



VALUES

AND

ELECTORAL SYSTEM CHANGE

IN

NEW ZEALAND

Victoria

UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

Te Whare Wānanga

o te Ūpoko o te Ika a Māui



The Great Spotted Kiwi



Three Questions:

1. Which democratic values were influential in putting electoral system change on the political agenda?
 2. What were the values that guided the Royal Commission on the Electoral System when it recommended MMP?
 3. Has MMP fulfilled its promise, in terms of the values that underpin the new system?
-

The Context

- Unicameral Parliament & unitary political system.
 - Almost no role played by the judiciary in constitutional issues.
 - Electoral Act 1956 protected the electoral system: could be changed *either* by referendum *or* parliamentary vote (75% majority).
 - General climate of constitutional and structural change, especially during the 1980s.
-

New Zealand: a Westminster system with its own indigenous traditions and values



Underlying discontents

- 1970s onwards, Labour and National gained decreasing proportion of nation-wide vote; but
 - Minor parties were scarcely (or not at all) represented in Parliament. Parliament one of the most disproportionate legislatures in the world.
 - Widespread Maori discontent with political system.
-

Events that discredited FPP

electoral rules

- 1978 and 1981 general elections: Labour won more votes but fewer seats than National.
 - Policy unpopularity and perceived governmental non-responsiveness to voters (Labour 1984-90 and National 1990-1993).
 - In general, declining levels of trust in politicians and the political system.
-

Hence electoral practices not fulfilling certain fundamental values

Representation

- Political parties were not *fairly represented*
- Parliament did not reflect *social diversity*
- Maori (and others) were *under-represented*
- Governments were elected on minority votes
- Decision-making was not *inclusive* of different views

Government

- Governments were viewed as *unresponsive* to public opinion
- Governments viewed as insufficiently *accountable* to voters

BUT THESE VIEWS WERE CONTESTED BY MANY

The Labour Government (1984-1990)

made a crucial decision:

- It appointed an independent royal commission.
 - The Royal Commission on the Electoral System was given wide terms of reference that included examining the electoral system.
 - The RCES consulted widely and received many submissions.
-

Royal Commission on the Electoral System (1986):

Criteria for evaluating electoral systems

- 1) Fairness between political parties (including proportionality);
 - 2) Effective representation of minority and special interest groups (gender, socio-economic class, locality, age);
 - 3) Effective Maori representation (because of history, the Treaty and socioeconomic position);
 - 4) Political integration (mutual respect for each other amongst groups and the pursuit of the public good);
 - 5) Effective representation of constituents (encouraging close linkages between individual MPs and constituents);
-

RCES Criteria continued:

- 6) Effective voter participation (an understandable system to encourage participation, popular sovereignty, and everyone's vote to be of equal weight);
 - 7) Effective government (decisiveness, continuity, stability);
 - 8) Effective Parliament (forum for alternative governments, and a House capable of performing full range of functions);
 - 9) Effective parties (voting system should recognise role played by parties in the policy and representative process);
 - 10) Legitimacy (acceptance of voting rules as fair, and acceptance of policy decisions).
-

Few MPs wanted proportional representation

- But (and it's a long story) two referendums on the electoral system were held:
 - 1992 indicative referendum: voters chose MMP over four others, including FPP; and
 - 1993 binding referendum at the same time as the general election (with 85.2% turnout):
 - MMP 53.9%
 - FPP 46.9%
-

MMP and democratic values

- Retained district MPs: for *legitimacy & responsiveness*;
 - Retained long-established Maori seats: to respect *minority rights* (RCES recommended abolition);
 - Party proportionality: to treat parties more *equally*;
 - Party proportionality: for *more ideas and viewpoints*;
 - Nationwide party lists: to encourage *parliamentary diversity and integration*;
 - 5% threshold (RCES 4%): to prevent *party fragmentation*
 - A multi-party Parliament: to make the executive more *accountable* to the legislature; and
 - A multi-party Parliament: to involve more parties involved in the policy process through coalition and support party *discussion and negotiation*.
-

Some traditional democratic values were downplayed

- Single-party majority governments were unlikely, risking instability and indecisiveness—departing from the traditional ‘winner-take all’, *majoritarian* political culture.
 - Government formation more difficult and in the hands of the parliamentary parties rather than the voters. More difficult to throw the rascals out.
 - Party fragmentation possible because of the one-seat alternative threshold for eligibility for entry into Parliament.
-

So what does *Parliament* look like a decade after the first MMP election?



More parties with more viewpoints



2005 ELECTION RESULTS	Party Votes %	District seats no.	List seats no.	Total seats no.
Labour	41	31	19	50
Progressive	1	1	0	1
NZ First	6	0	7	7
United Future	3	1	2	3
Green	5	0	6	6
National	39	31	17	48
ACT	2	1	1	2
Maori	2	4	0	4
		69	52	121

The composition of Parliament became more diverse

■ **Women**

- ❑ 1993: 21%
- ❑ 2005: 32% (23% of the district MPs: 44% of the party list MPs)

❑ **Maori**

- ❑ 1993: 7.1% (pop.= 13.0%)
- ❑ 2005: 17.3% (pop.= 14.7%)

■ **Pacific and Asian MPs**

- ❑ 1993: 1.0% (pop. = 5.0% & 3.0% respectively)
 - ❑ 2005: 4.1% (pop. = 6.5% & 6.6% respectively)
-

And *Government?*

- Government formation slow in 1996 and 2005 (taking some weeks) and rapid in 1999 and 2002.
 - Only one majority coalition government (1996-1998). Since then, minority coalition governments.
 - 1996-1999: National-led government; 1999-Labour-led governments.
 - Minor parties suffered at the polls, 1999, 2002, 2005.
 - Government has to negotiate with other parties to implement its legislative agenda.
-

Clark govt. 1999-2002



DPMC
Cabinet
Office

Labour
ministers

Alliance
ministers

DPM's
Office

Ministers
outside
cabinet

PM's
Office

Labour
caucus

Alliance
caucus

Support
party

SSC

Treasury

And Parliament's relationship with the executive?

- Minority governments unable to dominate parliamentary committees: legislation is amended, inquiries are conducted, and agency scrutiny can be rigorous. (Note that the committees were given wide-ranging powers before MMP.)
 - Minority governments have had to construct legislative coalitions in order to implement their legislative programmes.
 - But plenary sessions remain combative and adversarial.
-

And Voters?

- Some criticisms:
 - Party list MPs' perceived lack of accountability to voters
 - Dual candidacy
 - Power of minor parties
 - Number of MPs
 - Most approve of proportionality principle
 - High proportion of voters split their votes
 - Reasonably high proportion of voters understand the MMP rules
-

The values in practice, ten years after the 1st MMP election?

REPRESENTATION

- ✓ Fairer for parties and social groups
- ✓ Retention of constituency representation
- ✓ Choice of list or district MPs for voters to consult
- × Larger districts
- × Some disapproval of list MPs and dual candidacy

GOVERNMENT

- ✓ More parties (representing plus 50% of pop.) involved in policy process
 - ✓ NZ's minority governments have strengthened Parliament against the executive
 - × Governments less secure
-

New Zealand House of Representatives

