1890
Premiers and
Prime minister

(Miller, R., 2005: 27)

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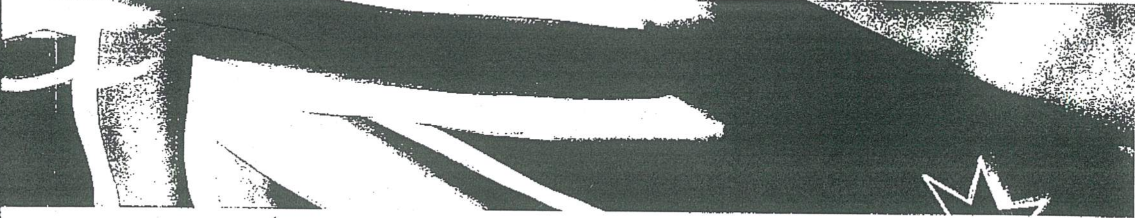
Party Politics in New Zealand



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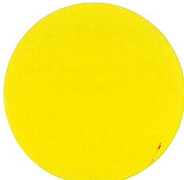

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Four waves of development

An overview of the history of the New Zealand party system reveals a complex pattern of continuity and change, with the socio-economic cleavage being the most visible thread that links the early stages of party system development.

Single party wave (1891–1908)

Before the advent of political parties, the New Zealand parliament was loosely arranged into factions, most of them held together by a combination of personal ties, provincial or community interests, and agreed policy positions (Dalziel 1981). In the absence of even the most skeletal of party systems, candidates tended to run as independents, although by the late 1880s they were under mounting pressure to declare where they stood in relation to the overall plan of action of the government (Richardson 1981, p. 198). By the time the Liberals took office in 1891 it was clear that '"party" was now to be the main determinant of political organization and behaviour in the House' (Hamer 1988, p. 13). In addition to voting together as a bloc, the Liberal members began to develop a collective identity and common core of principles and policies. Cooperation was made easier by the lack of an organised opposition (Hamer 1988, p. 34) and mounting pressure for a government that was both strong and united (Hamer 1988, p. 28).

The Liberals managed to forestall the formation of other parties by drawing support from a broad spectrum of voters—Pakeha and Maori, employers and unionists, skilled and unskilled workers, small traders, urban professionals, and farmers. Although Liberal voters were to be found in the cities and countryside, the party's fortress seats were in the newly prosperous provincial towns, especially the port seats of Gisborne, Napier, New Plymouth, Nelson and Invercargill (Hamer 1988, pp. 150–94. The party's wider coalition was sustained through its endorsement of an inclusive and socially liberal agenda, including graduated taxes, welfare reform, guaranteed recognition of the role of trade unions, and the gradual expansion of the local economy and infrastructure. Although farmers, especially sheep farmers, were less inclined to support the Liberals, with disagreement focusing on the proposed break-up of the large estates, rural opposition was far from universal—support was strong among leasehold farmers, for example, and those in the back-blocks whose standard of living had been improved by the expansion of roads, bridges and railways, as well as the creation of postal and telephone services.

The Liberals' programme of reform laid the foundations for New Zealand's long-time commitment to an active, interventionist state. Under the leadership of William Pember Reeves, landmark industrial legislation was passed to both improve working conditions and create processes for the

resolution of industrial disputes (such as the *Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act* and the *Factories Act*, both of 1894). In addition, the government introduced a number of welfare reforms, notably old-age pensions for the 'deserving poor' and more humane working conditions for women and young children.

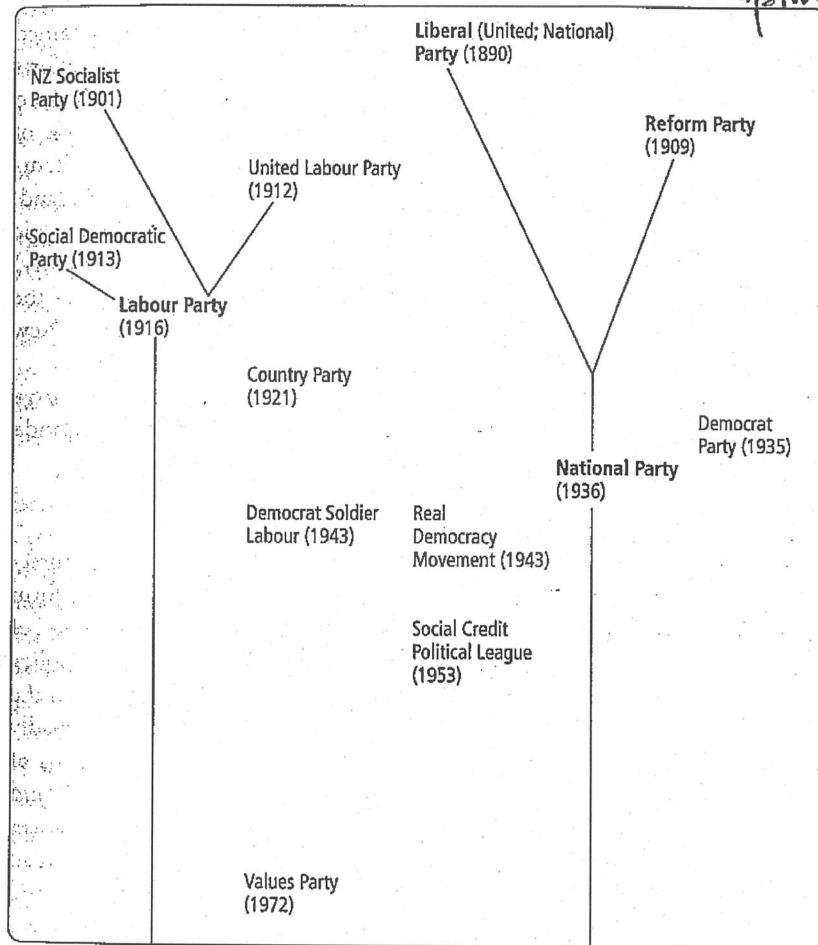
In what may appear to be a rather enlightened initiative for the time, in 1867 the New Zealand parliament had created four separate Maori seats in its seventy-member chamber (a temporary decision which became permanent in 1876). While the decision can be seen as recognition of the political rights of Maori as British subjects and landowners (Sorrenson 1986, A-28), less charitable explanations have been advanced. According to one view, extending the franchise to Maori may have been an attempt to resolve ongoing conflict with the settlers over land. From another perspective, in creating separate seats the government might have been attempting to ring-fence the influence of Maori within the political system. In 1896, the Liberals passed a law preventing Maori of more than half Maori descent from voting in the 'European' seats. By so doing, the government was able to ensure that all non-Maori seats were controlled by and in the interests of Europeans (Mulgan 1989, p. 81).

