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**Machinations and Maneuverings:  
Pre-Election Utterances in the New Zealand MMP Elections.**

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**Abstract**

New Zealand has not yet experienced the type of pre-election coalition formations that have been practiced in some other parliamentary democracies. Yet, there have been occasions where individual parties have signalled their unambiguous preference for a coalition partner based on a desired electoral result. Some parties have also clearly stated that they will not form a coalition with a particular party or parties. It would be expected that pre-election signals could be safely relied upon to predict post-election arrangements. A selection of pre-election events, indicators, arrangements and manoeuvrings of the post-MMP elections have been chosen to demonstrate the impact each case study had upon government formations. The position taken by NZ First, in 1996, is contrasted with those taken by the Alliance and Labour parties. Important lessons were learnt, by both Labour and the Alliance, in time for the 1999 election and both parties engaged in a manner which saw them successfully form a new government. During the 2002 and 2005 elections, most parties communicated strong messages indicating their most and their least preferred post-election partners. This paper is part of a wider PhD study on NZ coalitions that is being undertaken by the author. The case studies illustrate the difficulties faced by all parties in maintaining their individual identity and, at the same time, conveying an impression of cooperation and stability. The events outlined in this paper demonstrate that some form of pre-election agreement or electoral coalition is increasingly been reached. The indications are that there is a high level MMP adaptation in the centre but the general voting public appears to have yet to learn to correctly identify the parties' pre-election signals. It remains to be seen whether voters can correctly interpret whether parties pre-election stances transform into a post-election quick-step or perhaps a sly shuffle.

**Introduction**

It stands to reason that if politicians are motivated, into forming or terminating governments, by the perquisites of office or the ability to influence policy, then they might form electoral coalitions for similar reasons. These pre-election arrangements could also be construed to be part of an electoral strategy. Politicians would be

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unlikely to announce their coalition intentions with another party if they predicted that such an arrangement would cost the party electoral support. However, they might anticipate an increase in votes if the electorate approved of a particular potential coalition government. Such an increase in votes would provide extra post-election leverage with the coalition partner. The level of each party's negotiating currency would vary according to the outcome of the election.

Since the introduction of MMP in 1996, post-election outcomes have often produced as many surprises for the New Zealand public as the dynamics of the election struggles themselves. Political scientists attempting to predict likely coalition formations might assess a number of indicators. As well as policy dimension analysis, pre-election signals might be relied upon as safe guidelines to post-election arrangements. These signals would manifest themselves in many forms but the most reliable should be party leaders' favourable or unfavourable comments about other parties and their leaders. Although the Labour and Alliance parties expressed unambiguous preference during the 1999 election campaign, ambitions were not so transparent during the first MMP election held in 1996. The 2002 election saw Labour communicate a clear intention to include Jim Anderton in the next cabinet. This was in direct contrast to the Greens' intransigence over genetically modified organism issue. The Greens strong stance ensured their self-exclusion from the future government. In sharp distinction to previous elections, the 2005 campaign included a series of almost theatrical episodes as some party leaders adopted strange tactics to convey their particular electoral desires to the wider public. New Zealand's brief history of proportional representation indicates that such utterances made in the heat of a campaign have not always been accurate indicators of post-election positions. Parties will often seek to convey messages about possible coalitions that they think will be in their best electoral interests.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

Three main motivating categories have been advanced to enhance the accuracy of predicting the types of coalition that might form: office-seeking, policy-seeking, and vote-seeking. Politicians possessed not just office-seeking motives but also desired to achieve policy wins (de Swaan, 1973; Laver & Budge, 1992; Laver & Schofield, 1990; Strom & Muller, 1999). In fact, policy positions might be expected to form the very basis of difference (and cohesion) between political parties.

Policy positions are one of the many tools that politicians used to increase votes and win elections. Vote-seeking is instrumental because votes themselves do not possess any intrinsic value (Downs, 1957, p. 28; Strom & Muller, 1999). The value of a vote lies in its use as a form of currency to obtain either office or policy objectives or both. Politicians need to maximise votes to achieve their goals. The more votes that a party wins the more negotiating power it possesses. Therefore, politicians would have to consider the impact of any pre-election communication on their potential vote.

Bale, Boston and Church (2005), considered that formal models of government formation failed to foretell coalitions "in the real world". Instead, Bale et al., (2005) used the theory of path dependency when assessing the formation of the 1999 Labour/Alliance coalition government. Bale et al., (2005) concluded that pre-election pacts are "relatively good indicators" of subsequent government formation. The more resources parties invested in the pre-election process, the greater the incentive to

ensure that the agreement worked. It can be assumed that pre-election agreements are accurate predictors of government formation.

Sona Golder (2006) developed several hypotheses that are useful to assist in determining the effect of electoral coalitions. Golder identified varying types of coalition agreements or pacts. These pre-election arrangements ranged from highly formalised accords to loose arrangements. Such covenants might include non-aggression deals and announcements of post-election working arrangements.

