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A brief history of Winston Raymond Peters

Henry Cooke · 14:26, Jun 21 2018



STUFF (ARCHIVES)

You've probably known Winston Peters your whole life, but there's plenty you won't know about him.

This piece was originally published during the 2017 coalition negotiations. It has been expanded and updated.**ANALYSIS:** Imagine describing Winston Peters to a foreigner.

It's almost impossible. Without living in New Zealand for a good few years, watching Peters career from one issue to the next, always with a television camera not far behind, it's very hard to get your bearings.

There are people in their twenties - press gallery journalists among them - who have never known a world without Peters in the headlines.



GETTY IMAGES

Winston Peters took a long time to get here.

As much as his history may be obscured by the mists of time, it still follows our longest-serving Parliamentarian around, always at hand for well-briefed interviewers - even if Peters rebuts them with a document kept in his trunk.

Give that he is now the acting Prime Minister for the next six weeks, it seemed prudent to take a look back at his long and tumultuous life. Much of the detail in this piece come from *Winston First* by Martin Hames and *The Demon Profession* by Michael Laws.

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Winston Raymond Peters - not a typo, that's what the birth certificate says - was born on April 11, 1945, one day before US President Franklin D Roosevelt died, and just months from the end of World War II.

Peters spent his first years in Whananaki, a coastal Northland town about an hour's drive from Whangarei.

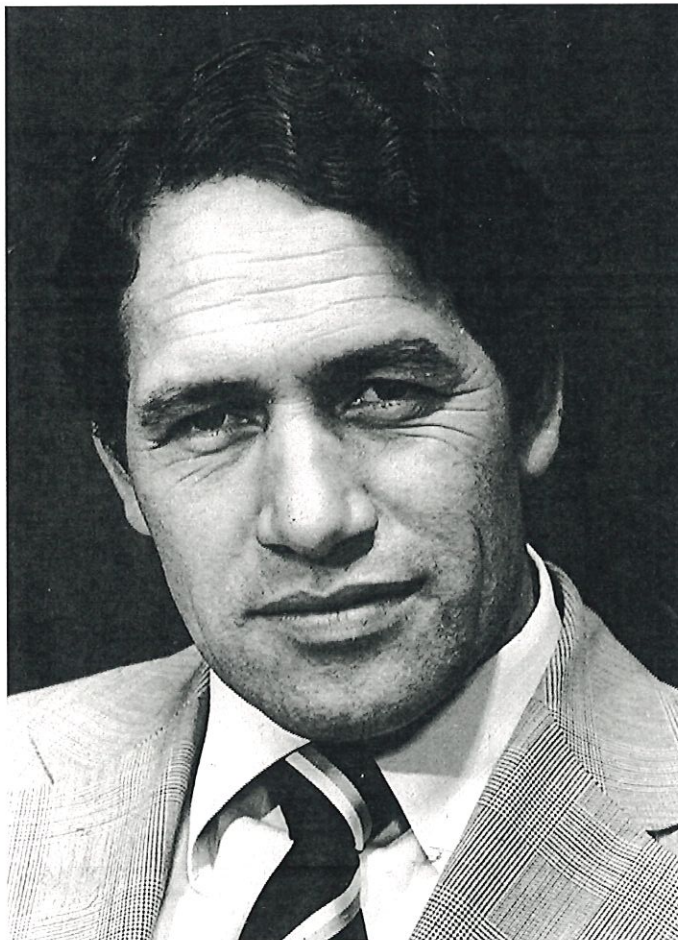


Winston Peters back home in Northland the day after the election. Credit: Jason Dorday/Stuff

As a boy he did not seem immediately marked for greatness, arriving smack bang in the middle of the 11 children that Len and Joan Peters were to have and saddled with asthma.

This was not a conventional upbringing. Peters was 11 before he even saw Whangarei, let alone Auckland or Wellington. He walked to school if the tide was low and rode a horse if it was high. His Scottish mother Joan is said to have instilled him with both drive and his long-time obsession with cleanliness.

Peters worked through his stutter and started his post-schooling career with a year at teachers' college, then a year of teaching at Te Atatu Intermediate. This wasn't for him, as he soon quit to go to Auckland University and get a BA in history and politics.



Winston Peters in 1986. Credit: Stuff archives.

While at university, contemporary Bruce Cliffe took him to a Young National Party meeting and got him to sign up. Decades later, Cliffe would move a motion to get him kicked out of the party.

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Auckland to study law. He then married Louise, a primary school teacher, in 1973, and secured a job at the law firm Russell McVeagh.

