Editorial

Hard to Centre

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While a Labour victory always looked likely in the wake of Jacinda Ardern's able and admirable handling of the Covid-19 crisis, the scale of the electoral landslide in October is striking. A National Party in disarray—reeling from successive leadership changes, infighting, and a litany of public scandals, and bleeding support to its right flank—slumped to its worst result since 2002. Labour, winning almost twice as many seats as National, not only decimated the Tories in the party vote, but also flipped 14 National-held electorate seats, including ultra-blue Rangitata, as well as Ilam and Nelson, home to long-serving senior Nats Gerry Brownlee and Nick Smith. With the prime minister repeatedly emphasising that she intends to lead a 'transformative government', this electoral victory potentially provides the centre-left a unique opportunity to build a more egalitarian, resilient, and sustainable Aotearoa New Zealand. What are the chances of the first one-party government under MMP actually accomplishing such a transformation?

The scale of the task is certainly daunting. In 2017, a rickety-looking three-legged coalition, led by Ardern, inherited a set of inter-related crises. Most urgent among these were skyrocketing poverty rates and a lack of adequate and affordable housing. Slower burning were decades of stagnant wages and rising wealth inequality, decrepit civic

infrastructure, and the deep, ongoing impacts of institutional racism across health, social services, and justice. All this set against the backdrop of environmental degradation and the impacts of accelerating climate change. Despite lots of feel-good rhetoric, especially after the onset of the pandemic, the coalition government made little headway on any of these.

The failure to address these crises in any meaningful way was indicative of a broader pattern. While the coalition government was frequently at the mercy of Winston Peters, Labour—and the prime minister in particular—demonstrated a chronic lack of political conviction throughout its first term. No serious attempts were made at shaping alternative political narratives nor building a mandate for change. Since Labour's great shift to the Right in the 1980s, the prevailing political dynamic has been one in which the grounds for debate are set by the Right and Centre, with both major parties fighting for the vote of the property-owning middle classes. A dearth of ideas in the Labour Party and an instinctually cautious prime minister have compounded this inertia over the last three years.

Unsurprisingly, Ardern and the Labour Party were at pains to present a non-threatening, business-friendly face through the election campaign—signalling a continued commitment to conservative incrementalism. Shamefully light on policy throughout the campaign, Labour relied almost entirely on Ardern's cult of personality. Here, the lack of clear political conviction on the part of the prime minister works in such a way that voters are able to project their own hopes and desires onto her. Indeed, Ardern's political ambivalence and governing style are remarkably similar to the techno-managerialism John Key perfected during his near-decade in power, albeit seasoned with lashings of compassion. 'Consensus building' and 'kindness' are the order of the day. Needless to say, the poorest and most disenfranchised New Zealanders are seldom mentioned. By promising nothing concrete and assuaging any concerns of the asset-owning classes as to the safety of their wealth, Ardern and the Labour Party tacked a straight line down the centre through the campaign.

But there is also no question that the biggest thing Labour had going for it in the election campaign was its response to Covid-19. Despite various

hiccups and failings along the way, it is clear that most of the population has felt, to one degree or another, part of the 'team of five million' that helped keep our islands from the worst of the pandemic. A visceral fear of what a National–ACT government might unleash via a lax border-control regime was a deterrent to voting Right and is likely to have accounted for some of the unusually high Labour party vote in traditionally blue electorates.

The incoming government now faces the same set of inter-related crises Labour, New Zealand First, and the Greens inherited in 2017, only this time magnified by the impacts, local and global, of the pandemic. In her election-night victory speech, Ardern reinforced the campaign message that the voters to whom she is most alert are those who shifted from a right-leaning National to a centrist Labour, rather than those who comprise the party's traditional support base. Doubling-down on her centrist messaging, the prime minister stressed that Labour works for 'every New Zealander', and that she would not take the support of previously blue voters for granted.

Beyond this desire to satisfy its newest supporters, Labour's post-election position is significant because it marks the first time in the 26 years of MMP that a single party can govern alone. Many voters will have no knowledge of what FPP politics was like, and others may have forgotten its worst excesses. Without the ameliorating effect of having to negotiate with others to pass laws and the annual budget, the ruling party can do as it pleases. Select committees are the democratic engine rooms of parliament, where ordinary citizens and advocacy groups can make submissions for MPs to consider. Under MMP, compromises are wrangled on the basis of these submissions, sometimes on every clause of a bill. Citizen and cross-party influence will likely be much reduced over the next three years. The only real power held by the non-governing parties lies in their capacity to advocate for the voters they represent, and to question and critique the government. The strength and acuity that non-governing parties bring to these tasks will determine their efficacy.

