

P O L I T I C S

Alliance for progress

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hen New Zealanders go to the polls in next year's national elections, for the first time they will be electing their Parliament in a proportional representation system. For more than 60 years, New Zealand's Parliament has been chosen by a winner-take-all electoral system similar to that in the United States. As in America, this system has ensured that political power is traded between two major parties: the National Party, traditionally the party of big business and the wealthy, and the Labor Party, long supported by the working class, liberals and the Maori and Pacific Islander minorities. Despite the presence of smaller third parties, the first-past-the-post arrangement has consistently tended to sideline any genuine opposition to the two-party power monopoly.

That is due to change in 1996, thanks largely to the effort of the Alliance, a young coalition of five

political parties that represents diverse constituencies, from indigenous communities to environmentalists to disaffected deserters from the Labor Party. Although Alliance candidates garnered only 18 percent of the vote in the 1993 election, the coalition achieved its major strategic objective: the ratification of "mixed member proportional representation," or MMP. To persuade voters to approve the measure, the Alliance joined forces with the Electoral Reform Coalition, a group that had worked for nine years to get a proportional representation referendum on the ballot. Despite the millions of dollars spent by business interests and the Labor and National parties on an anti-MMP ad campaign, the measure passed with 52 percent of the vote.

This move for electoral reform follows a particularly dark decade for New Zealand, one that saw a severe economic downturn and the dismantling of the country's cradle-to-grave welfare system. Between 1985 and 1992, New Zealand's economy actually shrank. The decline resulted partly from the difficulties of adapting to competitive global markets as the British Commonwealth's trade protections were being phased out. And neoliberal ideologues in the Labor Party only fueled this decline by presiding over the collapse of New Zealand's welfare state. In 1993, UNICEF cited dramatic changes in national social policy as the cause of massive unemployment, a widening gap between rich and poor, and the highest youth suicide rate among industrialized countries.

Not surprisingly, this has had dramatic political consequences. "An anger has begun to brew that has changed New Zealand society irrevocably," says Sandra Lee, one of two Alliance MPs elected in 1993. "You have people cutting their political ties with Labor and National whose families have been with the parties for generations."

Oddly enough, it was Labor, the putative party of the left, that initiated the attack on New Zealand's social democracy. In 1984, Labor Finance Minister Roger Douglas introduced a number of supply-side policies—derisively dubbed "Rogeronomics"—that included deregulation, privatization and tax-cutting. In 1986, the Labor government slashed the top marginal income-tax rate from 66 percent to 33 percent and, to compensate for lost revenue, imposed a flat goods and services tax of 12.5 percent—a measure that hit the poor especially hard. Privatization, Douglas' main strategy for reducing New Zealand's budget deficits, backfired. Government-run businesses, including the state banking system and the airline, insurance, printing and mining industries, were sold to foreign investors too cheaply, and the government debt—which was promised to decline with privatization—nearly tripled between 1984 and 1992.

Within the Labor Party, only Jim Anderton, an MP and one-time party president, had the temerity to oppose Rogeronomics publicly, decrying its assault on workers' rights and

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By **Penelope Whitney
and Peter Camejo**

social programs. His dissidence came to a head in 1989, when he abstained from voting on the privatization of the state bank—a measure he opposed because, among other reasons, it violated Labor Party policy. The Labor caucus expelled him—without protest from fellow MPs. Anderton resigned from the party and, with other ex-Laborites, formed the New Labor Party (NLP). Anderton was the only Labor MP to break ranks with the old party, but thousands of party members rallied to support him.

In the aftermath of the elections that swept the National Party back into power in 1990, it became clear to activists in all parties that National and Labor were pushing the same agenda. In 1991, the NLP, the Maori party Mana Motuhake, the Greens and the Democratic Party came together as the Alliance. They were later joined by the Liberal Party, led by two first-term MPs who broke away from the National Party when they became disenchanted with its rightward shift.

The Alliance scored its first victory in 1992, when it won control of the municipal authority that manages the regional assets of Auckland, New Zealand's largest city. Running on an anti-privatization platform, the coalition polled an unexpected 42 percent of the vote. Not only did the Alliance keep its promise not to sell off Auckland's fiscally troubled port, but it reformed the port's management and successfully restructured its debt.

The National and Labor parties now view the Alliance as a serious threat, especially after its surprising showing last June, when it came close to winning a by-election in the National stronghold district of Selwyn. Campaigning on a solid platform of Alliance policies, Democratic Party President John Wright took more than 40 percent of the vote. Labor fell to a historic low of 10 percent.

MMP promises to enhance the influence of the Alliance. Under the new system, voters will elect a 120-member parliament, in which roughly half of the seats will go to candidates who win elections in local districts. The other half will be allotted to parties based on their percentage of the general vote. The 1993 election results illustrate MMP's advantage to third parties: Though it polled 18 percent of the vote, the Alliance walked away with only two of 99 seats in Parliament. The winner-take-all electoral system had stopped the Alliance by tiny margins in many districts. With the same percentage of votes under MMP, the Alliance would have taken at least 20 seats.

Alliance leaders have taken important steps to strengthen the Alliance internally, moving it closer to being a party itself rather than just a coalition. The five parties agreed to end their individual veto rights and passed a motion to change the makeup of the coalition's ruling body: Now almost half the representatives are chosen directly by regional Alliance caucuses, not just appointed by the individual parties.