ENTRY TO POLITICS: A STRING OF DEFEATS

In 1975, as Robert Muldoon was sweeping to power, Peters ran in the unwinnable Northern Maori seat, which Labour held continuously from 1938 'til 1993.



Peters got his start in politics during the Muldoon-era. The two share many similarities but were not especially close.

Despite losing - obviously - Peters made a good showing for a National candidate in the seat and established himself within the party. By the time the next election came around in 1978 he was well positioned to take on the new seat of Hunua, an odd rural/urban seat in South Auckland.

Peters won the National Party nomination easily enough, but lost the main election to Labour's Malcolm Douglas (brother of Roger) by 300-odd votes. Never one to accept defeat, Peters took the decision to court, and after a contentious seven-week hearing won the seat, all by overturning 450 "informal" votes (where the voter's intention was still clear) and a number of Maori who had switched rolls.

with not a word of praise for those who have striven and dedicated their lives to its improvement.

The message of the thirty-ninth Parliament must be one of hope. The people long for hope. It is indeed fortunate that so many of our countrymen still have an impulse for constructive action and will respond to the call of David: "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills from whence cometh my help." In 1978 I promised my electorate I would work hard for its interests and for our country. It has been a hard road to Parliament, and in my case an extraordinary hard road. Today I say to the people of my electorate that I will work hard for them, not just in 1979, but year after year. I wish to renew that pledge.

Hon. M. RATA (Northern Maori): I join other members of the House in pledging my loyalty to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of New Zealand. In doing so I pay a personal tribute to the present Governor-General, notwithstanding my opinion about his

Peters' maiden speech.

His maiden speech on June 5, 1979, is nothing like the Peters of later years. He praised the free market, rallied against "excessive government controls", and spoke poorly of critics who would seek to exploit tremors in "race relations". There were of course some rhetorical flourishes ("we are our brothers' keepers, not our bludgers' keepers"), but nothing of the verbal dexterity he would soon develop.

During the next three years he set about representing his electorate, seemingly content to follow the rest of his party on major national issues. When a large group of MPs tried to roll Muldoon in 1980 Peters joined them - then when influential MPs like Jim Bolger reversed their course Peters went right back with them.



Muldoon survived the 1981 election - but Peters didn't.

Then in 1981, his political career stumbled again, when Labour's Colin Moyle - who left Parliament after Muldoon had implied he was a homosexual - won Peters' seat of Hunua. Peters was by all accounts respectful during the campaign, but after the loss blamed the media for not asking Moyle questions he wouldn't himself ask.

Three years later, Peters gave politics one more shot, seeking selection for the seat of Kaipara, which then encompassed his hometown. He lost, again.

THE LANGE YEARS AND SOME REAL FAME

But the 1984 election would not end up expelling Peters from politics. Just when all hope was lost following the Kaipara selection, an old friend asked him to take over from the retiring Keith Allan in Tauranga.

National lost the election to the David Lange-led Labour, but Peters won Tauranga. He would soon become one of the opposition's best critics of the rapid changes Roger Douglas and Richard Prebble would bring to the country. (Prebble had actually already had a run-in with Peters - at university he had yelled that Peters was an Uncle Tom during a debate.)



Peters in 1989. Credit: Roger Shepard/Stuff

After some early nautical-themed missteps in opposition - he said the Russians were trying to map the Cook Strait and a ferry had secretly run aground - Peters got his hands on a proper scandal in 1986.

The Māori Loans Affair, the first of many "affairs" Peters would start, involved an unauthorised and illegal \$600m loan that didn't happen, but put Māori affairs minister Koro Wētere in a seriously bad light. While Wētere didn't resign, it caused real damage to the government, and secured Peters a front-bench promotion, along with the Māori affairs and employment portfolios, after the 1987 election.

About this time Peters began working with future Whanganui mayor Michael Laws, who was then part of the National Party research team. Their partnership would prove fruitful but troubled - Laws wrote in a 1998 book Peters "did not possess one solitary creative thought in the employment portfolio and only a scattered understanding of Māori issues at best".



Peters playing rugby in 1988. Credit: Greg Baker/Stuff

There were still misfires - Laws at one point told media Peters was going to the US to meet Ronald Reagan - but the two-man team used Peters' portfolios and the Official Information Act to generate a series of negative stories for the government, cultivating the press gallery all the while.