Of the non-governing parties, this return to FFP politics is perhaps of most consequence for the Greens. The Greens did well in the election, and

for good reason had high hopes of a meaningful role in the next government. The party's lack of bargaining power post-election does not seem to have dampened its enthusiasm for taking whatever positions or policy gains Labour might deign to deliver. The risk here is that any agreement that mutes the Green's ability to critique government would be a body blow to the party's ability to deliver a strong, clear voice for the people and kaupapa it represents—a dangerous prospect after the constraints of the previous three years. At the time of writing, how this will play out is not at all clear.

Given the tepid policy of the last three years, the conservative nature of the Labour Party's electoral campaign, and the relative weakness of the Greens post-election, those on the more radical Left are likely to be fairly suspicious that much genuinely 'transformative' progress will be made at all. However, we could be proved wrong, and fairly quickly at that. Labour may, for example, choose to implement all, or most, of the recommendations of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG), something for which anti-poverty organisations have been campaigning since the WEAG delivered its report in 2018. This would be a great victory for welfare reformers and would change the lives of many for the better. It would also be a clever move on Labour's part, blunting critiques from this vocal sector for the foreseeable future and giving the government a genuine 'transformational' achievement of which to boast. But beyond one or two unexpectedly substantive changes such as this, a moderate conservativism, flavoured with the mantra of 'kindness', looks to be the most likely direction of travel. While Ardern and her government could use this opportunity to bring a decisive end to the long night of neoliberalism, and to build a fairer, more resilient, and more sustainable economy, this is unlikely to happen without pressure from below.

The challenge we on the Left face, then, is how best to organise and mobilise over the next three years. Every time a Labour-led government is in power and the Greens have a substantial presence in the House, there is a leaching of good activists, resources, and energy into the parliamentary sphere. Rising unemployment affects activists too, and there are good jobs to be had for people with backgrounds in social and environmental activism.

For a community sector plagued by restrictions on political advocacy and a shortage of resources, losing activists to parliament, as MPs and staffers, is part of the price paid for a stronger Labour/Green presence in the House. In addition, there is the risk that unions and community organisations will put their faith in the hope provided (for some) by an absolute Labour majority and the welcome gender and ethnic diversity apparent in the new parliament.

For those who by circumstance or choice remain outside the parliamentary sphere, the next few months will be a time when we should take whatever opportunities we can find or create for collective analysis and strategising. Together, we might consider the following questions. What opportunities does the parliamentary balance of power create for new campaigns, or the strengthening of old ones? What should our demands be in the face of the pandemic and the ongoing climate emergency? How can we do more to integrate a Tiriti perspective into the work we do? How can we better develop a vision of a truly just society in ways and language that are meaningful to those who have least, rather than, as too often happens, remaining in the echo-chamber of an educated urban elite? Here, the challenge from Māori advocates for constitutional transformation is as alive and as important as ever, as are the realities of ongoing racism at many levels of government and local-government bureaucracies. The ability of the tauiwi Left to respond adequately and collectively to this is critical.

But beyond these important questions, the biggest problem here is that there is no 'we'. The strands of the socialist, eco-socialist, beyond-patriarchy, and anarchist Left remain as fractured and fragmented as ever, despite the efforts of this publication and a number of fine people and organisations across the country. Some on the green Left remain tightly bound up with the Green Party, despite the enduring leadership of centrist-leaning James Shaw. Others have left the Greens to join Labour in the hope of shifting its course in a direction more akin to that of 1935 than 1984. But for such a strategy to succeed, worker counter-power needs to be built from the ground up. The gains won by and for workers in the inter- and post-war years were the product of a strong, united, and infrastructurally embedded

working-class movement. Building this counter-power anew and uniting the Left are the essential tasks facing us today.

More immediately, the parliamentary balance of power presents the Left with an opportunity. A political party with a large majority but few policy ideas of its own could be influenced by well-organised campaigns, convinced to shift in new, genuinely transformative directions if enough momentum can be built. Here, the challenge for the Left is to focus on building united campaigns and demands that the new government, rich in political capital, could adopt and rebrand as its own. If carried out successfully, and in tandem with other grassroots extra-parliamentary initiatives, such concerted actions have the potential to mark the beginnings of a more united and coordinated Left in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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