

Rt. Hon Winston Peters – Leader NZ First
Address to Political Science Students
Auckland University, 14 Symonds St, Auckland
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“MMP – The Inside Story”

Thank you for the invitation to talk to you about politics.

It brings back memories of a few years ago, when a country boy started studying POLITICS 101.

It is a great pleasure to speak to you about some aspects of the journey started then.

Despite what some might tell you, politics is not one of those subjects which can be described with a simple formula.

In many years in politics one has found oneself in many roles – from deputy prime minister down – but the aim has always been the same and that is to improve the lives of ordinary people and to ensure a fair deal for all.

If you were to ask about the “brand” of my politics, it probably doesn’t fit into any of the boxes in your text book, because it is neither Left nor Right, whilst some have labelled New Zealand First Centrist. But at its core are the very traditional New Zealand values that once saw this great country among the world’s leaders – hard work, fair pay, valuing our citizenship and building a sense of community. We added our particular brand of Idealism as well.

And to confuse you even further – in a life before politics I have been a farmhand, labourer, freezing worker, union delegate, school teacher and commercial lawyer. At the moment I work for a most reasonable boss – myself – but with great prospects of getting an old job back next year.

Today – as requested - we're going to talk about MMP and a New Zealand First perspective.

You will have studied the background to MMP – or to use the correct term Mixed Member Proportional Representation. New Zealanders voted for it because the two main parties, National and Labour in the 80’s and 90’s, would not stick to their pre-election manifestos. Worse than that, both came to power with an inner cabal cherishing hidden agendas. Those of you old enough to remember 1984, will recall that Labour sprang a surprise social and economic revolution on the country, from which we have still not recovered....And in 1990 National continued that disastrous revolution – despite pledging to do something entirely different. That was why the National Party and some of us parted ways – we had the temerity to suggest that we stick to our election promises and to criticise the leadership for deliberately not doing so.

A lot of obstacles were thrown in the way of MMP because the two old parties did not really want a bar of it. The Royal Commission recommended that a hundred MPs in a new MMP system would work. We ended up with 120 because the two old parties reckoned that the 20 extra would put voters off the change. In time, the Maori seats were supposed

to go. We were all to be blended in – as we should be! That did not happen either – more about that later.

New Zealand First was born from those who rejected the radical reforms of National and Labour and who wanted a party that represented ordinary New Zealanders – not overseas interests or those of a few ever mighty subjects.

So, after the blitzkrieg neo-liberal policy destruction of Labour between 1984 and 1990 – and National until 1996, New Zealanders decided they wanted change. They had experienced enough economic pain, while the promised land of freedom and plenty was still a pipe dream, and we had missed out again on winning the Rugby World Cup.

Enter New Zealand First, a First Past The Post party in 1993.

We were established to bring back some of the traditional values of New Zealand politics. Our mission was to restore moderate capitalism with a kind, responsible face. We wanted our businesses and exporters to prosper but we also wanted the state to abide by its long established social contract of caring for the young and the old and those who were down on their luck through no fault of their own. That is why we brought in free medical care for the under sixes and fought for higher pensions for the elderly which had been stripped away through the economic reforms.

In 1996 we were forced to form a coalition with National. Labour simply did not have the numbers to survive a no-confidence vote. This was never reported correctly at the time. The journalists, with two notable exceptions, refused to accept the arithmetic after the 1996 election. With Labour we could not form a majority government without the Alliance – and Jim Anderton would not guarantee Alliance Party support. So we went with National as that was the only way to guarantee stable government – at least mathematically.

Of course the personalities involved meant it was never going to be simple. After nearly 50 years as the natural party of government in New Zealand, National hated sharing power. In less than two years Jim Bolger was rolled by Jenny Shipley whose mission was to smash the centre-right coalition and to continue the neo-liberal experiment supported by the Business Round Table and any other stragglers they could cobble together. So the assets sales started again, pensions were cut – and all the failed experiments of the recent past looked set to continue.

While in the public perception, New Zealand First took a huge hit, National had two disastrous elections in 1999 and 2002 as the public rejected their brand of radical ideology for a Labour Party that had learned its lesson of Rogernomics. New Zealand First were not helped by individuals who cared more for themselves than the party and the principles we stood for – but that is sometimes the nature of politics.

We survived the 1999 election with five MPs thanks to 67 straight-thinking voters in Tauranga, and we spent the next three years regrouping to get 13 MPs in 2002. We then tried to influence the then Labour government over issues such as rampant immigration, failing law and order and the freeloaders on the Treaty of Waitangi gravy train. Labour kept us at arm's length until faced with riots over the contentious foreshore and seabed issue. We publicly offered to reaffirm Crown ownership, the unfettered access right of every person to the foreshore and to protect the customary rights of Maori forever. And that is what we did. We did it in the face of National accusing us of giving everything to Maori and in the face of radical Maori accusing us of taking everything away from them.