While Peters would learn the virtues of publicly attacking journalists later in his career, he always understood the value of paying plenty of attention to them. In fact it's said that Peters got his inspiration to wear double-breasted suits from long-time gallery member Barry Soper.

THE MOST POPULAR POLITICIAN IN NEW ZEALAND

Winston Peters said recently he could have been prime minister if he wanted. He's not wrong.

As the harsh new Kiwi economy stumbled in the late 1980s Peters' star just kept on growing - particularly as he started to inject a more nostalgic Muldoonist flavour into his speaking, rather than the neoliberalism preached by Labour and National's Ruth Richardson.



Peters in 1991. Credit: Dave Hansford/Stuff

In early 1988, he first entered preferred prime minister polls at 2 per cent. Two months later he leaped to 9 per cent - just two points down from Bolger. Then in July he surged right ahead to 17 per cent, five ahead of Bolger and five below the beloved Lange. One television poll in this period showed that 38 per cent of National Party members wanted Peters to lead the party, compared to 20 per cent for Bolger.

popularity to his party's leadership - possibly because so few in the party liked him. Peters missed a crucial vote that could have embarrassed the government into asking the speaker to use his vote. And he began what would be a long war with a caucus favourite - finance spokeswoman Ruth Richardson.

Early in 1989 the two had a dust-up over completely contrasting remarks - basically Richardson said Labour were spending too much money while Peters said Labour weren't spending enough.

In a press release, Richardson said: "Maybe this is the opening round in the formation of the Win Peters Party. But with the policies he is espousing it will be the 'Lose Peters' Party." Bolger discussed sacking Peters, but didn't follow through.



Peters has long courted the votes of the elderly. Credit: Bruce Mercer/Stuff

Peters soon found that contradicting his party only bolstered the public's perception of him - particularly a public fed up with both Labour and National. In the next preferred PM poll Peters was ahead of both Lange and Bolger at 19 per cent.

His contradiction of the party grew into outright criticism. In October of 1989, he said there was a "chronic lack of political leadership" in New Zealand and that distrust of politicians was "not the exclusive domain of the Labour Party".

This was too much, and Bolger demoted him from the front bench and stripped him of the employment portfolio. Asked if these antics had hurt his chance of making Cabinet after the 1990 election, Bolger replied: "Oh, I'm sure we could find something that's not too demanding ... he's shown that tough targets are not for him."

During the 1990 election, Peters started talking more and more about increasing the number of public referenda, putting the "public in the driving seat", now a touchstone of NZ First.

FIRED FROM CABINET, FIRED FROM CAUCUS

Despite the demotion, Peters won the largest majority of any National Party MP in the 1990 election. (For those keeping track, this is when Bill English entered Parliament for the first time.) Bolger let Peters into Cabinet - but way way down at 17 in the rankings, and with just the Māori Affairs portfolio.

Peters reportedly slept through Cabinet meetings, but hardly felt comfortable. He hired a private firm to sweep his office for secret recording devices, and kept an eye on issues well outside of his portfolio - particularly the outrage about the superannuation surtax.



PM. JIM BOLGER & Finance Min. RUTH RICHARDSON WALK TOWARDS THE CHAMBER FOR TONIGHTS BUDGET PRESENTATION Dom Photo - 30/7/91

Jim Bolger and Ruth Richardson on their way to deliver a Budget. Peters was not a fan.

As for Māori Affairs, the new minister did develop a plan for a new super-ministry called Ka Awatea. He hired a PR firm specifically for the policy, and then launched it publicly - all before bringing it to Cabinet.

Bolger kept Peters within the fold, but tensions were high. After a 1991 speech in which he said New Zealand had an "Erebus economy" the prime minister finally called him up to his ninth floor office.

"I've reorganised my Cabinet. You're not in it. Sorry it didn't work out," Bolger reportedly said.

"Jim, you've made your bed, you lie in it," Peters responded.

For the rest of his political career Bolger would.



Peters cries as he hears the results of Winebox Inquiry appeal.

Peters' exit from Cabinet immediately brought back popularity that being in government had taken out of him, sending him up to 17 per cent in the preferred PM poll.

He started attacking the Government in question time, then halfway through 1992 he began a sustained attack on BNZ, along with allegations that members of the Business Roundtable had tried to bribe him.

His story on the bribery shifted: First it was a phone call, then it was a dinner. He named names - many of them - but always inside Parliament, meaning he couldn't be sued for defamation. These attacks saw him leap up to 23 per cent in the polls - again the most popular politician in the country.