With the new proportional representation system on the horizon, the two traditional parties are struggling to come to terms with their new rivals. Rumors abound of possible splits within Labor and National, and a growing contingent in

Labor favors forming a bloc with the Alliance. In fact, that faction has adopted a party-wide policy of refraining from publicly denouncing the Alliance.

In a move to exploit political uncertainty, Matt McCarten, a former union organizer and the Alliance's chief political strategist, has been meeting with labor leaders. New Zealand's embattled labor unions, which have seen their membership plummet to 18 percent of the workforce from 46 percent in 1975, are slowly dissolving their institutional ties to the Labor Party. Of the 26 unions once affiliated with Labor only four remain, and many vow to endorse the Alliance in the 1996 election.

National polls report that the majority of New Zealanders favor some kind of Alliance coalition government in 1996, with a Labor-Alliance coalition the most popular of all. "The business class is frantic," reports McCarten. "They don't like it at all."

In a May 6 editorial, the prominent *National Business Review* warned: "A grand coalition of the left ... is not in the country's best interests. ... The restoration of trade-union power, the return to collective bargaining and the forcible extension of equal-employment opportunity and pay equity into the private sector are not the policies that will enhance economic growth or cut unemployment."

The Alliance knows that it is far from likely to gain a parliamentary majority any time soon, but it can form a potent opposition. Under MMP, National and Labor will lose much of their influence, finding it more difficult to form a government on their own. Because margins of party preference in New Zealand have been so narrow and because the Alliance is certain to bite deeply into the National and Labor vote, the next government will almost certainly have to be a coalition. In any case, the Alliance is poised to win 25 to 30 seats in Parliament.

MMP will also boost the Alliance's financial resources. Each MP in New Zealand is given a budget of close to \$700,000 per year to cover staffing and expenses. McCarten estimates that this will give the Alliance as much as \$60 million to work with over the next three years, allowing it to augment considerably its current full-time staff of nine. Unlike other parties, the Alliance plans to make sure that the new staff is appointed by, and loyal to, the coalition, not the MPs.

Meanwhile, Labor and Alliance aren't even talking. Labor says it will only consider a coalition after the vote, but the Alliance refuses to engage in post-election negotiations. "We will discuss our policies with anyone before an election, but we will not enter any coalition after an election that involves us having to trade away our policies," Anderton told the *Dominion*, a Wellington-based newspaper. "We want voters to understand that and know what they are voting for: parties like Labor that will betray them or parties like us that won't." ◀

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Safety Net

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Apocryphal studies and apocalyptic rhetoric are fueling the debate over "cyberporn."

By David Futrelle

arty Rimm learned early on the value of a well-placed statistic. Nearly a decade and a half ago, as a 16-year-old student at Atlantic City High School, he caused a stir in the local media with a study purporting to show that 64 percent of the students at his school had gambled in local casinos. The study was roundly criticized by the casinos themselves—and it didn't exactly help the flamboyant high schooler's credibility that he disguised himself as an Arab sheik in an attempt (successful, he contends) to infiltrate the Playboy Hotel and Casino. But the study received a great deal of play in the media, and led the state legislature to raise the age of legal gambling to 21.

Today, another one of Rimm's statistics has pushed itself into public consciousness in a big way: his claim, highlighted in a recent *Time* magazine cover story on "cyberporn," that some

83.5 percent of images on the Usenet newsgroups available through the Internet are pornographic. The figure, which Rimm first advanced in a *Georgetown Law Journal* article, has been cited on ABC's *Nightline*; it's been mentioned on the floor of the Senate. It's routinely invoked in newspaper stories and television debates. In a media culture built on soundbites, it's become the soundbite of the moment.

There's only one problem with the statistic: it's almost certainly wrong—no more accurate or scientifically valid than Joe McCarthy's famous claim that he had assembled a list of 53 known Communists in the State Department. There is no question that there is a considerable amount of pornography available online, mainly through commercial "adult" Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) and Usenet "binaries" groups, where images are posted in coded form. A quick glance at the binaries groups reveals that `alt.binaries.pictures.erotica.blondes` fills up much more quickly than `alt.binaries.pictures.furniture`.

But as anyone who has seriously attempted to study the elusive Net will tell you, basic facts about the beast are terribly difficult, if not impossible, to pin down with any degree of precision. Even Brian Reid, a respected researcher at Digital Equipment Corp. responsible for the development of sophisticated statistical techniques for measuring Usenet readership, acknowledges that his numbers—based on aggregate data from an extensive list of sites around the world—may be off by as much as a factor of 10. Rimm, who conducted his research as an undergraduate at Carnegie-Mellon University, based his number on a much smaller, and almost certainly unrepresentative, sample—a one-week survey of just 32 Usenet newsgroups featuring "binary" image files.

Since its prominent mention in *Time's* July 3 issue, Rimm's study—baroquely titled "Marketing Pornography on the Information Superhighway: A Survey of 917,410 Images, Descriptions, Short Stories, and Animations Downloaded 8.5 Million Times by Consumers in Over 2,000 Cities in Forty Countries, Provinces, and Territories"—has provoked hundreds of pages of commentary online and off, including detailed, and devastating, line-by-line critiques from notable academics and researchers, some of whom Rimm himself had cited approvingly in his text. Much of Rimm's study of Usenet, for example, is based on the techniques developed by Digital's Reid. Yet when he first saw Rimm's study, Reid was stunned. "I am so distressed by its lack of scientific credibility that I don't even know where to begin critiquing it," he wrote in a review of the study posted online. "In this study I have trouble finding measurement techniques that are not flawed." (See "Rimm shot" on page 27.)