

NEW ZEALAND ELECTION STUDY TOUR REPORT

BY ELIAS HALLAJ
NATIONAL ORGANISER
AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY

This report summarises observations made during my participation in an election study tour sponsored by the Australian Political Exchange Council (APEC). The delegation from Australia included representatives from the Labor, Liberal, National, Democrat and Green Parties. Participants were invited to construct their own itineraries focussing on personal and political interests. I must begin by thanking APEC and Gary Gray, the Labor representative on the APEC Board, for this opportunity – I am sure that other participants will agree it was an extraordinary journey into New Zealand politics and culture.

During my stay in New Zealand, fellow Australian Labor Party representative Michael Bailey accompanied me. Reports from other participants are also available via the APEC website at <http://www.polexchange.org.au/>.

Purpose:

To observe the 2002 New Zealand election campaign, in particular the campaign to re-elect the New Zealand Labour-led Government.

Activities

Our activities focused primarily on the New Zealand Labour Party's campaign. The study tour included visits to Wellington, Auckland and a day at Rotorua. Our itinerary included:

Prior to departure, a briefing at the New Zealand High Commission in Canberra
In Wellington, several meetings with Mike Smith – General Secretary, New Zealand Labour
In Wellington – briefings from Jenny Michie – Women's Organiser and Communications Officer New Zealand Labour
Labour ministerial staff election campaign briefing – led by Heather Simpson - Chief of staff for Prime Minister Helen Clarke
Meeting with David Burchett – IT/Communications Manager for Prime Minister's office
Meeting with Dot Kettle – Senior Advisor to PM Helen Clarke
Meeting with Tony Timms – Advisor to PM Helen Clark
Meeting with Marian Hobbs MP - Environment Minister and Member for Wellington Central and Electorate Representative Jordan Carter
Attended Wellington Central campaign meeting
Weekend campaigning activities in Wellington Central (letterboxing, street meetings, canvassing in malls)
Attended very entertaining 'Meet the Candidates' function at Kiora Community Hall (for Wellington Central candidates)
Attended Ohariu-Belmont Labour Campaign Meeting
Attended fundraising performance by 'Hen's Teeth' for Ohariu-Belmont Campaign
Visited Te Papa National Museum Wellington
Attended Televised Candidates Debate (front row seats!)
Lunch meeting with Chris Eichbaum – Senior Advisor to Hon Steve Maharey MP, Minister for Social Services, Employment, Tertiary Education
Meeting with Mike Williams–New Zealand Labour Party President and Campaign Manager
Meeting with Stephen Mills – Managing Director, UMR Research Ltd.
Assisted in proofing Labour policy material
Attended Labour Campaign Launch – International Wharf Wellington

Accompanied General Secretary Mike Smith and Assistant General Secretary Murdo Macmillan at official briefing by Mark Johns, Manager of Operations Electoral Enrolment Centre, New Zealand Post
Briefing with Labour Auckland Regional Organiser Andrew Beyer and Labour Maori Organiser Jason Ake
Attended Campaign Meeting for Maungakiekie campaign (Mark Gosche MP)
Meeting with Chris Carter MP at his electorate office.
Meeting with Jonathan Hunt – Speaker of the New Zealand Parliament
Assisted with preparations for Helen Clarke visit to Manakau Westfield shopping centre
Met Prime Minister Helen Clarke at Manakau Westfield (and have a bad photo as proof!)
Visited Waitakere Campaign Office in Glen Eden
Meeting with Labor candidate for Waitakere Ms Lynne Pillay
Meeting and briefing with Waitakere campaign manager Don Clarke
Sign Painting, door-to-door canvassing, billboard construction in Waitakere
Campaigning in Atoa Markets – campaigning/leaflets
Briefing with John Utting and visited UMR polling centre in Auckland.
Attended Auckland Labour Party campaign directors meeting
Meeting with NZ Engineers Union organisers and activists at Auckland office
Going door-to-door to get out the voters on election day
Scrutineering during the election and in the evening during the count
Visited Whakarewarewa Thermal Valley and Maori village at Rotorua

Report:

Wellington

Wellington is the capital of New Zealand and its political heart beats at the 'Beehive' – the common term used to describe the unique parliament building. The city is renowned for its cultural attractions and its compact design allows for easy access to various sights and experiences.