Unsurprisingly, his party was less enamoured. In October of 1992, Cliffe moved that successful motion to expel him from caucus meetings. This saw his polls rise even further to 28 per cent.



Bill English and Peters would again sit close together in the early 2000s. Credit: Maarten Holl/Stuff

In February of 1993, ahead of the election, he sought a High Court injunction to stop the National Party expelling him from the party and from vetoing his re-selection in Tauranga. The court said he couldn't be expelled but his selection could be vetoed. The following month it happened - the party said he wouldn't be able to stand in Tauranga.

Peters said he would resign if the Government promised an immediate by-election in Tauranga. They eventually did.

Peters stepped down, and things were looking good - one poll showed 31 per cent of people would vote for a party led by him, compared to 34 per cent for Labour and 22 per cent for National.

But the by-election was not the triumphant victory Peters might have hoped for, as Labour, the Alliance, and National all declined to stand candidates. Peters won the seat and returned to Parliament briefly as an independent.

Alliance tried to court him, although leader Jim Anderton never seemed to have his heart in it.

NZ FIRST IS BORN

On July 18, 1993, at the Alexandra Park Raceway in Auckland, NZ First was born.

The launch didn't quite go perfectly. There was confusion over whether NZ First would stand candidates in all 99 seats. Several of the 15 launch policies were more platitudes than plans. It wasn't clear if the party was to the left of Labour or the right, although their hardline immigration stance was to the right of basically everyone.

per cent meant one or two seats at most - and very little power. But Peters was still the most popular politician in the country.

At the 1993 election, NZ First stood for 88 of the 99 seats and won about eight per cent of the vote. Peters won Tauranga again, and future National Party MP Tau Henare won Northern Maori for NZ First - the first time it had been out of Labour hands since 1938.

Peters entered Parliament once more and kept up the attacks and 'affairs'. The most famous of this era was the 'Winebox' issue, a complicated tale of alleged tax avoidance, named that because Peters' evidence was a literal winebox full of documents, which he finally tabled in Parliament on his 17th attempt. The campaign resulted in an inquiry - not a bad result for a brand new party.



Winston Peters holds a giant pumpkin. This doesn't really relate to anything. Credit: John Nicholson/Stuff

Ahead of the 1996 election - the first under MMP - it became clear that Peters was likely to hold the balance of power. He hired Laws to run his campaign, and Laws would later describe it as a nightmare, in a 1998 book.

"Everywhere there was petty conflict, organisational disorder and a dumb naivete that had long passed beyond negligence," Laws wrote.

Peters was still hard to pin down on some issues, so Laws developed a simple mantra for the campaign: "Last one to talk to Win wins."

At this point Peters still thought the party could be a 30 per cent-plus vehicle, Laws said, while he was aiming for something more like 15 per cent.

Eventually he would win a respectable 13 per cent, all five Maori seats, and the kingmaker position.

THE MAN IN THE MIDDLE

As you will have heard countless times by now, Peters took his time deciding between Labour and National.

The election was held on October 12, and a Government was not formed until December 10. Throughout the experience Peters berated impatient journalists, and his party spent hundreds of thousands of dollars of taxpayer money on extra resources, causing some public concern.

Much like in 2017, Peters could either govern alone with National or go with Labour and a further left party - in this case the Alliance. Reportedly Peters was outraged that Alliance would not pledge unconditional support for the possible government, instead keeping an out clause in the letter they sent Helen Clark.



Peters and Clark at a later date. Credit: Andrew Gorrie/Stuff

It emerged this year that Peters asked Clark to let him be prime minister - something she refused.

Some believe he was never really choosing between the parties, but was simply using one to get a better deal from the other.

Laws writes that Peters was "always going to lie down with National" thanks to a kind of "familial longing" to go back to his old team. He just played ball with Labour to make National hungry.

Eventually he picked his old party. National seemed to give up a lot - the Superannuation surtax, deputy prime minister for Peters, and the newly created "treasurer" role - supposedly superior to finance minister. And for a time things seemed to go well between Bolger and Peters, despite their history.

But many NZ First voters had wanted Peters to go with Labour, or at least believed Peters would. Support for NZ First dropped all the way to 2 per cent in July of 1997, with just 13 per cent of the public approving of the coalition arrangement on the whole. NZ First associate health minister Neil Kirtton was fired, and then attempted to get the party to cancel the coalition.

National's MPs were not happy with the arrangement either, particularly those on the economic right. In December of 1997, health minister Jenny Shipley rolled Bolger to become prime minister, removing the old colleague that Peters had made the deal with.