Golder (2005) devised a definition of electoral coalitions as “a collection of parties that do not compete independently in an election either because they publicly agree to coordinate their campaigns, run joint candidates or joint lists, or govern together following the election”. Golder (2005) qualified this definition by employing two criteria that were “both objective and observable”.

The first criterion was that the arrangements must be stated publicly. This aspect was considered to be important because one of the main imperatives for forming pre-election coalitions was to influence voter behaviour. The second criterion was that members of a pre-election agreement were prevented from campaigning as independent identities. Golder included in this category those parties that had quite loose election strategies recognising that election strategies can appear in a number of different guises. For example, parties that announced an intention to form a coalition after the election were deemed to have agreed to a joint election strategy. The position of the Alliance and Labour in 1999 could be included in this definition. Although both parties campaigned separately there was a non-aggression pact as well as agreement on post-election arrangements. Golder (2005) also included those intentions that were announced by only one partner but were not endorsed or rejected by the other party. Two common links were identified between the different forms of pre-election arrangements. The first was that parties “never compete in elections as truly independent entities. The second is that “the coordination of party strategies is made public” (Golder, 2005).

Golder’s definition has been used in the case studies, to assess whether pre-coalition announcements are interpreted as electoral coalitions. The public expectation can affect the way electors cast their vote in both that and subsequent elections. Therefore, all types of signalling comments by party leaders, as well as pacts and agreements need to be included for the purposes of assessing the reliability of predicting post-election positions. The case studies indicate that the public did interpret intention from party leaders’ statements about their coalition intentions.

Politicians that have made public declarations about desired coalition partners are also apt to condemn or state very clearly, those parties with which they reject. However, there were no pre-election pacts prior to the 1999 general election. The 1996 coalition between National and NZ First could not have been predicted using path dependency theories; a point readily acknowledged by Bale et al., (2005). While research indicates that pre-coalition announcements and arrangements have a positive influence on the post-election government formation potential, it is not so clear about the less formal but nonetheless equally deliberate public utterances.

Voters in a proportional electoral system are increasingly choosing a government composition rather than a single party (Aimer & Vowles, 2004). Path dependency theory is a useful tool for assessing *how* pre-electoral accommodations and discussions translate into post-election arrangements (Bale et al., 2005). Similarly, Muller and Strom's (1999) arguments, centred on motives for forming inter-party arrangements and provide an acceptable theoretical base for analysing *why* such events occurred. However, neither theory fully tests the veracity of the signals party leaders might send to the electorate.

### **Electoral Coalitions as Signalling Devices**

Golder (2005) identified three main reasons why pre-election arrangements are treated as signalling devices: (i) to signal the ability and willingness to form an effective government coalition, (ii) to signal the actual identity of a potential government as transparently as possible, and (iii) to signal the relevant parties' desires to party members and voters to enable them to have a greater role in government rather than just preferred party selection (Golder, 2005).

It has been more common to signal the identity of potential coalition governments. The intention of signalling was to accurately and unambiguously identify post-election governments to voters. Risk-averse voters can then cast their ballot in the knowledge that they are helping to select a government rather than wait until after the election for a risky formation process to conclude (Golder, 2005).

Golder's (2005) final component of the signalling argument was that party leaders encouraged voters to have a greater say in the composition of the government. If voters were unaware of potential coalition partners and only voted for individual parties, then they left the formation process entirely in the hands of the parties. In these cases, the resultant government became a complete lottery as far as the voter was concerned. Signalling of potential coalition partners has been one way of assisting voters to 'own' the election outcome.

The value to parties of pre-election coalitions lies in the potential to gain a greater share of the votes. The value to voters of announcing pre-election arrangements lay in the reliability that such signalling, if successful, translated into a post-election government. If such a signalled government is not formed then it is reasonable to assume that the particular parties would lose the trust of the electorate. In other words, people would be unlikely to cast a future vote for parties that mislead the public (Bale et al., 2005; Golder, 2005).

### **The Methods Used**

This research triangulated three different methods in this study: semi-structured interviews, primary document content analysis and participant observation. These three methods were particularly suited to the research as they provided a means of extracting rich data from an otherwise 'closed world' of the political system. The purpose of using the three research methods was to provide for sophisticated rigor.

An analysis was carried out on primary documents including recorded information that is available from the 45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> Parliaments. These papers related to the key political actors of the period, decisions made and processes followed or amended as well as speeches and media releases.

Key informants were vital contributors to this research. These particular respondents were needed to gain unique perspectives of phenomena that I was not able to observe as a participant. The key informants included MPs, officials and party officers who possessed knowledge about those party systems and sub-systems that I was unable to access. As such, their insights were important to assist me in gaining a full understanding of events as well as helping to validate other findings.

