

Newman Weekly

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The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

MMP Referendum

Next week is the tenth anniversary of MMP, the Mixed Member Proportional voting system that was introduced as a result of a binding referendum in 1993. It was meant to deliver a better standard of government to New Zealand.

At the time MMP was introduced, the public was given a reassurance that once the new electoral system was bedded in, a further referendum could be held. A decade on, with four MMP elections now under our belts, I am interested in finding out how much public support there is for a follow up referendum on MMP.

The call for electoral reform that led to MMP had its origins in the disenfranchisement of minority groups locked out of Parliamentary representation. In 1975 election, both the Social Credit and Values Parties had found themselves in that situation in spite of attracting over 6 percent and 5 percent of the vote respectively.

As a result, both parties campaigned on proportional representation in the 1978 election with Social Credit winning 16 percent of the vote but gaining only one seat in Parliament. That election saw Labour, with 10,000 more votes than National, failing to win the Treasury benches because National had won 11 more seats.

The 1981 election saw Social Credit winning 20 percent of the vote but securing only two MPs, and Labour with 4,000 more votes than National again losing out because National had won four more seats.

With all of this fueling a perception that First Past the Post was denying fair representation, when Labour was elected in 1984 the Minister of Justice, Geoffrey Palmer, established a Royal Commission on electoral reform.

The Royal Commission examined our electoral system against ten criteria: effective voter participation, fairness between parties, effective Maori representation, effective representation of minorities and special interest groups, effective representation of constituents, political integration, effective government, effective parliament,

more effective parties, and legitimacy.

The Commission eventually recommended that New Zealand's voting system be changed from FPP to MMP but believed that the process should be through a binding referendum.

During the 1987 election campaign, Prime Minister David Lange promised that if Labour was re-elected there would be a binding referendum on MMP. However, instead of scheduling a referendum, a Select Committee review of the Royal Commission Report was instigated. Unsurprisingly, the Committee supported the retention of FPP but proposed that a referendum be held on the notion of electing extra MPs using the

Supplementary Member system. (The Supplementary Member voting system, used in Japan, Mexico and South Korea, combines FPP to elect constituency MPs and a proportional voting system to elect list MPs.)

The failure by Labour to implement a binding referendum on MMP led National's leader, Jim Bolger, to promise one in the 1990 election campaign. As a result an indicative referendum was held in 1992 followed by a binding referendum in 1993, which resulted in 1,032,919 New Zealanders voting in favour of MMP, and 884,964 voting for FPP.

Since significant public concern over such a major constitutional reform was inevitable, a provision was inserted into the 1993 Electoral Act to allow for a Select Committee to review MMP after two elections had been held, and decide whether a further referendum was needed. In particular, Section 264, "Review by select committee" states:

(1) The House of Representatives shall, as soon as practicable after 1 April 2000, appoint a select committee to consider the following matters: ... (c) whether there should be a further referendum on changes to the electoral system.

(2) The select committee appointed under subsection (1) shall report to the House of Representatives before 1 June 2002 and shall include in its report a statement indicating-

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-- ...(c) whether in its view there should be a further referendum on changes to the electoral system, and, if so, the nature of the proposals to be put to voters and the timing of such a referendum.

In setting up the MMP Review Committee in April 2000, the Labour Government invited all parties to participate: "In recognition of the constitutional significance of the review, it was agreed by the House that recommendations would only be made where there was unanimous or near-unanimous support for the recommendation".

On such a controversial issue consensus agreement was never likely and sure enough, the committee failed to reach a decision on a number of matters including whether or not MMP should be retained, and whether there should be another referendum to decide if we keep MMP.

The Government's response to the fact that the Committee could not make any recommendation on the need for a further referendum was as follows:

"The Government notes that changes to the voting system should not be made lightly, nor be too frequently embarked upon. The means by which New Zealanders elect their representatives to this House is at the heart of our democracy. New Zealand's decision in 1993 to adopt the MMP electoral system fundamentally changed the way in which Members of this House are elected. That decision signified a sea-change in our constitutional arrangements. The Government acknowledges the difficulty that the Committee had in reaching consensus on many of the major issues. The significance of the issues would clearly require a high level of consensus between the political parties to be reached before the Government

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could consider recommending any amendments. In addition, public attitudes would need to be taken into account. Changing any major constitutional arrangements would require a higher level of consensus from the public than currently appears to exist. In the absence of that high degree of consensus, the Government is of the view that it would not be appropriate to recommend any significant amendments at this time" (to read the Government's full response to the Report of the MMP Review Committee, see www.nzcpd.com).

With politicians and political parties having a strong self-interest in the format of our electoral system, surely it is their responsibility - in light of the widespread public expectation that there would be a further referendum on MMP - to ensure that it is the public (not the politicians) who determine New Zealand's future electoral arrangements.

Earlier this year, Peter Shirtcliffe, who led the campaign to oppose the introduction of MMP, made a submission to the Justice and Electoral Select Committee's Review of the 2005 election. In his submission, he suggested to the Committee that it would now be appropriate to hold the referendum on MMP expected by the public. Peter's submission is this week's NZCPD guest commentary (see www.nzcpd.com to view).

The poll this week asks for your feedback on whether you support the idea of holding a referendum on MMP. You are also invited you to ask others with an interest in this issue to vote in the poll as well.

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