

An unstable minority government in New Zealand

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley is clinging to power with the narrowest of margins after a split in her coalition partner New Zealand First amid a week-long political crisis in government ranks. Eight of the 16 NZ First MPs have left the party and pledged to support the National Party government on the crucial issues of no confidence motions and money supply bills.

Five NZ First parliamentarians--Tau Henare, Rana Waitai, Jack Elder, Rev Ann Batten and Tukoroirangi Morgan--walked out of a party caucus on Tuesday night, refusing to support the decision by NZ First leader Winston Peters to quit the coalition government. Three others have indicated their continuing support for the government.

The National Party has only 44 seats in the 120-seat parliament but can depend on the support of the NZ First defectors, the right-wing ACT (Association of Consumers and Taxpayers) party, the United Party MP Peter Dunne and 'independent' Alamein Kopu -- a total of 62 seats. Henare and Elder may continue to hold their posts as ministers.

Peters precipitated the political turmoil last week when he led his fellow NZ First ministers out of a cabinet meeting after sharp disagreements over the privatisation of Wellington airport. Both government parties immediately set in motion a formal dispute-settling procedure agreed to when the coalition was formed after the 1996 elections. But bitter public recriminations made clear that the procedure was little more than a prelude to the breakdown of the coalition.

Both National Party and NZ First members publicly attacked Peters, pointing to the fact that as Treasurer he had previously played a key role in the sale of five other airports. Tensions within NZ First were already high as a result of the party's slump in the polls to near

zero and the declining popularity of the government as a whole.

NZ First won significant support in the 1996 elections based on a right-wing nationalist agenda. Prior to the poll, Peters attacked the National Party government and indicated that he would never form a coalition with the then Prime Minister Jim Bolger. After the elections, however, NZ First did an abrupt about face, joined with the National Party, and was jointly responsible for continuing the assault on living standards--resulting in a rapid loss of support and an opening of divisions within the party.

The breakup of the NZ First has resolved the immediate political problem confronting Shipley but the fate of her government, even in the short-term, is extremely tenuous. National Party rule is dependent on a highly heterogeneous collection of small parties and individuals, all of whom are positioning themselves for the next national elections.

ACT, a party formed by former Labour Party ministers Roger Douglas and Richard Prebble, is based on the most extreme version of so-called market reforms--the complete abolition of all welfare, public health and education services. Henare and other ex-NZ First Maori MPs, who are considering the formation of their own party, are seeking to retain their credibility among sections of Maori workers and poor, who have been devastated by such measures.

It is a highly unstable and potentially explosive political mixture.

See Also:

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[15 August 1998]

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