### **The 1996 NZ First/National Government**

The 1996 National/NZ First government formation was controversial. The general expectation was that NZ First would form a coalition with Labour (J. Vowles, Aimer, Banducci, & Karp, 1998). However, the coalition agreement was signed with the National Party after two months of NZ First negotiators haggling between National and Labour spokespeople. The formation process was greeted with dismay by many, particularly because of the pre-election stance taken by NZ First leader, Winston Peters and other of his party's MPs. Voters' apprehensions were triggered both by their expectations as well as their preferences.

It appears that Winston Peters embarked on classic vote-seeking behaviour as outlined by Muller and Strom (1999). Peters, mindful of National's increasing unpopularity, deliberately raised the electorate's expectations that NZ First would support forming a coalition with Labour rather than National. These hopes were at least partly created as a result of Peters' speeches and behaviour. For some time, Peters had been attacking National's record and lambasting New Zealand corporate business community (Kerr, 1998; New Zealand Parliament, 1996a; J. Vowles et al., 1998). Just prior to the 1996 election (20 August), Peters attacked National as being traitors. He went further and stated in Parliament that the National Party Prime Minister, Jim Bolger, should not even bother to phone Peters after the election as he was "not fit for the job" and would be "out" (New Zealand Parliament, 1996b).

Peters and his deputy continued to pour scorn on both the major parties but refused to confirm his preferred coalition partner and many of his actions created confusion in the voters' minds. Peters appeared to express greater vitriol towards National than Labour, calling National and its stated potential coalition partners, ACT and the Christian Coalition, "the toxic trio" (Laugesen, 1996). Furthermore, Peters stated that "There's only one party that can bust National this election and you're looking at it," (Laugesen, 1996). Writer, Bruce Jesson (1997) reported on a NZ First meeting that he attended where Winston Peters "stated categorically that there would be no coalition with National". The comment was later denied by Peters when it was raised during a television interview.

The end result of these public utterings by Peters was an expectation of a Labour-NZ First coalition after election night 1996. Following the election, Peters told his supporters that it was a time for cool heads, patience and leadership, not a time for settling old scores (Burdon, 1996). Such comments indicate that Peters had an inkling that he might have to deal with the National Party. While Winston Peters might have been playing both of the major parties off against each other with "practised deftness", most observers seemed to consider that he had publicly indicated that the Labour Party was his preferred option (J. Vowles et al., 1998, p. 121). A poll of

voters' coalition preferences showed that NZ First's supporters were dismissive of a National-NZ First coalition (J. Vowles et al., 1998). The resulting decision of NZ First to form a government with National left many NZ First members with a feeling of betrayal and undermined public confidence in the new government (Miller, 1998).

NZ First was the only small party to rise in the polls closer to the election. Most of the NZ First support seemed to come from Labour's three point slide. Labour leader Helen Clark beat off a leadership challenge in late May. The attempted coup might have been sparked by Labour's poor performance and helped NZ First increase its lead in the next NBR poll to 30 percent (Hunt, 1996b; Small, 1996). Peters' polling was also attributed to a number of populist stances and policies that were in direct opposition to National's policies (Hunt, 1996b). NZ First's polls peaked in May and started to decline in late June and continued into the election period (Hunt, 1996a, 1996c). However, the dramatic poll rise indicated, amongst other things, a major level of support for a party that opposed the National Party's policy direction.

Polling also indicated a "clear preference for a coalition involving Labour" (J. Vowles et al., 1998). Forty-four percent of NZ First voters preferred a Labour-NZ First or a Labour-NZ First -Alliance coalition (J. Vowles et al., 1998). Only 13 percent of NZ First voters wanted a coalition with National. The Vowles' survey results showed that there was a wide expectation and desire both before and after the election that Labour would be the senior partner in any coalition. At the same time, few National voters wanted a National-NZ First coalition government (J. Vowles et al., 1998).

As the election approached Winston Peters was questioned more and more about his preferred coalition partner. The protest vote switched to serious consideration of NZ First as a major player in government once the party increased its poll to second place. Peters was equivocal and conveyed mixed messages. The electorate became distrustful and wary as National supporters became suspicious that Peters preferred Labour. Labour voters were also nervous that Peters would coalesce with National and NZ First support ebbed away to such an extent that the party fell to third place by election night. Nonetheless, NZ First's electoral achievement was considerable having risen in only three years from nothing to a major party in New Zealand's Parliament.

Many voters felt betrayed after the formation process of 1996 when, against public expectations, NZ First formed a coalition government with National (J. Vowles et al., 1998, p. 121; Wilson, 2002). In contrast, the Alliance was particularly keen to ensure that voters knew that their preferred coalition partner was the Labour Party (The Alliance, 1996, p.4). A major aspect of this position was to encourage voters to cast their ballot in favour of a government rather than a party.