The Beehive acts as the centre of political activity in New Zealand. As it accommodates the Prime Minister's office and ministerial offices – it is the place to be to witness and participate in New Zealand politics. As the election campaign progresses to its final stages the focus shifts from Wellington to the main population centre in Auckland.

MMP – New Zealand's Parliamentary system

The Mixed Member Proportional (MMP)* system was adopted in New Zealand in 1996 via referendum as a solution for the electorate's frustration with the existing first-past-the-post system. Voters were fed up by the behaviour of previous governments, which abused the unchecked mandate delivered by a first-past-the-post system. MMP effectively ensures that no single party can rule in its own right. The election on Saturday 27 July 2002 was the third election under the MMP system.

Under MMP each voter receives a single ballot paper on which they choose (by placing two ticks on the paper) a local representative candidate (from the list of candidates for the local seat), as well as a party vote.

The New Zealand Parliament has 120 MPs. 61 MPs represent 61 general electorates. 6 MPs represent 6 Maori electorates (elected by voters on the Maori electoral roll only). 53 MPs are elected from the party lists in a manner that ensures their party's final proportion in the parliament reflects their party's 'party vote'.

In order to be represented in parliament, a party must either reach a 5% threshold in its party vote or hold at least one local electorate seat (in which case 2% of the Party vote will get you a friend elected as well from your 'party list').

As far as the major parties are concerned, MMP necessitates that the focus of the election campaign is maximising your 'party vote', even at the local campaign level. A high party vote ensures that the maximum number of candidates from your 'party list' is elected and you are more likely to be part of the inevitable coalition government.

Although Labour won three quarters of local electorates it still needed coalition partners to form a government. As it only won 41% of the party vote it only received 52 MPs in total.

The players – non-Labour parties

NZ First – Winston Peters

The controversial leader of New Zealand First led his party to a surge in votes – attaining 10% of the party list vote. This gave New Zealand First 13 seats in total - a dramatic increase of eight new MPs.

ACT

Led by Richard Prebble, ACT was able to utilise the centrist approach of the National Party to manoeuvre themselves into an extreme right constituency. Promises of tax cuts and restoring law and order retained their nine list seats in parliament.

Alliance

A very public split within the Alliance (weakening the Coalition Government) precipitated the early election in 2002. The party was subsequently ejected from parliament after leader Laila Harre lost her seat of Waitakere – despite a controversial in-house poll predicting her victory. They failed to attain the 5% minimum required for party list representation – only achieving 1.3% of the party vote across New Zealand.

The Green Party

The Green strategy of having one non-negotiable bottom-line demand (on lifting the GE moratorium) backfired with the electorate. Their leader lost her seat (the Green Party's only electorate seat) and they were relegated from being a partner in government to a minor party on the extreme left.

United Future

Led by Ex-Labour MP Peter Dunne, this party has its roots in the moral right. Having a safe margin in his own suburban seat of Ohariu-Belmont – Peter Dunne was able to carry seven other list MPs into Parliament with him – increasing his party's representation by 700%!

The National Party

In terms of product differentiation, National was unable to define itself clearly to the electorate. They were constantly outflanked and outmanoeuvred by parties such as ACT and New Zealand First making stronger claims on their natural constituency – with policies such as more tax cuts, tougher penalties for criminals and less tolerance for the Treaty Of Waitangi and foreigners. Competing parties also had simpler and clearer messages. National were stripped of their core right wing support. New Zealand First stole the old-fashioned conservative right. Peter Dunne captured the moral right. Richard Prebble made the most of the economic right.

By the end of the campaign National had changed its messages so often that many supporters became confused. In some electorates, National candidates removed the party logo from their hoardings to avoid being tarred by the National brand.

