# New Zealand's Alliance party splits

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At the beginning of April, the Alliance—the coalition partner in New Zealand's Labour-led government—formally split into two separate camps. The split, just seven months out from the general election, erupted after six months of internecine warfare, brought on by the rightward trajectory of the coalition government; in particular, its craven support for the US-led war in Afghanistan.

One faction centres around party leader and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Anderton and six MPs, who depict themselves as loyal to the government. On the other side is the Alliance governing body, the National Council, led by President Matt McCarten, claiming to represent the party rank-and-file. McCarten's faction has the support of three "left" MPs, including alternate leader-designate, Women's Affairs Minister Laila Harre.

Tensions within the Alliance first surfaced publicly last November, when an attempt was made at a party conference to revoke a unanimous decision by Alliance MPs to support the government's dispatch of SAS troops to Afghanistan. The debate was initially prompted by concerns that the Alliance was about to be outflanked on the "left" by the Greens, which voted against the move in parliament. A resolution demanding the Alliance oppose participation in the US-led war was narrowly defeated after intervention from key ministers, but the conference approved a watered-down motion to "review" the party's position. Anderton then announced that any review would be carried out under his control, and would not in any way be used to challenge government policy.

This set the scene for the eruption of infighting over control of the organisation and various personal and financial issues. After the conference, Anderton and his parliamentary faction stopped paying a portion of their salaries to the party organisation. The National Council responded by threatening to withdraw party endorsement for one of his key supporters, Corrections Minister Matt Robson, as a general election candidate.

A thoroughly farcical situation now prevails. Having engineered the split, Anderton has insisted on remaining leader of the majority Alliance faction within the government caucus until the current parliament is dissolved. In the meantime, he has announced he will launch a new party in May, six months before the elections are due. Along with deputy leader Sandra Lee, Anderton has already begun soliciting financial support for the as yet unnamed party through advertisements in the major newspapers.

For its part, the McCarten-Harre faction also remains part of the Alliance, committing itself to see out the parliamentary term and work with Labour in the interests of "stable" government. While controlling the party's governing bodies, the faction has explicitly ruled out any moves to expel or discipline the intending defectors. Following several days of negotiations, an amicable deal has been struck which will see the factions operate as two separate caucuses, while dividing up parliamentary funding and speaking time. The deal, announced by the two contending leaders on Tuesday at separate press conferences, commits both sides to continuing to support government and Alliance policies and to keep "public disagreements" to a "minimum".

Behind the sordid machinations lies the concern of both factions to prop up the Labour government and maintain the perks of office. To do so they must abide, at least formally, by the provisions of the Electoral Integrity Act.

The Act was passed last year in an attempt to restore a measure of stability to the parliamentary system. It was prompted by a string of defections from the minor parties, including the right-wing populist NZ First and the Alliance, during the previous government. The defections caused considerable public disgust, as MPs elected on a particular platform jumped ship and joined rival parties. In the last election campaign, the Labour Party promised legislation to prevent "party-hopping."

Fundamentally, the Act was designed to enhance the power of the party leaderships and ensure that MPs toed the party line. Any MP who resigns from the party for which he/she was elected, must also quit parliament. In addition, party leaders have the power to fire an MP if he/she is deemed to have distorted parliamentary "proportionality" by, for instance, consistently voting against a particular party policy. The leader simply needs to notify the speaker in writing that two-thirds of the party's caucus agree that such

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an MP must be sacked.

Under the Act, Alliance MPs from both factions must stay with the party or resign from parliament. At stake are not only their careers but access to party funds, control of mailing lists and parliamentary perks worth an estimated $848,000, all of which they intend to use to establish their respective new organisations.

Anderton has justified the split on the basis that the party's "lefts" have been incapable of adapting to the demands of a government he describes as "the best ... in a generation". In March, he tried to make a direct appeal to party members, sending out a letter asking them to respond to his strategy of taking a "constructive" role within the government. He claimed to have received over 2,000 messages from supporters tired of the "negativity" within the Alliance council towards the coalition. After refusing to attend the February National Council meeting, Anderton rounded on McCarten and the other councillors, telling them that if they wanted a "revolutionary party" they should quit the Alliance and go form one.

Once Anderton and his supporters leave, the Alliance will lose all its parliamentary seats unless it gains over 5 percent of the vote or wins one electorate at the next election. Anderton is currently the only Alliance MP who holds an electorate seat. All the others are "list" MPs who owe their positions to the popular vote—just over seven percent—won by the Alliance in the 1999 election.

The prospect of the demise of the main "left" party has caused considerable concern in sections of the political establishment. The *Sunday Star Times* on March 24 declared in an editorial headline that the Alliance schism was "bad for the country". According to the accompanying comment, the Alliance had made a "real difference" to the government. It listed some of the Alliance achievements as the establishment of the "people's bank", the promotion of a regional growth strategy and introducing a more "robust" form of paid parental leave than Labour would have carried through on its own.

Such comments underline the political basis of the Alliance's role within government. Far from being an alternative to Labour, it has acted to provide minor pieces of window-dressing while the government as a whole—including all the Alliance MPs—has continued to implement the demands of big business in domestic and foreign policy. The "lefts" duly participated, only expressing concern over government policies when they began to be challenged from the left by the Greens.

As a result, Alliance support has reportedly plunged to around two percent, less than the margin of error, while the Greens have consistently polled well above the five percent threshold needed to maintain a parliamentary presence. The Greens are thus positioning themselves to take over the role as the "left" buttress to Labour. Last week they received Prime Minister Helen Clark's own seal of approval, when Labour declared it would endorse Greens' leader Jeanette Fitzsimons for re-election.

The need for a left-wing cover is not hard to fathom. Labour, while pretending to represent the interests of the working class, has replaced the the National Party as the preferred party of the ruling elite. Over the past month, Clark has emerged from a number of international meetings—including the Commonwealth leaders' meeting in Australia and an audience with US president George Bush—having assured business and political leaders at home and abroad that Labour will stop at nothing to advance their interests.

Prior to Clark's visit to the White House, the first by a New Zealand Labour leader in nearly 30 years, the media expressed fears that the country's non-nuclear legislation and withdrawal from the ANZUS defence pact—both dating back to the mid-1980s—would hinder the harmonisation of relations with the US. However, Clark's assurances that Labour would fully support the US "war against terror", including its extension beyond Afghanistan, and that US warship visits might be permitted to resume, assured her of a warm reception from the Republican administration. She left Washington with a strong seal of approval from Secretary of State Colin Powell, who declared the two governments to be "very, very, very good friends".

The *Evening Post* was moved to editorialise: "Prime Minister Helen Clark's transformation from a leftie university lecturer who believed that American spooks tapped her phone into a Prime Minister welcome at a White House peopled by right-wing Republicans is complete... She has represented our interests with spirit and with care on the most important State visit she may make in her premiership."

Anderton, a businessman and former Labour Party president, quit Labour in 1989 in protest against state asset sales. To all intents and purposes he is now back in his political home. As for McCarten and the "lefts", their declaration of continued loyalty to Labour, whatever "differences" they may profess, speaks volumes about their real political orientation.

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