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The issues that divide us: three recent books

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ABSTRACT

This essay reviews three recent books that address a range of policy issues currently affecting politics in Aotearoa New Zealand. Dominic O'Sullivan's *Sharing the Sovereign* illustrates how treaties between states and Indigenous peoples can provide the basis for power-sharing arrangements across various spheres of public policy. Paul Spoonley's *The New New Zealand* outlines the profound immigration-driven demographic changes experienced in recent decades and the failures of decision-makers to adjust to this new reality. Max Rashbrooke's *Too Much Money* analyses the issue of social class in New Zealand and the dangers of an apparently increasing class divide. The essay outlines some of these arguments in detail and evaluates each contribution to both scholarship and actual public policy debates as New Zealand arguably enters a more contentious political moment.

KEYWORDS

New Zealand; Aotearoa; public policy; politics; Treaty of Waitangi; Indigenous; social class; immigration

In September 2021, a year and a half into the Covid–19 pandemic and the closure of Aotearoa New Zealand's borders to most international travellers, former Prime Minister John Key described the country as a 'smug hermit kingdom', likening the Jacinda Ardern-led government's approach to managing the pandemic as 'the North Korean option' (Key 2021). This rhetoric was clearly hyperbolic and the comparison between an elected liberal democratic government working within the constraints of the rule of law and the personalist, nominally Communist, authoritarian regime of North Korea was ridiculous from the standpoint of political science. Yet Key's use of the term 'smug' to characterise New Zealand political culture touched a nerve with some political observers and commentators. Are we in danger of being overly sanguine about the state of our democracy? Could we possibly be accused of taking the stability of our liberal democracy for granted? While smug might be too harsh a term, it could be argued that, as a discipline, we have often emphasised the apparent strengths of our democratic institutions while downplaying their potential weaknesses.

This tendency, it could also be argued, goes back to the description of New Zealand politics as essentially pluralist, a conception which long dominated local political studies textbooks yet glossed over the possibility that strong political interests wield structural power or that power inequalities are a core feature of liberal democracy in Aotearoa (Miller 2015; Mulgan 1989). Celebrations of the country's consistently high rankings in annual lists such as the

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Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index or Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index abound (Daly 2022; Gillespie 2022; Radio New Zealand 2020). While there has, more recently, been greater acknowledgement of the role of colonisation in fundamentally shaping political culture and societal power relations, the narrative of New Zealand politics as being better and more stable than that of other parts of the world tends to remain. New Zealand does seem to have so far avoided the threats to democratic stability posed by the forms of populist extremism prevalent in Western Europe since the mid-1990s (Betz 1994) or associated with Trumpism in the United States and the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom (Vowles and Curtin 2020). Even our populist parties, represented by New Zealand First and occasionally the ACT Party, do not seem 'as bad' from the perspective of comparative politics and in terms of their anti-democratic tendencies as their North American and European counterparts (Donovan 2020). Especially in the case of New Zealand First, populist rhetoric has been reserved for the campaign trail and the politics of opposition, largely set aside once the party attained a share of power and negotiated largely centrist, somewhat centre-right statist policy positions.

Yet, as the recent experiences of other mature liberal democracies well illustrate, we should be extremely cautious about taking democratic stability for granted. Aside from the shock of the violence that accompanied the anti-Covid vaccine mandate protests in Wellington in early 2022, involving a very small, albeit highly motivated, fringe social movement, numerous difficult policy issues have the potential to deepen political and social divides. In fact, with the 2023 general election campaign in prospect, we seem to be headed into one of the more divisive and fractious political eras Aotearoa New Zealand has seen for some time, especially where political elites opt to campaign on wedge issues, including those touching on issues of race, ethnicity, and the rural-urban divide. Some of these issues are longstanding or ongoing in nature; others, though, appear to involve relatively new and inter-related policy problems of a complexity not faced by previous governments, including climate change and mitigation; intergenerational socio-economic inequality and its social and political implications; how to reflect the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi/Te Tiriti in health and education policy and in new forms of partnership and power-sharing; and the changing ethnic make-up of Aotearoa and the cultural and infrastructure pressures brought about by mass immigration, along with housing affordability and political clashes over urban densification.