Jim Anderton – Progressive Coalition

After forming and then splitting from The Alliance, Jim Anderton campaigned on the platform of being a Labour Party Coalition Partner. A list seat vote meant he had 2 parliamentary seats to contribute to the minority coalition Government which was eventually formed with Labour.

It is worth noting that six out of the seven major non-Labour parties contesting the election included ex-Labour candidates amongst their ranks.

NZ Labour

NZ Labour began the election campaign with a commanding lead over their nearest rivals the national Party. Before a sudden surge in support for minor parties towards the end of the campaign, there was a distinct possibility that Labour would (despite the design of MMP) govern in their own right.

The campaign message and material

Labour's material focused on its commitment to deliver good stable government. The campaign prominently featured the Prime Minister Helen Clarke – who had a commanding lead in recognition over all other candidates.

Material spelled out the 7 key commitments that a re-elected Labour-led government would deliver: Jobs; healthcare; education; superannuation guarantees; apprenticeships; tougher criminal sentences and no rises in income tax or GST.

Material for all local candidates was centrally produced to conform to the major themes and design. Although local candidates did produce their own letters and flyers a strong uniform campaign image was achieved successfully.

Brand recognition was high and it was positive.

Auckland

Our visit to Auckland left the impression of a vast expanding suburban metropolis. Auckland is much richer in cultural diversity than Wellington. The nightlife in the city centre is more energised and the larger population leads to faster lifestyles and more variety and spice.

The campaign for Waitakere - Campaigning on the ground

We had the good fortune to attach ourselves to the Labour campaign for the winnable Auckland seat of Waitakere. Labor candidate Lynne Pillay and campaign manager Don Clarke left us with a positive impression of local campaigning in New Zealand Labour.

Don Clarke was also a quickly cherished source of information about the history and local structures of the NZ Labour Party. Don has been a party activist for most of his 85 years. He was generous, honest and witty – and managed to motivate his campaign team with the promise of an even funnier anecdote once the task at hand was completed.



During our time with the Waitakere Labour team we assisted with many basic campaign activities and were able to experience election campaigning in New Zealand on a first-hand basis.

We assisted in campaigning in Atoa Markets – a suburban street-stall market frequented by western Auckland’s growing islander community. Other MPs and Labour activists regularly set up stalls and use the markets to publicise their activities.

We assisted with preparations for Helen Clarke’s visit to a major suburban shopping centre - Manakau Westfield shopping centre. We met Helen Clarke, who seemed a bit surprised that we were spending our visit working on the campaign. She listened to our opinions from our ‘outsiders’ perspective. She left us with the impression that she is a seasoned and confident campaigner. At Manakau Westfield we witnessed an excellent public endorsement for Helen Clarke and Labour by Che Fu (a popular Islander rap singer) and popular female musician Anika Moa. Their message to the audience during their free performance included instructions to get on the electoral roll and get out to vote for Labour.



Day to day activities at the Waitakere campaign included sign painting, door-to-door canvassing and billboard construction. We handed out material at train stations, held up signs at intersections and handed out material at the local Kelston Shopping centre.

New Zealand Labour seemed to have excellent candidates (at least those that we met and spent time with). We must presume that they were selected well. At no time during the campaign was there any hint of internal Labour conflict or dissent from the Leader's message. We were fortunate to be closely involved with a highly energised local campaign with a great candidate and experienced campaign director.

Observations of campaigning mistakes

For several political parties there seemed to be a lack of local campaign monitoring and central direction or authority. We recall where local media stories and campaign activities sometimes did not match central campaign strategy. Even Labour was not immune to errant behaviour by candidates. A billboard for one government minister observed near the airport advocated a vote for himself - there was no mention of the crucial Party Vote for Labour.

Labour also fell into the trap of complicated newspaper advertising – particularly in comparison to NZ First - whose TV, radio, billboard and newspaper ads worked very well to reinforce their straightforward (although misguided) message.

In comparison to Australian norms, local campaigns seemed to be severely under-resourced. Even a winnable seat lacked personnel, computer, office, vehicle resources that would be taken for granted in most state and federal election campaigns in Australia. Limits of campaign finance (\$20,000) however ensure that all candidates and parties are in the same boat with resources. Strangely – voters still complained about being inundated with campaign material and attention from political parties during the campaign period.

