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1931 Political parties

POLITICAL PARTIES

REFORM PARTY

Origin

The Reform Party, the full title of which was "the New Zealand Political Reform League", was a conservative body, but that term must be understood in the light of our history and environment. Right-wing organisations which preceded the N.Z.P.R.L. were the Political Reform Associations (1887), the National Association (1891–99), and the Auckland Electoral League (1902). In spite of the poor prospects for a successful attack on Seddon's strongly entrenched Liberal Party, a Political Reform League was formed in Christchurch in June 1905, mainly through the work of W. J. (later Sir William) Polson and of Charles Lewis who was probably responsible for reviving the "Reform" label of 1887. P.R.L.s sprang up in other centres, and Massey accepted their support for the 1905 election. The Christchurch group produced a few numbers of the *Reformer*, but as Massey was a strong critic of Seddon's "Tammany machine", he could hardly set up a full-scale organisation in competition. The 1908 election result encouraged him to put forward the Opposition as an alternative government, and he announced the Reform Party in February 1909, borrowing the title from the P.R.L.s. The name was not new, nor did it commit Massey to any new policy; but it helped to efface the "Conservative" name and party-image fastened on him by the Liberals. By the 1911 election, the parliamentary party and the P.R.L.s were virtually merged at the local level, but the N.Z.P.R.L. was not constituted until its first conference (4–5 August 1912), held after Massey had come into office. The chief architect of the 1912 Constitution was E. F. Hemingway of Patea, who had been a member of the British Primrose League. The objects of the N.Z.P.R.L. were, briefly, to correct the alleged maladministration of the Liberals and to put forward and support parliamentary candidates. The subscription was a minimum of 2s. 6d. There were to be branches of the League in all electorates, which were grouped in five divisions (October 1913). The leader of the parliamentary party was to be president of the League. He presided over the executive of 15 (1913), and its "literary" (policy and propaganda) committee; he convened conferences; he approved the appointment of organisers (five in 1914), and gave them special instructions. No procedure was laid down for the selection of candidates. Massey made little secret of his determination to keep the League to canvassing and financial functions. An attempt in 1912 to change the name to the N.Z. Democratic League failed.

Reorganisation

The League made good headway in preparing for the election of 1914, but the political truce at the outbreak of war, followed by the formation of the National Government (August 1915), led to its [illegible]lling apart. During the Prime Minister's absence in Europe, 1918–19, a "Progressive

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Reform" cave, of vaguely leftward tendencies, developed among his backbenchers. Massey turned aside the threat by taking three of the leaders into his Cabinet in 1920. By the election of 1919, Reform was, in effect, Massey's personal following, his supporters standing as "Independent Reform", not as League candidates. He relied on his own *mana*, the wealth of Sir Walter Buchanan and others, and the services of E. A. James, twice General Secretary of the League, and editor of the Reform journals, *Light and Liberty* (1913–14) and the *Newsletter* (1920–28). In spite of a provisional rule (1920) that candidates should be chosen by the electorates and approved by the President, procedure remained varied, and Massey had to cope (not always successfully) with local quarrels. From at least 1915, Reform-Liberal fusion had been advocated. After the stalemate election of 1922, protracted negotiations were carried on with the weakened Liberals, but Massey was lukewarm, and Coates, confident of Reform victory, broke them off in 1925. In 1923 Massey had set up an Organisation Committee under A. D. McLeod. Five organisers were appointed, including A. E. Davy, the most controversial figure in Reform history.