Three recent books address themselves to one or more of these contemporary policy issues, with each text underlining the need to find pathways to resolution so that deepening cultural and social divisions that have the potential to spill over into political conflict can be avoided. These three contributions vary widely, however, in their disciplinary grounding and audience appeal, especially concerning the extent to which they present original theoretically-inclined academic contributions versus the degree to which they are aimed at a more general audience. Political Scientist Dominic O'Sullivan's *Sharing the Sovereign* is the most academically oriented and theoretically cohesive book of the three, presenting both a political theory of the role of treaties in managing relationships between Indigenous peoples and contemporary liberal democratic states along with a number of practical applications of this framework. Sociologist and demographer Paul Spoonley's *The New New Zealand* gives us an analysis of the implications of rapid demographic change for politics and society that clearly draws on his disciplinary expertise and yet appears to be pitched with a more general readership in mind. Investigative journalist

and long-standing observer of social inequality and the role of government in redistributing wealth, Max Rashbrooke, similarly addresses a general audience, with an analysis of class issues in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Too Much Money* utilises a range of data sources and draws on analyses from a range of disciplines, including economics, sociology, and cultural history.

Dominic O'Sullivan is one of the discipline's most prolific writers on issues of biculturalism, the rights of Indigenous peoples, and the relationship between political theory and Te Tiriti o Waitangi specifically. Based at Charles Sturt University, his many years teaching and writing in Australia no doubt strengthen his comparative perspective on Indigenous issues. *Sharing the Sovereign* works within this comparative tradition, beginning with recent efforts in Australia to recognise Indigenous peoples and for the colonial state to come to terms with itself. The 2017 *Uluru Statement from the Heart* proposed the establishment of an Indigenous representative body and a truth and reconciliation Commission that would oversee agreements between the state and Indigenous peoples. Evolving into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament, this limited but highly controversial institutional innovation is scheduled to be put by the Albanese government elected in 2022 to a nation-wide referendum in 2023. O'Sullivan then devotes the bulk of his book to illustrating how a Treaty might help frame these proposed institutions and processes, focussing especially on Aotearoa's experience in transforming our foundational document from a potential tool of oppression to one of potential recognition, inclusion, and most importantly, a genuine sharing of power.

Two inter-related features of O'Sullivan's writing on Indigenous issues are his profound optimism about the possibilities for improving the status and political participation of Indigenous peoples currently living under the rule of colonial states, and his faith that this can be achieved within the framework of liberal democracy. This approach to advancing the rights of Indigenous peoples does not reject the state, argue for its destruction, revolution, or indeed Indigenous secession from the larger entity, as some more radical voices have suggested. Rather, the goal is to achieve decolonisation while retaining the core institutional characteristics of a liberal democratic state. Yet this is an approach that is still radical in the sense that it asks us to see the advancement of Indigenous rights as an ongoing process and that will be continuously negotiated between Indigenous peoples and the state, and within the state itself. The political theory that underpins this approach draws on the challenge posed to traditional democratic theory by the 'multiculturalism debate' that emerged in the 1990s, centring on ideas as how to incorporate group rights into an increasingly atomised and individualised conception of democracy, and more especially around the concept of recognition (Kukathas 1992; Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1994). Much of this earlier literature tended to be dominated by writers in the Northern Hemisphere, so the distinctive Southern Hemisphere-located Indigenous perspective that O'Sullivan's extensive contributions have made to this field are very welcome.

The idea of seeking justice and recognition for Indigenous peoples as an ongoing, perhaps never-ending process may be a difficult message to sell to many New Zealand voters, who often see processes like those established by the Waitangi Tribunal as seeking a full and final solution so that the country can somehow 'move on' from its past. In fact, issues surrounding Indigenous voice and representation, expressed by the 2017–2022 Ardern-led government sometimes problematically as 'co-governance', have proven to be major source of political division and even social unrest in recent years. Initiatives such as

the teaching of Māori language and history in schools and the creation of Te Aka Whai Ora (Māori Health Authority) as part of a general move towards the centralisation of the health sector have proven to be controversial, but nothing compared to the backlash against the Three Waters legislation, which sought to centralise the management of water resources. While there were perhaps legitimate reasons to critique this legislation, especially from a local government perspective, the public backlash against Three Waters centred mainly on the so called ‘co-governance’ provisions of the legislation. The outcry against ‘co-governance’ in general, amounting to simply anti-Māori sentiment in many cases, led to a retreat from the concept by the Labour government, particularly under the Prime Ministership of Chris Hipkins following Ardern’s resignation in early 2023, as well as a ‘watering down’ of the Three Waters proposals themselves.