### **The Alliance and Labour Parties in 1996**

Where NZ First was evasive about its preferred coalition partner the Alliance was emphatic. Prior to the 1996 election, Alliance leader Jim Anderton made several overtures to Labour but these were spurned by Helen Clark. Clark found some of the Alliance's policy demands too restricting. As a result, Labour and the Alliance were unable to reach any agreement by Election Day 1996, a situation that hindered their chances of forming the next government.

The Alliance party recognised that when in government, it would need to cooperate with other parties in order to pass legislation (The Alliance, 1996). Mindful of the sense of policy betrayal felt by voters over previous Labour and National governments, the Alliance considered that any policy compromises should be transparent to the electorate (Bunkle, 1994; The Alliance, 1996; J. Vowles et al., 1998). The Alliance (1996, p.4) considered that “any policy agreement be announced to the voters before the election” and that “potential coalition partners also be announced to the public”. The Alliance (1996, p.4) announced its own coalition direction stating that it would “...not support a National Party Government”. As well as announcing its coalition bottom-line, the Alliance also specified its policy bottom-lines.

Labour firmly rejected several advances made by the Alliance (Hunt, 1995). The Alliance leader, Jim Anderton was reported as approaching Labour three or four times for coalition talks but “the Labour Party has said to get lost until after the election” (Hunt, 1995). Clark was reported as predicting that there would be talks between Labour and the Alliance but there would not be an agreement before the election (Waikato Times, 1994). Helen Clark also considered the Alliance’s policy stance was designed to deliberately keep it out of coalition “so that it could retain its purist minority status” (Riddell, 1994). Whatever the reasons, the inability of the parties to reach an agreement precluded the possibility of a centre-left government until the 1999 election.

In an attempt to initiate coalition talks, Anderton softened his non-negotiable policy stance<sup>2</sup>. The leader of the Alliance announced that the two parties could agree to disagree on fundamental policy points. The Alliance still wished to retain the right to speak out on issues if it was out-voted by a larger coalition partner (Laugesen, 1995a). Anderton continued to press Labour for coalition discussions prior to the election. Helen Clark continued to reject Anderton’s calls right up until the election saying at one point that “he has a viper up his sleeve” (Laugesen, 1995b). Clark took this position despite a large proportion of Labour voters preferring a Labour-Alliance coalition (J. Vowles et al., 1998).

Anderton maintained that his purpose was to try and deliver something to the Alliance’s supporters and the policy stance was not a coalition negotiating tactic (Anderton, 2005). The public had voted for an MMP system partly because they felt betrayed by previous Labour and National governments. Voters desired consensus politics and considered possible coalition combinations, but seemed to reject any hardline stances. The Alliance’s position was rejected by both Labour and the voters.

### **The Labour/Alliance Dance of 1999.**

The experiences of the 1996 general election helped shaped political attitudes for the 1999 election. Hard political lessons on coalition negotiations had been learnt by both Labour and the Alliance in time for the 1999 election. An Alliance post-1996 election review concluded that the Alliance had “badly misjudged their stance on the coalition” and had “marginalised itself from government” (Alliance Election Review Committee, 1997, p. 14). The committee recommended that a public virtue be made

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<sup>2</sup> NZ First did not learn from the Alliance’s experience in 1996 and leading up to the 1999 election Winston Peters announced a “non-negotiable bottom line” of four policies (Peters, 12 May 1999,).

of the Alliance's stance on coalitions and to continue to explore partnership opportunities in the lead up to the next election. Further, a decision was made to reposition the Alliance in such a way that it could exert significant influence on and be part of a coalition government (Alliance Election Review Committee, 1997, p. 24-5). Both the Labour and the Alliance parties met, held discussions, and signalled their coalition intentions well before the 1999 election. Helen Clark was invited to and attended the Alliance's annual conference held in Auckland, in 1998. Anderton had a very clear view to play a role in government (Anderton, 2005). The Alliance's strong policy-seeking behaviour was modified so as to attract votes and gain office.

While Labour and the Alliance did not enter into bilateral arrangements, there were clear policy modifications on both sides to make them more acceptable to each other (Jonathan Boston & Church, 2000). The Alliance dropped its twelve point non-negotiable policies and adopted a more conciliatory stance with Labour (Anderton, 2005).

Both Labour and the Alliance were dismayed they had missed out on government in 1993 and that disappointment was compounded by the events of 1996. The events of 1996 incentivised the parties to develop relationships with potential coalition partners. It was apparent from experiences of the 1996-99 Parliament that it was unlikely that one party was going to govern alone. The government benches and their supporting parties were in disarray and Labour and the Alliance decided to exploit this disorder (Miller, 2002).