Tensions stayed high. In August of 1998, Peters staged a walkout of Cabinet with his ministers after a dispute over the privatisation of Wellington Airport. Shipley sacked him from his positions, accusing him of bringing the whole country into disrepute, but invited other members of his party to stay in the coalition to keep the Government afloat.

"These are not people who can be bought off," Peters said, but eight of them defected, enough to keep Shipley in power. Five of them, including Tau Henare, started the party Mauri Pacific. They didn't survive the 1999 election - but Peters did, just.

A CAUTIOUS BUT SUCCESSFUL TIME THROUGH THE CLARK ERA

Voters punished both National and NZ First for the instability, securing Labour's rise to power.

Peters came very close to exiting Parliament altogether. NZ First dropped below the dreaded 5 per cent threshold, but Peters held on to his Tauranga seat with a razor-thin 63-vote margin, securing his party's place in Parliament.

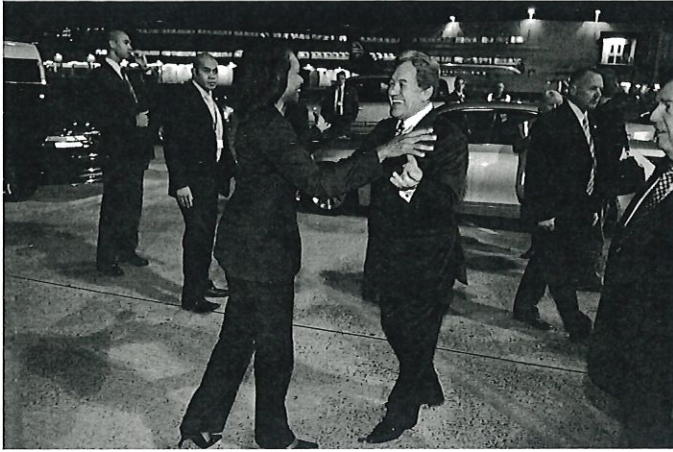
But he was no kingmaker in 1999. Clark formed a minority government with the support of the Alliance and the newly formed Green Party. Still, he had three years and the parliamentary resources to rebuild the party in his favourite position - Opposition.

In the 2002 election Peters expected a return to the balance of power. He ran a more disciplined campaign than in previous years, focusing on immigration, law and order, and Treaty issues, all with the slogan "Can We Fix It? Yes We Can".

The party almost doubled its support on 1999, but thanks to the worst National Party performance ever it was not in a position to form a government with them. Instead Clark drew on United Future's seats to govern.

But National would come back. In his 2004 Orewa Speech leader Don Brash took a firm hold of the race-based third rail of politics that Peters had been riding for years, and it shot the party up in the polls. By the time the 2005 election rolled around it looked like Peters would once again hold the balance of power.

This time he took careful steps to keep the public onside. He expressed no preference for either side prior to the election, other than to say he would not work in a coalition with the Greens. He promised to keep the negotiating period just three weeks long. And he said he would stay away from the "baubles of office" with a confidence and supply deal.



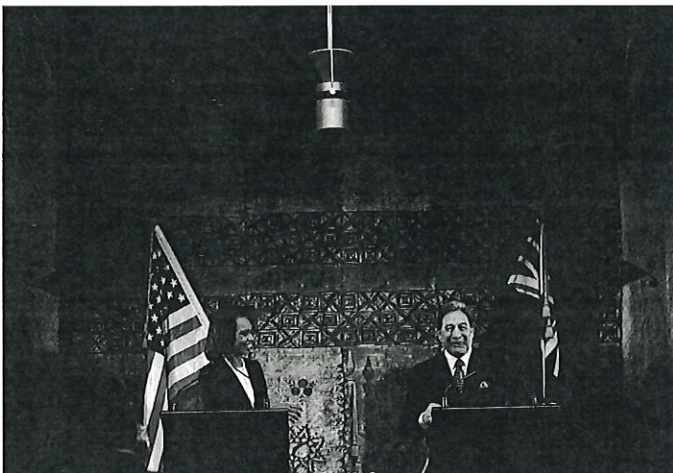
Peters as Foreign Minister greets US Secretary Of State Condoleezza Rice. Credit: Ola Thorsen

NZ First's vote halved in the 2005 election - likely as a result of National's resurgence - and Peters lost his long-held Tauranga seat. But at 5.72 per cent, the party remained in Parliament and once again held the power to decide the government.

Peters went with Labour - who had edged out National in the party vote - becoming minister of foreign affairs and minister of racing, outside of Cabinet.

