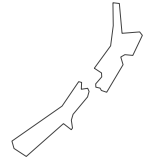


NEW ZEALAND: A Long-Established Westminster Democracy Switches to PR



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New Zealand recently changed its electoral system. In 1993, the country voted to discard the First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system it had used for over a century in favour of proportional representation. Two things stand out from this move.

In the first place, some 20 years ago, it was thought highly unlikely that New Zealand, of all countries, would change its electoral system. Second, the change can be regarded as a good example of how to move from one voting system to another. It was done only after a great deal of research, debate, and public consultation. Most experts on electoral reform would agree that major electoral reforms should not be undertaken lightly, and the move to PR in New Zealand was certainly not undertaken lightly.

New Zealand has long been accorded something of a special status among the world's democracies as one of the "purest" examples of the Westminster model of government, a model of virtually unrestrained executive authority with an electoral system which in some ways was "more British than Britain". For many years it produced quintessential Westminster parliaments, with single-party governments and a relatively stable party system. Nevertheless, public disquiet about the effects of FPTP surfaced in New Zealand after the 1978 and the 1981 parliamentary elections. On both occasions, the opposition Labour Party won more votes throughout the country as a whole than the incumbent National Party government, but in both elections the National Party won a majority of seats in Parliament and thus stayed in power. Furthermore, in both 1978 and 1981, the then third party in New Zealand politics, Social Credit, won a fairly large share of the popular vote – 16% in 1978, and more than 20% in 1981, but – not unusual for FPTP systems – it won very few seats in the New Zealand Parliament, one and two seats respectively, in a House of Representatives of more than 90 members.

When it gained office in 1984, the Labour Party established a Royal Commission on the Electoral System to consider "whether all or a specified number or proportion of Members of Parliament should be elected under an alternative system ... such as proportional representation or preferential voting".

The Royal Commission on the Electoral System sat for most of 1985 and 1986 before releasing a long and detailed report in which it defined 10 criteria for testing both FPTP and other voting systems. These were: fairness between political parties, effective representation of minority and special interest groups, effective Maori representation (the Maori being New Zealand's indigenous ethnic minority), political integ-

ration, effective representation of constituents, effective voter participation, effective government, effective parliament, effective parties, and legitimacy. At the same time, however, the Royal Commission stressed that “no voting system can fully meet the ideal standards set by the criteria”, and pointed out that the criteria were not all of equal weight.

The Royal Commission proposed that New Zealand adopt a system of proportional representation similar to that used in Germany; the Mixed Member Proportional system, or MMP. Electors have two votes, one for a political party, and one for a local candidate elected by FPTP in single-member districts. As in Germany, but contrary to the situation in Japan and Russia, the party vote is paramount in the New Zealand system, because the party vote determines the overall number of seats parties are entitled to in Parliament. For example, if a political party wins 25% of the party votes in an election, it will qualify for 30 (25%) of the 120 seats in Parliament. If the party has already won 23 local district (or constituency) seats, then its complement of seats in the House of Representatives is topped up by giving it seven additional seats, and those seven seats will be allocated to the first seven eligible people on the party's rank-ordered list of nominated candidates. Likewise, a party with 25% of the party votes but only two district MPs will be awarded an additional 28 seats from its party-list to bring its total number of seats in Parliament up to 30 as well.

In view of the fact that New Zealand had used an FPTP voting system for more than 100 years, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System rejected the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of proportional representation, both because MMP “retains single-member constituencies” and because the results of an MMP election were “likely to be more closely proportional” than those under STV. The Commission also recommended that a referendum should be held on the adoption of the MMP system, and despite the fact that a select committee of the New Zealand Parliament disagreed with the Royal Commission's recommendations, political pressure eventually led to two referendums on electoral reform.

The first referendum, held in September 1992, was not binding, but an indicative plebiscite. However, voters so overwhelmingly favoured both changing the electoral system and MMP that a second – and binding – poll was held 14 months later. The second referendum was a straight choice between the FPTP and the MMP electoral systems, and MMP won 53.9% of the referendum votes.

To ensure that the official publicity campaigns for the electoral reform referendums were conducted with “political impartiality, ... balance and neutrality”, the Minister of Justice went so far as to appoint an independent Electoral Referendum Panel, at arm's length from politicians and public servants, in both 1992 and 1993. On each occasion, the panel was headed by the country's Chief Ombudsman and had a substantial budget for the task of informing voters about the mechanics – and, in

effect, the advantages and the disadvantages – of the different options under consideration in each of the referendums.

New Zealand's last FPTP election was held on 6 November 1993, on the same day as the referendum in which voters adopted MMP as the country's new electoral system. Just under three years later, New Zealand held its first MMP election, on 12 October 1996. The results of the 1996 election demonstrate that MMP has lived up to many of the expectations of the Royal Commission which recommended it.

Six parties are represented in the new Parliament, each in close accord with the share of the votes it won throughout the country as a whole; the system is highly proportional. There are now 15 Maori in the House of Representatives, and Maori are represented in the New Zealand Parliament in rough proportion to their numbers in the population as a whole. The same is true of Pacific Islanders, and the country's first PR election also saw the election of the country's first Asian MP. In addition, the overall proportion of women in Parliament rose from 21% in 1993 to 29% in 1996.

There is also clear evidence that voters grasped how to use the new voting system in their own best interests. A pre-election survey found that 38% of electors intended to differentiate between their party and their local constituency or district votes; by way of comparison, only about 15% of German voters split their tickets. Furthermore, voter turnout in New Zealand was even higher in 1996 than it had been in either 1990 or 1993.

In 1986, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System had stressed that an "electoral system should allow Governments ... to meet their responsibilities. Governments should have the ability to act decisively when that is appropriate, and there should be reasonable continuity and stability both within and between Governments". Time alone will tell whether New Zealand's new electoral system fulfils the demands of this criterion. There was some criticism that it took two months after the 1996 general election for a new government to be sworn in. The new government is a coalition of two parties – National and New Zealand First – that control a bare majority (61 seats) in the 120-member House of Representatives. Nevertheless, New Zealand voters would not have been too surprised by this. For example, the 1992 Electoral Referendum Panel pointed out that under MMP "minor parties are likely to be represented in Parliament", and that as a result "coalitions or agreements between parties may be needed to form governments". The following year the Electoral Referendum Panel reiterated that "coalition governments are more likely under MMP. This is because the MMP system results in a Parliament that reflects each party's share of the nationwide party vote. Having several parties in Parliament makes it more likely that there will be no one party with a majority of seats in Parliament." This is precisely what happened in New Zealand in 1996.