While much of the *Sharing the Sovereign* is pitched at a theoretical level, typical of O’Sullivan’s political theory the book then seeks to bridge the gap between pure political philosophy and real-world applications to contemporary policy problems. While Chris Hipkins admitted the Labour government had done a bad job of pitching the idea of co-governance in language and framing that the citizens of Aotearoa could understand and accept (Ensor 2023), perhaps O’Sullivan’s book provides useful tools for similar efforts in the future. In fact, large parts of the applied-theory sections of this book read as theoretically-underpinned justifications of some of the work already undertaken by governments to recognise Indigenous peoples, including the framing of treaties between the state and Indigenous peoples as a type of social contract, and the principles behind moves to self-determination in health policy, among other examples. Yet potentially the most useful contribution this book makes is that it offers a more hopeful kind of language through which to frame future policy discussions involving the relationship between state and Indigenous peoples. For those of us seeking to combat the populist idea that ‘giving in’ to Indigenous demands for recognition somehow locks us into a zero-sum game in which the rights of non-Indigenous individuals and communities ‘lose out’ to Indigenous ones, a possibility is contained right there in the book’s title. The idea of ‘sharing’ gives us a possible positive antidote to the negative rhetoric surrounding issues of co-governance, where the extension of group rights does not have to be at the expense of individual or majority rights.

Many of the conservative forces caught up in the current backlash against taking biculturalism seriously may also fear how rapidly Aotearoa is changing along other social dimensions, including, notably for the purposes of this review, increasing diversity caused by immigration. Distinguished Professor Paul Spoonley has long studied demographic change in New Zealand, especially that caused by migration, as well as the political forces opposed to the multiculturalism that results from these patterns. *The New New Zealand: Facing demographic disruption* was first published in 2020, then again in revised form in 2021, presumably to account for the impact of the Covid-19 related border closures on both outward but mainly inward migration flows. Overall, the book draws on Spoonley’s extensive academic knowledge of New Zealand society, but packages this in such a way that it can be easily absorbed by an undergraduate or general audience. In fact, much of the book serves as a primer on long-term as well as more recent demographic change in Aotearoa, most of which will be familiar to students of social history or sociology. Following the overview introduction, a further nine chapters are dedicated to this task, beginning with an introduction to the study of the demography itself, what kind of themes are considered important and

the types of data sources that experts draw on. Chapters three to ten are then arranged thematically along familiar lines, including family formation, the impact of falling birth rates, inward migration, the New Zealand diaspora, the decline of regional New Zealand vis-à-vis the possibly too-rapid growth of Auckland, the fact of an ageing population, and the intergenerational tension over issues of distribution, redistribution, fairness, and future well-being.

This solid and informative discussion, however, is slightly out of balance with the book's stated premise, which is that there is something approaching a demographic crisis in Aotearoa, or at least a crisis born out of government failures to plan for and adapt to a rapidly changing society fuelled in the main by a lack of domestic labour supply and an over-reliance on mass immigration. In fact, the book reads partly as a textbook outlining demographic change and challenges, and partly as a call to action, with Spoonley underlining especially in the beginning and concluding chapters how subsequent governments, both at local and national level, have failed to adequately consider the implications of such rapid change. In an interesting design choice from Massey University Press, a summary of the book's mission even appears (in identical font to the book's title) on its front cover, declaring: 'In 2030 there may be six million of us. One and a half million of us will be clustered in Auckland, dependent on migration, and worried about a shortage of workers. *We haven't planned for this. We need to*'. (Emphasis in the original). Yet the book mostly further outlines this challenge rather than seeking to provide complete policy solutions, with just five pages explicitly dedicated to the section of the book entitled 'What Next?'. In this chapter, the author outlines the need for a detailed national population policy, attention to the implications of the population imbalance between Auckland and the rest of the country, housing and welfare concerns in the context of an ageing population, the specific needs of Māori communities given the variation in demographic structure between Māori and the general population, and the needs for workforce planning given that so much inward migration is driven by local skills shortages and gaps in the labour market.

