves Parliament.

“We work on the front line for sexual violence and family violence. We’re a tough bunch and not much gets past us. We don’t trust the government but we trust her.

“I believe her heart is with her people and her community, she’s clear about identifying what she will and will not compromise. You always have those conflicts when you’re working within a system but I don’t see her compromising her people or her country. It’s her heart and her future.”