By the late 1890s the Liberals had gained a firm foothold in the Maori electorates, having captured three of the four available seats (Sorrenson 1986, B-68). Two Maori MPs went on to become cabinet ministers, holding the position of Minister for Native Affairs in successive Liberal governments. When the Liberals decided not to enter federation with Australia in 1901, one of the reasons given was that the terms of federation precluded 'aboriginal natives' from being included in population statistics. They were advised that the exclusion of Maori from any prospect of representation in an Australasian parliament 'would be a great injustice to them'.[3] Despite this expression of support for Maori political rights, a number of electoral anomalies persisted. While the secret ballot was introduced for Europeans in 1890, for example, it was not required in Maori seats for another fifty years.

By the beginning of the new century, the Liberal government's electoral coalition was beginning to unravel. With the burgeoning of the cities and provincial towns (by that time a quarter of the population lived in the four main centres) and the emergence of both an urban middle class and an industrial sector, the image of New Zealand as a 'pioneer-frontier society' was receding (Olssen 1981, p. 253). Thereafter it was the relationship between employer and worker that would determine the structure of the emerging party system. New pressure groups were being formed on the party's right and left flanks in response to growing social and economic divisions within New Zealand society. In the rural heartland, farmers who had been helped onto the land with government assistance now looked for a political party

more strongly committed to the protection of their own personal prosperity. In 1898, the Farmers' Union was formed with a view to putting pressure on the government to allow farmers to freehold their leased land. As the debate over the freehold tenure of land became more intense, the government's critics accused it of standing for 'revolutionary socialism' (Bassett 1995, p. 31). In the cities, a new pressure group, the New Zealand Employers' Federation, came to represent the views of an increasingly disaffected business community. With the help of the Farmers' Union and its freehold land supporters, it formed a new right-wing political movement, the Reform party. Under the leadership of a Mangere farmer, W.F. Massey, it took power in 1912.

Figure 2.1 Party development, 1890–1978



On the left of the political spectrum, a number of moderate and militant trade unions had been formed with a view to advancing workers' rights. Their growing opposition to what they came to regard as the pro-capitalist, anti-worker policies of the Liberals, especially in response to the demands of the well-to-do farming and city business interests (Gustafson 1980, p. 14), resulted in the formation of breakaway socialist and workers' parties. Following the electoral success of the Australian Labor party—in 1901 it held the balance of power in the federal parliament (Brown 1962, p. 4)—the Independent Political Labour League (IPLL) was formed with a view to nominating its own slate of parliamentary candidates. Although its eleven candidates suffered humiliating defeat at the 1905 election, three years later the IPLL won its first seat, that of Wellington East (Gustafson 1980, p. 19). However, a more militant political movement had begun to emerge in the wake of a series of bitter industrial disputes on the South Island's West Coast. Whereas the moderates backed the Trades Councils and the IPLL (renamed the New Zealand Labour party in 1910), the militants directed their efforts through the Federation of Labour (the 'Red Feds') and the New Zealand Socialist party, a movement that framed its arguments in the 'language of class warfare' (Richardson 1981, p. 208). Prominent among the militants were Michael Joseph Savage, Robert Semple, Peter Fraser, and Harry Holland. At the 1914 election the more radical party (now called the Social Democratic party) won two seats and the moderate group (now the United Labour party) three. In parliament they tended to work together until, primarily over the issue of military conscription, the two groups merged to create the New Zealand Labour party in 1916 (Gustafson 1980, pp. 105–19).

With these early twentieth century developments on the Liberal party's right and left flanks the defining socio-economic cleavage of New Zealand's nascent two-party system had taken root.

Three-party wave (1916–36)

While Labour's formation as a single party marked the beginning of a three-party phase, it proved to be something of a mirage, the conservative Reform and Liberal parties having been cast as the 'Tweedledum' and 'Tweedledee' of New Zealand politics (Chapman 1969, p. 5). Lack of substantive policy disagreement gave impetus to periodic attempts at fusion, especially as the electoral threat from Labour grew. However, despite appealing to a broadly conservative constituency, the two parties did represent some variations of emphasis and appeal. Reform was in the ascendancy in the North Island countryside and more prosperous city seats, as well as having made advances in the towns. In contrast, the Liberal party's survival largely depended on an ability to win increasingly close three-way contests in its former heartland seats in the provincial towns (Chapman 1969, pp. 7–8).