The Nationals made many mistakes

Prior to the campaign they had effectively reformed and dismantled their campaign team, and branch power bases and networks, which had worked so hard for them in the past. This left them with reduced experience and numbers in the individual local campaigns. Public infighting between Bill English and National Party President Michelle Boag caused further embarrassment.

Bill English's comments on national television (in response to a question about his team's readiness for government) that it will take '10 years to rebuild the National Party' (if it wins government) will undoubtedly haunt him for years. The Nationals offered no carrots to their targeted constituency (unlike the tax cuts offered by their competition).

The Nationals were hurt by obvious changes in advertising message and style mid-campaign when their leader took the strategic reins from his party organisation. Obviously, a team where the leader cannot trust the competence of the team that surrounds him/her is doomed to failure. When such a team demonstrates this lack of trust so publicly, the voter backlash is inevitable. The National Party vote plummeted from 35% to 21%.

In contrast to the Nationals the Labour team led by Helen Clarke was very well disciplined. There were no contradictory ministerial statements or promises. Carefully designed material was sending the same message across the nation. Although in some cases the message was relatively complicated, it is important to remember that a balance between memorable and popular policy and policy which is credible in its detail is always easier with hindsight.

Alliance faults – left behind by the electorate

The Alliance leadership was guilty of overestimating their relevance. They were effectively overtaken by the Greens as the extreme left party once their founder Jim Anderton deserted them. Doomed by plummeting voter support they focussed on a desperate effort to retain Waitakere in the hope that a electorate seat would entitle them to party list MPs. They resorted to advertising which asked voters to 'vote for Laila Harre in Waitakere' and 'another party for your party vote' – against the common interpretation of MMP strategy. They also resorted to publicising fake polling to boost their profile in the community - polling which was shown to be inaccurate.

Media – The power of television

Free to air coverage of election issues and campaigning is quite intense in New Zealand. The media often goes to extremes elevating seemingly minor issues and minor candidates to national status with detailed coverage of most parties and their activities.

We had the good fortune to be in the studio audience for both televised public debates. The first debate included no less than eight Party Leaders, each given reasonably equal airtime to voice their concerns and priorities.

Apart from the rowdy National Party members in the audience, a lasting impression of this evening was the cult status of a seemingly innocent remark made by Peter Dunn – an obscure Party Leader: something along the lines of "...we are for a common sense approach to Government." As a result of this comment during the first televised debate, Peter Dunn's previously unremarkable United Future Party was elevated to election-winning status - because of a single line he used that impressed the 'studio audience worm' and election commentators.

From that moment on he was reborn as the candidate and party leader that was focussed on 'common sense'. The penny dropped with other minor (and major) Party Leaders who began sprouting key messages about 'common sense' at every opportunity – to no avail. In a dramatic display of the power that public perception based on television viewing can have, 2002 saw the United Future's representation leap upwards from one single MP to eight. No doubt this included many National Party voters who were looking to park their vote somewhere distant from the rabble led by Bill English.

Advertising

TV advertising during NZ elections is strictly limited. Government allocations of advertising airtime are based on each party's previous election result.

In the three-month period prior to an election, each party has a limit of \$1 million on its campaign budget and \$20,000 per party candidate in each electorate. Although this results in a more level playing field – particularly for minor parties – it can lead to disqualification if the limits are ignored. Individual candidates have an additional \$20,000 limit on advertising their own personal campaign. Candidates and parties must provide returns after the election showing what they have spent. These returns are available for public inspection.

Stories circulated of local campaigns coming to a grinding halt several weeks before Election Day when opposition teams had collected evidence of overspending and made detailed reports to the Electoral Commission.