He also secured several policy wins, including the jewel in his crown - the SuperGold card for seniors to get free bus rides and discounts on goods and services, along with a bump in the actual Super payout.

This coalition, with Peters outside of Cabinet and thus free to criticise the Government in areas outside of his portfolios, was much smoother sailing than the late 1990s had been. Many expected Peters to embarrass New Zealand as foreign affairs minister, with Australian paper *The Age* describing him as a 'outspoken, anti-migrant populist ... known for his anti-immigration views and protectionist policies'.



Peters with Rice in 2008. Credit: Janna Dixon/Stuff

Nevertheless, Peters' tenure as foreign affairs minister went very well, keeping Peters in high comfort and stature, far, far away from Wellington for much of the term. He secured a budget increase for the ministry, improved relationships across the Pacific, and most impressively, brought US Secretary Of State Condoleezza Rice to New Zealand while our countries were on far from good terms.

Peters is a relationships kinda guy - many of his staff stay around for years - so his success in diplomacy makes a lot of sense.

But as ever, being in Government was not kind to NZ First's poll ratings. Just before the 2008 election it emerged that wealthy New Zealander Owen Glenn had donated \$100,000 to Peters in 2006 to help fund a legal challenge to his loss in the Tauranga seat. Peters was eventually censured by the Privileges Committee in Parliament over this and stood down from his ministerial portfolios. (The Serious Fraud Office eventually cleared him of wrongdoing.)

THE MODERN ERA

The worst was yet to come. In the 2008 election, as John Key swept National to power, Peters again lost Tauranga, and by a considerable margin. This time there was no party vote to fall back on either, as NZ First dropped to 4.07 per cent. (For those keeping track, this is when Jacinda Ardern first entered Parliament.)

Peters exited Parliament for a third time, but promised in his concession speech that 'this is not the end'.

It wasn't. After three years in the wilderness, where he ran a small business and wrote rugby

meaning they could govern with the help of smaller parties once more, leaving Peters out in the cold.

As the years wore on Peters' political positions stayed fairly firm: He was anti-immigration, pro a more expansionary monetary policy, pro benefits for the elderly, and fairly conservative on social issues.

Peters voted against the same sex marriage bill in 2013 - much as he had voted against legalising homosexual sex in 1986.

In 2014, Peters increased his party's vote to 8.6 per cent, but despite rampant speculation he would hold the balance of power again, National managed without him.

Over the last term Peters' long-term issues - particularly immigration - returned to the spotlight, with the housing crisis in Auckland and a populist wave sweeping the globe seemingly falling right into his lap. After a rip-roaring by-election campaign he won the Northland seat off the National Party in 2015, putting those Kaipara ghosts in his past completely to bed. And as recently as July 2017, people were seriously discussing him taking over as leader of the Opposition - and possibly even prime minister.

Then Jacinda Ardern happened. The 2017 election ended up as a two-horse race - much to Peters' disgust - and his vote dropped from 8.66 per cent to 7.51 per cent (prior to the specials).

But with Labour rebounding and the demise of United Future and the Māori Party, Peters was once again in the position to choose the next government.

On October 19, after days of hotly watched negotiations, he announced that decision to a rapt press gallery: he would be going with New Zealand Labour, and once again picking up the role of Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Affairs Minister, and Minister for Racing.



A NEW ERA

Peters' return to Government has been entirely in keeping with his career to date.

There have been moments of real statesmanship, meeting with leaders from all over the world and helping get us in line for trade deals with the EU and UK. A lesser-known but crucial victory was a change to Superannuation rules that allows "realm citizens" of Pacific Islands that are also part of the Realm of New Zealand the ability to port their Kiwi pensions back home.

But there has been plenty of more controversial moments. Peters inclusion of a "waka jumping" bill in the coalition agreements has caused no end of headaches for the Government. His perceived slowness to denounce Russia after the Salisbury attacks caused consternation. More recently, his public humiliation of Justice Minister Andrew Little over the three strikes repeal has pointed to problems within the coalition.

Yet we aren't anywhere near how bad stuff got in the 1990s, or even during periods of the 2005-2008 government.

As he steps into the role of acting prime minister, Peters brings more experience with politics than any other current MP has. That extends beyond simple retail politics and into the intricate world of cross-party coalition politics. Any serious decisions as prime minister should technically be taken in consultation with Ardern - who is still texting her ministers between contractions. Even so, with Peters fronting media every day it's likely to be a fun ride. Buckle in.

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