One in two Labour voters preferred a coalition government, and by the 10<sup>th</sup> November 1999 support had peaked at nearly 35 percent for a Labour-Alliance coalition (Miller, 2002). Labour and the Alliance entered into a cooperative arrangement and presented "a more united front" to the public (Jonathan Boston & Church, 2000, p. 233). Regular informal meetings were held between senior members of both parties who adopted a more conciliatory approach in the House leading up to the 1999 election. MPs in the House discussed strategy and there were regular meetings, between key advisers to Helen Clark and Jim Anderton, to develop understandings that would guide the transitional process. Although, the parties did not sign formal agreements they made a commitment to implicit understandings (Jonathan Boston & Church, 2000, p. 233).

The parties developed broad understandings of managing the pre-election and immediate post-election period. There were four main areas that focussed more on process rather than policy. Parties were to avoid personal criticism including attacks on each other's political record or policy positions. A no-surprises policy was agreed to as well as a commitment to close communication on policy announcements. Finally, a timetable was to be developed for government formation and post-election negotiations and coalition management. Part of this arrangement was an agreement that no other party would be part of the coalition deal without "prior consultation and mutual agreement" (Jonathan Boston & Church, 2000, p. 235). Post-election ministerial positions would be allocated according to general proportionality principles. The parties also recognised that each had the ability to campaign separately on policy platforms but they agreed to avoid promoting policy positions that were so different that they created tensions. The arrangements were an example of an electoral accommodation as defined by Golder (2005).

There was early recognition by Labour and Alliance strategists that their respective election campaigns had the potential to harm the other party. Any damage would risk handing the election to the Opposition. Unlike other parties, Labour and the Alliance decided against any electorate accommodations.<sup>3</sup> . However, an agreement was reached on campaign strategy. Labour asked that the Alliance not campaign on an exact formula for splitting the vote. Any other tactic to secure the party vote was perfectly acceptable. But, it was considered misleading to try to convince Labour voters that splitting their vote was the only way to guarantee a coalition. In return, the Alliance's advisor asked that Labour not campaign with the slogan that 'the only way to get rid of National was to cast both votes for Labour'. Agreement was reached. Further, part of the 'understandings' was that if there was a breach the 'victim' would try to ensure that there was no immediate retaliation. This was specifically designed to stop an escalation of reprisals that would electorally damage both parties by showing that they could not solve their problems - especially between the leaders.

Labour surprised the Alliance in the last few days of the campaign by suddenly campaigning very strongly on the slogan "the only way to defeat National is to double-vote Labour". Senior Alliance members considered Labour's tactics as specifically damaging to the Alliance, as well as being in breach of what was thought to be an 'understanding'. The Alliance attributed their subsequent poll drops from about 12 percent to about 8 percent (and Labour's rising polls) to Labour's actions in the last few days before the election (Jack Vowles, 2002).<sup>4</sup> Both parties' actions exhibited strong office-seeking behaviour. Labour campaigned for single-party majority status and the Alliance lost votes but attained the government benches. However, the lack of trust was to haunt the coalition government and eventually contribute to the break-up of the Alliance and an early election in 2002.

### **Labour/Progressive Coalition Minority Government**

When the Prime Minister announced an early election polls indicated that Labour could win a majority single party government (Church, 2003; J Vowles, 2004). Helen Clark called the election on June 11<sup>th</sup> 2002, four months earlier than anticipated. By June 23<sup>rd</sup> Labour's support briefly ducked below the 50 per cent line and subsequently recovered to touch almost 55 per cent by July 1<sup>st</sup>. However, a number of damaging events including 'paintergate' and 'corngate' caused Labour's polling to steadily decline.<sup>5</sup> There was a last minute partial recovery to 41.3 per cent on election day (J Vowles, 2004).<sup>6</sup> The initial polls contributed to Labour developing a high level of confidence over the potential election-day results. The subsequent lower polling and damaging publicity were factors that encouraged Labour strategists to adopt aggressive positions towards the Green and NZ First parties.

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<sup>3</sup> Closer to the election, Alliance candidate Phillida Bunkle did withdraw from the Wellington Central race, leaving the seat to a straight contest between Act NZ and Labour.

<sup>4</sup> I have checked my understanding of this sequence of events with Jim Anderton's former Chief of Staff, Andrew Ladley who was responsible for formulating the original understandings, and for advice on this particular event, and he had no objections to it.

<sup>5</sup> Clark was accused of fraudulently signing a painting that had been placed in a charity auction. National leader, Bill English severely criticised her on 7 July after a police report was made public. In a second incident Clark and her government were accused of a cover-up over the inadvertent release of genetically modified seeds. This issue was aired on TV3 on 10<sup>th</sup> July followed the next day by a book release on the issue.

<sup>6</sup> Election Day was 27<sup>th</sup> July 2002. Labour's party vote was 38.7 per cent.