Corngate

The biggest election story during the brief campaign period was 'Corngate'. During an interview on national television Prime Minister Helen Clarke was ambushed with an unexpected question. The question quoted claims within a new book that genetically modified corn had been mistakenly released from an experimental farm and a cover up had taken place. There were 'fears' that this GM corn would contaminate other agriculture and jeopardise NZ food production and export revenue. The PM was caught short and the media exaggerated her anger over the presenter's ambush. The problem for Labour became less the allegations of government conspiracies and cover-ups but more the PM's apparent overreaction to the questions. For days the media focused on genetically modified agriculture and the Government's response to the book, which was coincidentally published by someone with close links to the NZ Greens Party.

The Corngate issue breathed life back into the Greens Party assault for Labour and Alliance votes and their tactics reflected an orchestrated campaign. Suddenly – stickers shaped like corn cobs appeared on Labour posters and billboards across New Zealand. Greens Party members dressed as cans of corn and accompanied by video cameras followed Helen Clarke at most of her public engagements.

Teachers Dispute

During the middle of the election campaign a potentially embarrassing industrial dispute between the Government and the Teachers Union erupted. The dispute centred on a wage claim and became an election litmus test for media commentators: Would the Labour Government succumb to pressures from a large union?

The dispute was partly resolved prior to Election Day through careful (and well publicised) negotiations involving the Education Minister. The Government carefully maintained that throughout the dispute that its primary concerns lay with the education of children and ensuring that parents were satisfied with quality and access to education. The Government refused to be held to ransom during an election campaign and the electorate responded positively to the outcome.

Election day

Campaign pundits from outside New Zealand could be forgiven for thinking that the mass media in New Zealand boycotted election coverage on the final day of a campaign because readers and watchers were fed up with the intense coverage. For election pundits, there is nothing interesting in newspapers on Election Day. Specific rules outlawing electioneering, advertising and publication or distribution of campaign-related material ensure that voters escape such activities from midnight the previous day.

The candidate's handbook issued by the Chief Electorate Officer states: "You must remove or cover any advertising before polling day that promotes your election and can be seen from a public place.... Fixed signs on campaign headquarters that refer to the election campaign must be removed or covered.... Signs on vehicles, including bumper stickers, that refer to the election must not be displayed publicly on polling day."

Opposition teams are sometimes accused of falsely distributing their rival's material to generate complaints and voter ill will.

On Election Day Labour candidates are left with little to do apart from proudly walk about in the red t-shirts and jackets. Hardworking candidates help with back-room organisation and preparations for evening celebrations.

Scrutineering and monitoring of voter turnout from publicly available rolls is allowed during the vote – if a campaign is well organised it can identify and contact voters who have indicated support but have not voted on the day. A point is reached in late afternoon when this exercise becomes futile and there is little left to do apart from recover in preparation for the celebrations (for Labour volunteers anyway).

We celebrated with other Waitakere volunteers at the Ranui community centre and were rewarded with a very public thank you from both the candidate and campaign manager during their victory speeches.

The result

Watching the results of the election on television and reading about them in the newspaper over the next few days can be very frustrating for a political junkie. No 'swings' are displayed and it is very difficult to make judgements about the success or failure of various local campaigns.

Detailed election results are available at <http://www.electionresults.govt.nz/>

NZ cultural snapshot - Maori issues

Maori culture is well preserved despite decades of oppression and upheaval. Most New Zealanders, including the majority of Pakeha (whites), respect and support the preservation of Maori culture. In some communities this has led to the inevitable backlash from people who feel disenfranchised by 'political correctness' and affirmative action policies, which may seem to favour Maori above other cultures.

During the campaign period political parties such as New Zealand First, led by Winston Peters – successfully tapped into prejudices from perceptions of favouritism towards cultural minorities. One of Winston Peter's mantras during the campaign was to end 'the Waitangi Treaty industry' and affirmative action policies and 'treat all New Zealanders as equals'. There were justifiable analogies made with Pauline Hanson and One Nation – Winston Peters often quoted their policies in defence of his. He made frequent references to the Australian Government's 'correct actions on turning back boat people'. He argued strongly for dramatic reductions in immigration, particularly 'from third world countries' and Asia.