On Massey's death, in 1925, Davy organised a spectacular press campaign for Coates, which was widely believed to have paved the way for the Reform victory with 54 seats, the party's peak of power. Coates set out to revitalise the League, which held a full conference in 1926, the first since 1914. The constitution was revised to ensure more vigorous branches, but many of the old habits remained. By 1927–28 the Reform Party itself was in danger, with Coates as the storm-centre. He was criticised on the one hand by businessmen for his "socialism", and on the other by debt-ridden farmers for his alleged deference to stock and station agencies, and financial institutions. A businessmen's political conference in November 1927 was the beginning of the end for Reform. A "1928 Committee" was formed to demand "less government in business" from Coates. Davy, who had fallen out with Coates, organised the United Party, which took enough votes from Reform to become a minority government. The League then purged its membership lists, and achieved its highest level of organisation in preparation for a comeback in 1931. However, powerful Reform and ex-Reform leaders forced the reluctant Coates into coalition with Forbes at the eleventh hour (September 1931). The leaders claimed that this was not a union of parties, but the League was instructed to follow Cabinet leadership. Though some branches were still active as late as 1933, the growing strength of Labour, and the threat of the Democrat Party (with Davy as organiser) forced Reform and United together in 1935 in the National Political Federation, to prepare for the coming election. The N.Z.P.R.L. was formally dissolved in 1936, and virtually absorbed into the National Party.

Political Philosophy

Reform was not a party of historically-minded "Conservatives", but a political defence for "men in possession" in a new country. It was not a party of doctrine, unless "anti-socialism" and Massey's mixture of practical and mystical imperialism can be called doctrine. The nearest approach to a Reform political philosophy is found in the *Dominion* editorials of Charles Earle, who appealed to the "true Liberalism" of Bentham and Mill, only occasionally to Burke, and most of all to the individualism of Herbert Spencer. In the 1880s "reform" had meant reducing or ceasing borrowing, and cutting down the civil service and State expenditure. By the 1900s it signified to many the ending of Seddon's "Tammanyism" and, in particular, checking the alleged favouritism to Catholics in the civil service. Massey hoped to win radical "reformers" into his Reform Party, but the basic general position of Reform was "anti-socialism", and resistance to the rising menace of Labour. Massey had long since promised to respect Liberal legislation, and had given up his old opposition to Liberal protection and borrowing. Hence, he could attract Liberal votes in town and country, and his "freehold" banner rallied New Zealand's strong individualism, particularly as expressed in the Farmers' Union, which had been won to full support of Reform by 1911. Reform of the Legislative Council and of the civil service had less popular appeal. The party in 1911 did not offer a "conservative revolution", but cleaner and more efficient administration of existing laws, and firmer resistance to socialism than Ward was likely to undertake. Though there were some limited local alliances with Labour against Liberal in 1911, Reform revealed itself as conservative in the

strikes of 1912–13, probably gaining more support than it lost by Massey's firm action.

During the war and post-war period, controversy raged round the Protestant Political Association, which conducted a vitriolic anti-Catholic and anti-Labour campaign. Massey, an Ulster Orangeman, denied any organic connection between Reform and the P.P.A., but the latter endorsed practically only Reform candidates in 1919 and 1922, and included some prominent Reformers in its ranks. In the same years, Massey moved towards a more fervid and "British" imperialism, the obverse of which was "anti-Bolshevism". Reform virtually claimed to be the only loyal party. Coates carried on much of Massey's imperialism, which headed the party's 1929 objectives. This latter list, which was never effectively put forward, would have committed Reform to a more radical land and social policy, and covered much of the same ground then taken by Labour. Reform however, was, in essentials a party of conservative sectional interests. Those interests were held together in prosperity and by common fear of Labour, but clashed in depression. The party rose to power primarily on the growing rural conservatism of the North Island, particularly Auckland. In the creeping depression of the 1920s, Coates found he could no longer reconcile the rural and urban interests in his party. Businessmen claimed that Coates was using the State to save farmers and to destroy urban private enterprise, while some dairy farmers looked to the more radical Country Party and even the Labour Party for bolder credit policies. In 1928 Reform lost conservative votes in both city and country to United, and could not maintain its claim to be the one authentic anti-Labour party. Yet, in spite of the apparent landslide of 1925, Reform had never succeeded in gaining a majority of electoral votes, and was thus never truly a majority party. The following figures (from Lipson's *Politics of Equality*, pp. 187–8) which relate to European seats only, demonstrate the electoral fortunes of Opposition (1905–08) and Reform (1911–28):

Year of Election	*Percentage of Valid Vote*	*Seats Obtained*
1905	30	15
1908	28	25
1911	35	36
1914	47	39
1919	36	43
1922	40	35
1925	47	51
1928	35	25

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