Soon after Parliament had risen for the election, Helen Clark indicated that she would welcome the Progressives as coalition partners. The Progressives had requested that Clark make it clear that former Alliance leader Jim Anderton would be back in cabinet, regardless of the election outcome.<sup>7</sup> The announcement conveyed a message of continuity and respect for a valued coalition relationship, rather than Labour saying it wanted total parliamentary domination. Clark agreed and indeed all the rest of the parties' 'understandings' played out as arranged (NZPA, 2002a)

But Clark would not confirm Jim Anderton back in his role as Deputy Prime Minister saying that it would "depend on the strength of his party" (Luke, 2002; Waikato Times, 2002). Clark went further to declare repeatedly that the Progressives were the only party that she wished to include in any coalition after the election (J Boston & Church, 2003; Waikato Times, 2002). If the two parties could not form a majority government, Clark preferred a supporting arrangement with other parties as necessary.

The costs to Labour of a coalition deal with the Progressives were minor. Jim Anderton was keen to continue in the demanding role of Minister of Economic and Regional Development. The addition of the Progressives to a Labour Cabinet, even if the arithmetic showed that they were surplus to a majority, indicated a willingness to operate in the MMP environment of constructive cooperation and stability. This aspect was increasingly important given both Anderton's conflict with his former Alliance party members and Clark's conflict with the Greens.

A bitter rift developed between the Labour MPs and the Green Party over a genetically modified organism policy (GMOs). The Greens made a number of public statements threatening not to support a Labour-led government after the election if the impending government lifted a moratorium on GMOs (Fitzsimons, 2002a, 2002b; Mold, 2001).

However, the Greens soon recognised that their stubbornness was costing them votes. The Greens 'clarified' their position only a week out from the election. Green Co-leader Rod Donald announced that the Greens were willing to support a Labour-led government outside of a coalition and give them "confidence" (Wilson, 2002). This confidence would only last until the decision was made on the GMO moratorium (due in October 2003). In turn, Clark's position appeared to become increasingly accommodating towards the Greens.

Clark seemed to anticipate the inevitability of having to develop relationships with parties that might support an increasingly likely minority government. Although, Labour ran an anti-Greens advertising campaign in the last week of the campaign Clark advised National Radio that she would look to the Greens for support (NZPA, 2002b). While Labour's attitude towards the Greens softened, there was no thawing in the relationship with NZ First. Peters' party remained unpopular with the voters and any deal was likely to cost Labour electoral support.

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<sup>7</sup> The Progressive Coalition was formed from the members of the Alliance that stayed with Jim Anderton upon the Alliance's break-up. The Progressive Coalition later became known as the 'Progressives' for Parliamentary purposes.

Early on in the campaign, Clark identified two other issues that caused Labour to dismiss NZ First as a likely coalition partner: NZ First's immigration policy and Labour's experience in trying to negotiate a deal with Peters after the 1996 election (Peters, 2002). However, NZ First's polls lifted in the last week of the campaign assisted by Labour's attacks on the Greens (Johansson, 2003; J Vowles, 2004). The polling increases of both NZ First and Peter Dunne's United party led commentators to speculate on the possibility of a "Grand Coalition" of "National, NZ First, United and Act" (Venter, 2002). Polling also indicated that more NZ First's supporters preferred the party to enter into a coalition with National rather than with Labour (Small, 2002). The "Grand Coalition" idea was firmly rejected by Peters and Act's leader Richard Prebble (NZPA, 2002d; Tunnah, 2002). Clark also waded into the debate after being silent for a few days and firmly rejected Peters as a possible coalition partner (Small, 2002).

Although, Clark still had one eye on a majority coalition government she also considered the possibility of a minority government from a week out from election-day. Labour and the Green Party started to slip in the polls. But the fortunes of another minor party, Peter Dunne's United Future were climbing (J Vowles, 2004). Clark expressed a willingness to consider Dunne as a coalition partner. In turn, Dunne communicated a readiness to support a Labour minority government (Mold & Armstrong, 2002; Venter, 2002).

However, the new relationship between Labour and Dunne almost immediately started to wobble. Labour MPs were publicly split over their ability to work with United Future (Browne, 2002). The Greens also raised concerns about a Labour-United Future coalition. Fitzsimons thought that given Dunne's voting record and lack of policy bottom-lines, people may as well just vote for Labour (NZPA, 2002c). In response, Dunne maintained that he had not ruled out working with National. Dunne advised people to wait and see what the election results were and depending on the final figures could talk to either National's English or Labour's Clark (NZPA, 2002c).

The final arrangement saw a formal minority coalition between Labour and the Progressives. United Future, whose policy dimension was further from Labour's than the Green's, provided a confidence and supply agreement to the government in exchange for some policy wins. The government entered into a unique 'cooperation agreement' with the Greens. The Green party provided the necessary votes on some key policy areas that United Future did not support. Later, the coalition government had to rely on NZ First to enact the Foreshore and Seabed Bill when it could not gain support from either the Greens or United Future. Although the combination of support agreements necessitated numerous complex negotiations and extra liaising on House processes it enabled the government to continue full term.