And here we must point out, the media failed in every way to tell the people of New Zealand the truth about what was happening. In the biggest misinformation campaign since the Treaty of Waitangi, from opposing ends of the political spectrum the radicals and extremists created a lie which has been allowed to fester. This is worse than just being mischievous for political purposes, it is outright deceitful.

You see the Ngati Apa case, which sparked this debate in the first place, never said Maori had customary title. It said that perhaps in a few cases it might be able to be tested in the courts but it could not conceive of a successful claim.

The lie is that the seabed and foreshore was stolen, which begs the question – how could the Crown steal what it already had? Not a single piece of property changed hands from one group to another when the act was passed – not one. So where was the theft? In the minds of the radicals and extremists, and those making political capital out of the confusion – that's where.

But NZ believed that what could exist were customary rights – the right for iwi or hapu to continue their customary practices. That is what we guaranteed in the existing legislation – because that is the part that matters to most Maori. It is only the trouble makers who have perpetrated the lie that it was stolen and are reverting to the only language they know – grievance.

Now we come to the hard bit ahead.

When the foreshore legislation was passed National claimed that we were giving it away to Maori. The Maori Party was claiming that it was stolen. Now these two parties – from totally opposing points of view – claim they are going to sort it out. You can almost hear the sounds of the pigs' wings flapping overhead!

Watch now how National is squirming over an issue they cannot compromise on. They couldn't give way on the Maori seats in Auckland and there are parts of the seabed and foreshore act they can't back down on either. This is why they are delaying the decision. On this issue, what the Maori party want, National can't sell to their constituents and vice versa. There is no middle ground without one side taking a major hit.

This issue has highlighted an unforeseen and unfortunate aspect of MMP. At no stage did we ever expect that MMP would provide a continuing basis for race-based politics in New Zealand. We were a country, justifiably or not, that prided itself on doing its best for both Maori and non-Maori and treating everyone equally under the law. We were not perfect but our record was better than most colonised nations. Now we have the Maori Party with its separatist agenda with one of its MPs preaching an appalling message of hate against another race. We also hear the same person talking about the Maori "nation" and some iwi have also taken up describing themselves as "nations". This, of course, is imported nonsense. We are in fact only one nation, and a small one at that.

Tribes with flags have the potential to tear this country apart unless there is some inspired leadership from both sides over the next few years and New Zealand politics has far too many people at the top who are not leaders but managers.

Flags are a powerful symbol. Throughout the ages they have been rallying points in battles. People have died for their flags. It was a great honour to carry them. Now, the

prime minister and his mate Hone Harawira have decided – at great expense - that the Maori Party flag should fly with the New Zealand ensign on Waitangi Day. This news has insulted many New Zealanders – both Maori and non-Maori – and Maori leaders at Waitangi hosting the event won't have a bar of it! It is an example of the misuse of MMP. In exchange for supporting the destruction of ACC, National has given the Maori Party a day to fly their divisive flag. A flag chosen at 21 hui where less than a quarter of one percent of Maori turned up and from submissions from Maori no more numerous that. You've all heard or seen the British comedy TV show "the two Ronnies" - well we have our own comedy show starring the "two Hones". Hone, of course, is Maori for John – and the two "Hones" don't give a "Heke" about who they insult on Waitangi Day. Sadly that is what our country is being forced to endure over this issue – extremists and radicals, trying to pass themselves off as moderate and reasonable.

Meanwhile back to MMP and New Zealand First.

Between 2005 and 2008 we gave Labour supply and confidence while we saved the racing industry, improved pensions, introduced the SuperGold card for the over 65s and got our relations with the world's only super power back to a sound basis of mutual respect.

At the same time we did our best to improve New Zealand's relationships elsewhere abroad – particularly with the countries bordering and within the Pacific.

So, over the years we in New Zealand First have tried to keep the values of the people who made many sacrifices last century to make this country a better place.

If you think we are making huge progress now as a nation, let me put you straight. New Zealand was once regarded as the social laboratory of the world, underpinned with sound nationalistic economics. We were admired for our enlightened social policies and our equality of opportunity. These values are timeless and they are what matters. After all improving peoples' lives should be the number one priority of politics. We rejected the radical ideologies that have created so much disharmony and injustice abroad. Yet these agendas have festered in certain domestic quarters for many years now and have bubbled to the surface again. We saw some of this recently in the economic prescription of a failed politician who simply could not see that pure neo-liberal economics is a pathway to economic servitude for all but a small privileged elite. Or maybe he does know this – which makes he, and his ilk, even more dangerous. It is not possible to govern a country while shackled to one particular political philosophy.

You have to look at what is in front of you and what lies ahead. MMP has brought more points of view to New Zealand politics and wider representation. It is still not fully understood – even by the parties in parliament and the media – because it is still too much about winners and losers and us and them.

Democracy can be very untidy at times. But as Winston Churchill once said "nobody has thought of anything better".

Democracy under MMP is patently, obviously more representative, abandoning minority government for majority rule.

The system of MMP in NZ can obviously be improved and hopefully as circumstances change in the future needed improvements will occur. It's a system capable of

improvement unlike First Past The Post which was not and therefore never was improved.
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