In a sense, none of these issues are new and most New Zealanders are not unaware of them, whether this is through the work of academics such as Susan St. John, who has written about the policy challenges associated with an ageing population for decades now (St John and Ashton 1993), consistent calls from employers to address labour shortages, or the experience of ordinary citizens grappling with the costs of living, driven in part by new and return immigration, or the enormous pressure on our public transport, roading and housing infrastructure. The difficulty, as it often is, is the lack of political will to make some of the radical changes required to address such problems. Political science, for its part, tends to richly describe, analyse, and explain the various dimensions of this political inability to address truly difficult policy challenges, but rarely puts itself in the position of recommending how to solve the problem of the unwillingness of elected officials to enact necessary policy change without alienating either the median voter on one hand or powerful vested interests on the other. Spoonley, too, raises this problem, asking the question as to who should take leadership in this policy sphere, and what processes might be used to address these concerns, but does not provide a specific answer, yet, to his own question (239). The public policy literature, and its recent focus on long-term strategies versus short-term thinking, might offer some particularly useful insights for the type of challenges Spoonley refers to (Boston 2016; González-Ricoy et al. 2016; Jacobs 2011).

The third volume to be reviewed also clearly speaks to similar issues of policy-making for the long term as well as those of intergenerational justice. Out of the three contributions to the policy debate, Max Rashbrooke's *Too Much Money* is most clearly addressed to a general, though informed, audience. Rashbrooke has been researching and writing about inequality in New Zealand for over a decade (Rashbrooke 2013, 2014, 2015), although this specific volume is more squarely organised around the concept of social class. This concept was once central to the discipline of sociology and applied frequently across the sub-field of political sociology to analyse topics such as voting behaviour, where 'occupation' or 'father's occupation' was a presumed predictor of various social and political attitudes and preferences (see Congalton 1953). Class has clearly given way to competing causes of social stratification over the past few decades (Taylor and Grey 2014), including gender, ethnicity, race, and migration status, as the result not only of social scientists becoming more aware of these sources of marginalisation, but also because the shift from industrial to finance (and in Aotearoa, service-based) capitalism, has made us all question the utility of the concept of social class. Rashbrooke makes a case here that class still matters, arguing that inequality is not just a new phenomenon in New Zealand, as is sometimes portrayed, but that recent rises in social inequality are overlaid on a structure of inherited wealth and disparities in access to education, property, business opportunities, and other steps on the road to becoming a member of the economic and social elite that are deeply ingrained in this country's colonial foundations. *Too Much Money* digs back into New Zealand's social history to show evidence of the persistence of class structures, explains why the author thinks inherited social position matters for well-being outcomes, and then provides evidence of the impact of class position on these outcomes over the course of several chapters.

In line with previous works, including his relatively recent *Government for the Public Good* (2018), Rashbrooke draws extensively and eclectically on overseas academic research, theorising, and evidence, before applying some of these ideas to the local context. In his main theoretical overview, Chapter One, the author draws heavily on Piketty's (2014) work on inequality, but also Sen's (1999) capabilities approach to well-being. He also reintroduces us to the concept of class in this chapter, although if this book were to be evaluated as a purely academic text, this seems a little theoretically underdeveloped. Rashbrooke references here classic modern sociologists such as Marx, Weber, and the French student of cultural capital Pierre Bourdieu, but also makes a number of popular culture references to underline that social class is not just about income and wealth, but also social and cultural status. A slightly more academic text would then likely move on to outline how Rashbrooke himself will operationalise the concept of class before rigorously applying it, but further conceptualisation and analysis of class is left until much later in the book. Chapter Seven 'Top of the Class: Sketching Social Structure' introduces some hard data outlining the contours of the country's wealthiest classes. Academic readers will also likely skip lightly over the personal story sections that accompany most of the chapters, in which Rashbrooke has interviewed a series of well-known and less well-known New Zealanders about their life experiences, although the connection between these vignettes and the main chapter they are attached to are not explicitly spelled out and are not always immediately obvious.