### **2005 Election**

The Green Party became more office-seeking in the lead-up to the 2005 election. Although the Greens held strongly to their position over the GM moratorium they grew tired of playing a support role and some members looked forward to holding ministerial portfolios (Taylor, 2003). Green Co-leader Rod Donald considered that having only one minister in government "wouldn't be enough. We would want two," (Butler, 2005). But, after their conflict with Labour over the GM issue, they needed to signal their coalition aspirations to the public early on in the 2002-2005 Parliament.

The Greens started the process of convincing the public that despite their differences with Labour they were capable of working together. The Greens were also convinced that Labour in turn wanted to show that the two parties could co-operate and “in particular were capable of working in coalition on some thing” (Donald, 2004).

The Green Party started thinking ahead to the next election and they wanted to demonstrate an ability to work with Labour. “The political reality was and still is that Labour is the only party that we could form in government with” (Donald, 2004). Labour’s position had also softened. Helen Clark sent strong signals to voters that she was able to work with the Greens. Closer to election-day, Clark invited Fitzsimons to campaign with her for a day on transport issues. However, these moves sent ripples through other parties.

Both United and NZ First expressed strong concern about the possibility of Green MPs being in Cabinet. United Party’s, Peter Dunne also reiterated the point that his party remained “committed to talking first to the largest party after the election” (Dunne, 2005). As if to reinforce the point, Dunne engaged in a public show of meeting with National’s new leader, Don Brash. The meeting was reported to be a discussion on the possibility of post-election cooperation (Radio New Zealand Newswire, 2005). A theatrical incident occurred as a prelude to this meeting. Act’s leader, Rodney Hide had appeared desperate to meet with Brash to gain public support for a coalition between their two parties. Brash had avoided the meeting until he unexpectedly “bumped into” Hide on Lambton Quay, Wellington. There was media speculation that Hide had devised the accidental meet (McLoughlin, 2005). In an effort to avoid a repetition of the Lambton Quay meeting, Dunne and Brash went to extraordinary lengths to keep their meeting a secret. They even had to change the venue when Rodney Hide was spotted close to the planned meeting place (New Zealand Herald, 2005a). It was rumoured that Dunne would meet with Clark over similar issues but that arrangement never eventuated (Martin, 2005). United Future’s Peter Dunne made it clear that his party would not support a Labour-Greens coalition (Dunne, 2005).

NZ First’s leader, Peters sent signals to voters that he had “no preference” between National or Labour (Peters, 2005c). Peters maintained that “If the electorate clearly chooses one of these (National or Labour) over the other - we will accept this” (Peters, 2005c). Peters tried to take a middle course in an attempt to avoid the traps of 1996 when he was accused of misleading voters (Donald, 2005a). This might have been in response to a Herald DigiPoll that showed NZ First supporters almost evenly split in their coalition partner preference between Labour or National (New Zealand Herald, 2005b). In doing so he sent confusing signals to voters resulting in further attempts at clarification (Peters, 2005a, 2005b). What NZ First did make clear was that they would not support or join a coalition government that included any members of the Green party (Donald, 2005b; Peters, 2005c).

There are several events where dramatic poll fortunes of parties paralleled electoral announcements. The Green Party’s percentage rating in the Herald DigiPoll doubled (3.2 per cent to 6.4 per cent) overtaking NZ First soon after Clark and Fitzsimons spent a day campaigning together (New Zealand Herald, 2005d). Likewise, a public display of camaraderie appears to have assisted United Future’s fortunes. Dunne’s

party's polls rose 1.9 per cent to 2.6 per cent in the days following his coffee break with Don Brash on the 6<sup>th</sup> September (New Zealand Herald, 2005c). At the same point Act's fortunes dropped by a third to 1.3 per cent after Brash announced that he was not going to do any deals with Hide over the Epsom electorate (New Zealand Herald, 2005c; Watkins, 2005). Clark's comments advising that the Maori party "would be the last cab off the rank" are also close to the dropping of Maori Party polls (TV One, 2005). Perhaps the most compelling change was that which could be associated with announcements made by both Peters and Dunne.

Both Peters and Dunne made two main announcements concerning their post-coalition 'bottom-lines': they would not support a government that included the Greens; and they would support the largest party on election night. The announcements received a large amount of publicity and generated extensive debate. It is reasonable to assume that their positioning caused electors to cast both votes for the two main parties. The NZ First, United and the Green parties all slumped in the polls in the last few days of the campaign. The electorate seemed to line up along the traditional left/right lines. Voters who had previously considered it safe to cast a vote for a minor partner in a coalition government changed their mind. Electors seemed afraid that their support for a minor party would inadvertently allow their least desired choice to form a government.

After the election, an 'inner coalition' was formed between Labour and the Progressives. The government formation processes excluded the Greens from the coalition but they signed a cooperation agreement with the Labour-Progressive government. Formal confidence and supply agreements were signed by the government with both the United and NZ First parties. In an unusual move, Peters and Dunne accepted ministerial positions outside Cabinet.

