

New Zealand elections characterised by widespread political disenchantment

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Campaigning has begun in New Zealand for national elections to be held on November 27. National Party leader and Prime Minister Jenny Shipley announced the poll two weeks ago after months of prevarication in the face of a deteriorating economy and lack of support for her minority government.

There is an overwhelming sense of betrayal among ordinary people regarding official politics as a whole. Electoral Enrolment Centre national manager Murray Wicks recently expressed concern at the levels of “complacency” and “political disillusionment” shown by the enrolment figures. According to the Electoral Commission, nearly 400,000 people, out of a potential voter pool of 2.6 million, have not as yet registered to vote. Failure to enrol is a legal offence with a fine of up to \$NZ200.

In the 18-39 age bracket—the generation that came of voting age during the 1980s when the onslaught on living standards began—nearly 25 percent are off the electoral rolls. In the South Auckland region, the centre of the largest congregation of poor working class families, 152,000 voters remain off the rolls despite extensive Electoral Commission voter registration drives.

New Zealand has long been held up as a country with strong democratic traditions and high levels of political participation. Throughout the post-war period, voting levels of over 90 percent were the norm. Then from the mid-1980s, as Labour and National Party governments implemented big business policies, voter turnouts steadily declined. In the last election in 1996, participation rose to a high point for the decade of 88 percent, attributed mainly to the introduction of a new voting system based on proportional representation.

The depth of the political alienation was revealed by a Massey University study released in August. The long-running *New Zealand Study of Values* showed that confidence in government and parliament had plummeted over the previous decade. Only 16 percent of the study group expressed “quite a lot” of confidence in government compared with 48 percent who expressed high levels of confidence in 1985.

Dr Alan Webster, who carried out the survey with Dr Paul Perry, commented: “Government has suffered a massive decline in public confidence over that time, far more than any other institution we surveyed.”

Significantly the study found growing disenchantment with parliament itself. Thirty-nine percent of respondents were in favor of having “experts, not a government, make decisions according to what they thought best for the country”. Seventeen percent were in favor of a “strong leader who doesn't have to bother with parliament and elections,” and 2 percent expressed support for army rule.

According to Webster, views about politicians and political institutions are polarised along class lines. The better-off who have gained the most from market-oriented reforms of the post-1984 period “stand apart” from the “general climate of disillusionment”. According to the study, 26 percent of upper-middle class respondents have “great confidence” in government, compared to only 8 percent of working class respondents.

Membership of political parties has also dropped sharply, to the point where none of the official parties has an active base. During the 1950s, more than one in five of the adult population was a member of a political party. Today, fewer than one in 27 adults are party members.

Prior to 1984, the Labour Party had a membership of 42,000 or more; now it has less than 20,000. The National Party, once a powerful social and political institution, particularly in rural areas, has seen its membership plummet from over 200,000 in the 1970s to less than 50,000 today. The right-wing Association of Consumers and Taxpayers (ACT) and the Alliance both claim memberships of only about 15,000.

The falling membership figures have also been accompanied by declining membership involvement. Alliance chairman Matt McCarten has said that party's conferences have no power over MPs any more, and that politicians have become “separated from the rank-and file”. Webster's study shows that only 6 percent of the population have any confidence in political parties.

The widespread hostility to the established political institutions is the product of 15 years of attacks on jobs, living standards and social services, in which all political parties have been complicit. Workers and middle class people have been through significant political experiences with both Labour and National, and no longer see any fundamental difference between the main parties.

The National Party assumed office in 1990 following a massive swing against the Labour Party after its six years in office between 1984-1990, during which Labour presided over economic deregulation, job losses and attacks on state sector enterprises. The Nationals continued Labour's pro-market policies, in particular through the introduction of the Employment Contracts Act, that led to lower wages and conditions, and the "Mother of all Budgets" in 1991 that thrust thousands into deep poverty through extensive cuts to welfare benefits.

At the 1996 elections, conducted under the new proportional representation system, the deeply unpopular National Party gained a minority of votes but retained its hold on government by entering into a coalition with the right-wing populist New Zealand First Party, led by a former National cabinet minister, Winston Peters.

New Zealand First had campaigned on a platform "opposing" the National Government. It gained 13 percent of the vote, polling particularly strongly among the elderly and the Maori population who were among the chief victims of benefit cutbacks. Any hopes of a National-NZ First government improving their lot were quickly dashed when Peters, as Treasurer, continued to implement the demands of big business.

Mid-way through this parliamentary term, the coalition broke apart after support in the opinion polls for New Zealand First slumped and party split to try to distance itself from the government. The National Party has been forced to see out the last 18 months as an unstable minority government, propped up by the pro-big business party ACT, Mauri Pacific—an ethnically-based party set up last year by a group of defectors from NZ First—and a shifting coalition of "independent" MPs.

Many voters have become particularly embittered at politicians, elected on opposition platforms, who have changed horses mid-stream and ended up as props of the Shipley government. The first MP to jump ship was Alamein Kopu who quit the Alliance early in the parliamentary term to become an "independent" and subsequently set up a party purportedly representing Maori women. Also leaving the Alliance was Frank Grover, who went to join the right-wing Christian Democrats.

Four of the eight MPs who set up the Mauri Pacific Party gained their seats in parliament by winning the Maori

designated electorates, traditionally held by Labour, for NZ First. Led by Tau Henare, a former union official, they joined Kopu in supporting National as it struggled to see out its term in office. Many of these minor parties are now languishing in the polls. Mauri Pacific will struggle to hold any seats in the coming election, while the Alliance and NZ First are both polling around 6 or 7 percent.

The disenchantment with the smaller parties has not translated into any significant revival of support for the main opposition party, Labour. In 1996, despite six years of far-reaching assaults on jobs, wages and social conditions, Labour's share of the vote slumped to an all-time low of 28.4 percent, and support for its likely partner, the Alliance, fell from 18.2 percent to 10.2 percent.

A poll published Monday showed Labour on 39 percent and the National Party on 37 percent with ACT on 7 percent and NZ First with 6 percent. Significantly the Alliance, the likely coalition party for the Labour Party, has only 4.5 percent, less than the 5 percent necessary to gain any of the seats allocated under proportional voting through the New Zealand voting system.

As well as the election there will be a vote on two non-binding referenda established through the "citizens initiated referendum" procedures. One calls for tougher sentences for crimes of violence and "home invasion" offences, and the other seeks a reduction in the number of members of parliament from 120 MPs to 99.

Both in their own way are further symptoms of the political disorientation. The first is the product of the right-wing "law-and-order" campaigns that have been the hallmark of all the political parties whose policies have created the conditions of poverty and unemployment that have resulted in rising crime rates and other social ills. The second is a reflection of the widespread hostility to politicians and their privileges.



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