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KEY ROLE: Labour cabinet minister Fraser Colman was on a frigate that sailed to Mururoa to protest against French nuclear tests, he has died aged 83.

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Fraser Colman - best known for being the cabinet minister on board the frigate that sailed to Mururoa Atoll in 1973 to protest against French nuclear tests - has died aged 83.

As a minister in both the third and fourth Labour governments, Mr Colman took a low-key approach and generally avoided the political limelight.

Born in Wellington, he became a boilermaker on leaving school and soon became active in the union movement.

In 1955 Mr Colman became the Labour Party's assistant general-secretary, a position he held till he was elected MP for Petone in an April 1967 by-election.

When Labour won the 1972 election he became minister of mines, immigration, and associate minister of works and development.

The following year he grabbed the public spotlight after the government decided that a cabinet minister would be on a frigate that would sail to Mururoa to protest against French nuclear tests.

All 20 cabinet ministers wanted to go, so a draw was held, with a cabinet office typist pulling Mr Colman's name out of a rubbish bin.

In 1987, Mr Colman decided not to seek re-election after 20 years in Parliament.

He was appointed chairman of the Fire Service Commission in 1988, a job he held for three years.

In his retirement Mr Colman lived in the Wainuiomata home he and his wife, Noeline, bought soon after they married in 1958.

Prime Minister Helen Clark said he had been a stalwart of the Labour Party who played a key role in New Zealand becoming nuclear free.

Mr Colman had suffered a series of strokes since 1991 and had been unwell in recent months. He died at his home yesterday. He is survived by his wife and three daughters, Ann, Lynda and Jeanette. His funeral will be at 1pm on Tuesday at the Wainuiomata RSA.