The actions of Dunne and Peters were clearly designed to attract votes from both other minor party supporters but in the end frightened voters into either National or Labour camps. NZ First and United also recognised in voters an underlying concern about the Greens entering government and campaigned on that fact. Hide attempted to portray himself as a partner for National in an attempt to attract votes from the larger party. Something Brash recognised this and resisted Hide's overtures forcing Hide to campaign strongly for an electorate seat. The 2005 election undoubtedly exhibited strong vote-seeking behaviour from most parties and electoral signalling played a strong role in the campaign strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The four election events highlight a unique situation of considerable competition for votes between the potential coalition partners. Formal coalition theories proved useful in assessing the motives of politicians during this time. Poll data gathered during all four elections indicated a close fit between potential partnership statements and changing public support. Anticipated increases in electoral support provided incentives for party leaders to make pre-election statements about their post-election intentions.

NZ First embarked on vote-seeking behaviour in 1996 in order to win policy and office. During the same time the Alliance remained focused on policy rather than votes while its only potential coalition partner, Labour exhibited office-seeking

behaviour. These contradictory positions helped to ensure that neither party was able to enter government in 1996. The approaches taken by both NZ First and the Alliance in the lead-up to the 1996 election were both flawed. NZ First had taken great care not to choose their potential partner, but this strategy resulted in a confused public. The Alliance on the other hand was very open in courting Labour, and only Labour, as their potential coalition partner. This approach seemed to spook Labour into fearing a loss of voting support. In contrast, the public positions of both the Alliance and Labour signalled to voters that the two parties could not form a viable alternative government. The electorate had clearly signalled their preference for a Labour-NZ First coalition. After the election the voters felt they had been betrayed by politicians yet again. The public believing that they had been misled by NZ First in 1996 punished them in 1999.

Political parties had not been clear about their electoral strategies and failed to accurately convey their intentions to the public. The key lesson for Labour and the Alliance from 1996 was that in the chaos and emotion of the run-up to the election, the greater goal of government had to be kept in mind. Otherwise, obvious division would lead to continued periods in opposition. This lesson had been learnt by the time of the 1999 election. Both Labour and the Alliance modified their strong policy seeking behaviour, in 1999, in order to gain enough votes to enter office. The result was that the voters identified a potential stable and viable coalition to replace the instability of the previous three years.

Similarly, the Greens recognising that a hard policy position of GMOs lost them votes in 2002 sought to relax their stand in an effort to win back votes and gain office. Their efforts were unsuccessful. The public, wary of returning a majority Labour government, chose United Future as a partner in the place of the intransigent Greens.

During the 2005 election, NZ First and United campaigned to increase their vote share. Both parties opposed a coalition that included the Greens. In 2005, most parties contrived public events at which they could declare their seemingly undying devotion to one partner or another. Labour's Clark recognised public unrest of Treaty of Waitangi issues and declared that the Maori Party would not be part of her government. The voters selected a parliamentary composition based on the party leaders' announcements. Labour, desirous of retaining the treasury benches, also heeded those signals and this decision was reflected in the resulting government.

Several conclusions can be drawn from the research. The first is that party leaders considered that pre-election strategies sometimes provided electoral advantage. Some leaders, such as Winston Peters and Peter Dunne, have consistently refused to publicly align their parties with any other single party. Other party leaders, such as Labour and the Alliance, saw advantage in directly informing the electorate their desired coalition partners. Parties also relaxed or hardened earlier positions and statements depending on the polls and ambitions for office. As Muller and Strom predicted party leaders acted in what they considered to be their best interests. All strategies were anticipated to provide the respective parties with an increased share of the votes.

Secondly, the same motivations applied to government formation can be applied to electoral coalitions. Politicians view office as the pathway to policy gains. The more votes a party wins then the higher the chances of gaining ministerial portfolios thereby achieving policy wins. Party leaders clearly considered that their stated coalition position would provide an increase in votes. This increased electoral share, in the NZ proportional system directly transfers into legislative currency.

Thirdly, as New Zealand's political parties and voters became more familiar with the proportional voting system they became more adept at transmitting and receiving accurate pre-election signals.

Parties no longer hesitate to provide public indications of their preferred coalition partner. This is in stark contrast to the experiences of pre-1996 when the Alliance's attempt at electoral coalition was rejected by Labour. During the 2005 general election, parties openly sought association with other groupings as an electoral strategy. Further, preliminary research indicates that heightened public expectations have encouraged parties to more accurately communicate their post-coalition intentions as electoral coalition signals. The public's reading of the electoral signals increased in accuracy with each election. This improvement in understanding might parallel a greater understanding of the machinations of MMP itself. Understanding politician's motivations in adopting a particular pre-election stance is now essential to assist the prediction of post-election government formations. Further, such understandings contribute towards the transparency of government formation.

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