A strictly academic treatment of the subject of social class in Aotearoa is, however, probably not the main objective of Rashbrooke's contribution. That might be for

others to take up, reminding us to think about how the concept of class might be updated for twenty-first analysis of politics and society. Not only does the book appear to be aimed at convincing a general readership that class both still exists and still matters, but much like Paul Spoonley's book discussed above, lays down a challenge, asking us as a society and as potential participants in the policy-making process what we will do to combat the entrenchment of class. Rashbrooke's recommendations for what to do to meet this policy challenge are more explicit and concrete than Spoonley's recommendations regarding population and immigration policy, including a section on 'five ideas for fairness' comprising a Kids Kiwisaver scheme that would start with an initial government contribution as a baseline; specific entrepreneurship policies that encourage the less privileged into positions of business ownership; ensuring greater wage equality through a restoration of collective bargaining; incentives to introduce a culture of secure rental and state housing where property ownership is not possible; and the introduction of a wealth tax, whether this is done through a capital gains tax and/or other measures. Some of these specific policy proposals for ameliorating the impact of inherited wealth and class status have previously been put on the country's policy agenda, yet found to be difficult or impossible to get over the political line. The kind of capital gains tax proposed then dropped by the Jacinda Ardern government, or any form of wealth tax for that matter, have proven extremely difficult to sell to both coalition parties and the general public. Fair Trade Agreements, designed to reduce wage inequality and enacted under the same government, were first weakly supported and then fiercely resisted by organised business – problematic in an employment relations system that relies heavily on good faith and voluntary cooperation. For political scientists, it remains a near-impossible task to imagine how to shift public opinion, or perhaps more importantly, interest group fixed positions, so significantly on such key issues.

Max Rashbrooke's contribution is powerful, however. Furthermore, it is important from the perspective of the discipline of political science, not so much in its measurement or description of class in New Zealand, but rather in underlining the implications of class divisions for social cohesion in what appears to be an increasingly divided Aotearoa. In contrast to the author's previous works on inequality, which tended to emphasise the link between poverty and inequality, this volume specifically addresses itself to the problem of the existence of a moneyed, propertied, and socially privileged local elite. Indeed, having too much money is rarely seen as a problem in New Zealand, where national newspapers regularly publish 'success' stories of young entrepreneurs buying rental houses, never mind, as Rashbrooke points out, that this success is more often than not attributable to the 'bank of Mum and Dad' rather than hard work. The problem of too much money lies not only in the fact that it may mean that some sectors of society are indeed materially worse off, but also potentially that it helps create a society in which shared experiences, understandings, and common worldviews, are increasingly seen as a thing of the past. At its worst, this can lead to what communications and journalism experts have termed 'fragmented realities' (Hameleers 2021), enhanced by social media and at its most dangerous for democracy, disinformation and misinformation, which preys on pre-existing social divisions and their associated divergent cultural and political narratives.

In summary, all three books discussed in this review raise difficult, long-term, and intergenerationally complex policy issues that have the potential to divide Aotearoa

further over the next few electoral cycles. Difficult, because addressing this range of policy problems involves governments being bold in the face of entrenched societal and economic interests. Long-term, because they demand significant structural shifts that defy the short-termism associated with governments, hoping to be re-elected, shying away from making hard, likely unpopular choices. In the Aotearoa context, some of these institutional and electoral difficulties are even more acute not only due to the particularly short-term nature of our three-year electoral cycle but, well beyond that, the perpetuation of an elite political culture that is still largely majoritarian in nature, with bipartisan policy commitments between the two largest political parties remaining extremely rare indeed. Intergenerational, not only because serious issues of intergenerational justice are at stake, but also because problems such as the basic orientation of the economy and the class system rising out of it, redesigning housing and welfare policies for a new New Zealand, the forging of national identity, decolonisation, and coming to terms with ourselves as a multicultural country, all require shifts in the wider culture that are unlikely to be fully realised for some decades. With hope in those future generations, as well as deliberate long-term planning, perhaps we can ultimately begin to address some of the issues that divide us.

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