New Zealand First did remarkably well in the election – increasing their representation in the parliament from 5 to 13 and elevating Winston Peters and his platform. Speculation remains on where the majority of voters who chose NZ First came from – the dramatic plunge in the National Party vote suggests most were National Party voters who deserted Bill English but refused to vote for Helen Clarke.

On a tangential positive note, our short stay in New Zealand expanded our vocabulary to include several Maori words: iwi – tribe; mana – prestige; utu – retribution; tiki – carved human figure; mere – club; haka – dance; moko – tattoo.

The Maori we met during our activities with the New Zealand Labour Party were articulate and passionate about their culture and their politics. They left us with the impression that the promotion of Maori culture and the future of the Labour Party in the Maori community were both in safe hands.

Many of the obstacles faced by Maori in the past, such as access to housing, education, employment and healthcare are being dealt with head on today by the growing Pacific Islander (PI) population. This diverse community appears to work closely with the Labour Party to ensure that inequity is carefully addressed in key policy areas.

Treaty of Waitangi and British Settlement

The Treaty of Waitangi is a much-discussed document designed by the British to transfer sovereignty of New Zealand land to the British Crown. Fundamentally the treaty could satisfy no one completely – Both Maori and settlers believed they had been harshly done by. Although, in 1840 the Treaty secured apparent legitimacy for British annexation, it did not unify the races and remains a contentious issue.

The Treaty opened the doors to organised settlement by Europeans. Inevitably – confrontation over land grew and fighting flared in 1843 between militant settlers and Maori. By 1860 the whole North Island was plunged into war. Fighting petered out in 1872. The Maori, lacking common bonds apart from inter-tribal allegiances – did not have the unifying nationalism needed to win set piece battles against colonial forces armed with artillery. The Government punished rebel tribes by confiscating more land. Passive resistance continued for some time but by 1892 the Maori were left with 4.4 million hectares of land, 6.6 million hectares having been bought or confiscated. Of their 4.4 million hectares a quarter was leased to settlers and the remainder was rugged and of little use in those times. Today less than 5% of New Zealand remains in Maori (i.e. communal) ownership.

Impressions of Wellington and Auckland

Auckland traffic congestion is very bad and getting worse. As in most modern cities it is caused by unplanned urban sprawl and lack of planned transport corridors. Public transport needs major funds – the train system is OK but limited and unreliable.

Wellington fares relatively better than Auckland because its compact nature leads to higher building densities. Wellington has wisely installed an electric bus system for its urban centre – reducing noise and pollution. Higher density means entertainment, work, shopping, amenities are within walking distance for many people. Public transport is encouraged by the fact that many people in Wellington do not have garages or parking spaces and street parking for motor vehicles is hard to find.

In its favour Auckland has many signs of investment and economic prosperity in its centre. There is obvious gentrification in some areas around the main university campus and a thriving café and club culture near the city centre.

Campaigning is campaigning: The NZ election campaign in a nutshell.

The New Zealand election showed that successful election campaign methods are universal: Assess the environment; define your strategy and implement appropriate tactics.

However, despite the complicated calculations when counting the MMP ballot – the basic political tactics during this campaign remained the same as under any electoral system. Electorally successful parties (Labour, New Zealand First, United Future) increased their popular vote by: having a simple message that resonated with voters, repeating that message ad nauseum in their campaign material, maximising the coverage of their message in free-to-air media and canvassing for votes.

Electorally unsuccessful parties (the Nationals and the Alliance) never had a fighting chance because their original strategy was flawed. They targeted the same constituency (with the same message) that had got them elected in 96 and 99, despite all the signs that the political landscape had seismically shifted around them. The leaders of both the Nationals and Alliance spent the last two weeks of the campaign in damage control.

Labour won almost three quarters of the local electorates and ended up with three extra seats – enough to form a minority Coalition Government with Jim Anderton (a reliable ex-Labour coalition partner) and another minor party. The National Party was decimated, receiving only half of the Labour popular vote. Traditional National Party voters deserted in droves to other conservative parties who had stolen their traditional message (and constituency) during the campaign.

Elias Hallaj

For comment and feedback please write to Elias.Hallaj@cbr.alp.org.au

