

Coalitions and Tabloid Interviewing

Keith Rankin, 14 March 2014

My main theme today is the state of political journalism in New Zealand's commercial media, as exemplified by TV3 and TVNZ. The problems are a mix of innumeracy, anti-intellectualism and conceit.

So I'll start by looking at an issue that, while revealing all of these traits, remains poorly understood; namely coalition building. In New Zealand, a governing coalition is any arrangement whereby parties make sufficient commitments to each other on the issues of political confidence and public finance (supply) to enable a government to be formed.

Given our general understanding – and certainly journalists' understanding – of a linear left-right spectrum of political viewpoints, under a proportional system (such as our MMP) the 'king-maker' should always be the party of the median voter. (Note that I have already used three words that relate to numeracy – linear, proportional, median – and that subtlety of thought around these three words is almost entirely missing from New Zealand's mainstream political korero.)

In the MMP era, the median (or middle) party has been New Zealand First (1996), Labour (1999), United Future (2002), New Zealand First (2005), National (2008), United Future (2011). (See my [Wooing the Median Voter](#), *NZ Herald*, 11 Sep 2013.) Considering just the parties in our present parliament, the left-right spectrum would be (from left to right): Mana, Green, Labour, New Zealand First, Maori, United Future, National, Act. The median MP at present is United Future's Peter Dunne; he has 60 MPs to his left and 60 MPs to his right.

The Maori Party, while having no influence over who would be Government (Peter Dunne, not Pita Sharples, was Kingmaker in 2011), decided in 2008 and 2011 that it could achieve more by participating in government than by throwing rocks at government. But it incurred a huge political cost, because of the politics of perception; the media-enhanced perception that by "going with National" they had somehow betrayed their supporters.

Narcissistic TV3 political editor Patrick Gower made a pig's ear of this part of his recent interview with David Cunliffe (*The Nation*, 1 March). He kept pressing Cunliffe to say that the Green Party and the Labour Party should go into the election campaign as already-determined coalition partners. The issue as Gower seemed to understand it, is that big parties form semi-permanent political partnerships with the parties they like the most. Yet the most important player, the king-maker, is not known until after each election.

In reality, parties form partnerships with the purpose of forming a government; that's much more about arithmetic and the strategic importance of the centre-ground than it is about chumminess. Further, when Labour or National hold the king-maker median position – as they did in 1999 and 2008 – they still need to form partnerships with the parties they may depend on in subsequent elections. This means that the parties on the left and right – Mana, Green, Act – are incidental to the process of coalition formation, but do represent part of the bargaining power of their allied major parties. And it means that the actual process of coalition-formation only begins once the median (king-maker) party is known.

If the Green Party wants to play an active role in the coalition-building process, it has to usurp the centre ground from any other small party that may be occupying the strategic middle position. It can only do that in 2014 by having post-election coalition discussions with National. Further, Green voters' interests would be much better served by a National-Green government than by a National-Act-Conservative government.

(As an aside, John Key might consider 'punishing' Judith Collins for her recent 'optics' – a Shane Jones word for perceptions – by ranking her next to Paul Goldsmith on the 2014 party list and inviting Colin Craig to stand for the Conservative Party in Papakura. Collins would get back to Parliament OK, but would receive some interesting media attention if Craig responded in the affirmative.)

But I sense that our political journalists are not much interested in the arithmetic of democracy. For them, politics is a dark arts of back-stabbing, fund-raising and self-promotion. Some journalists, accountable only to the advertisers of the broadcasters they work for, see their pit-bull-mastiff interviewing techniques as somehow serving democracy. To the contrary, these journalists just ensure that our representatives and candidates become risk-averse, and that our parties rarely contemplate campaigning on innovative policies lest minor communication errors become overblown.

The pit-bull style of interviewing is anti-intellectual to its core. The worst offenders in the last few years have been TV3's Duncan Garner and Patrick Gower. Simon Shepherd, in his recent interview of Act's Jamie Whyte seemed to be trying to emulate Gower. Bad idea. TV1's Corran Dann is the interviewer that I like the most. While he asks the beltway 'perception' questions, he quickly moves on to more interesting fare, relating to actual issues.

I think anti-intellectualism is a particular legacy of the late Paul Holmes. Following an informative and interesting [interview](#) by Guyon Espiner of Richard Wilkinson, co-author of "The Spirit Level" – the world's most famous and accessible book about economic and social inequality – Holmes (see this [Dim-Post commentary](#)) had the [Q+A panel guffawing](#) about the alleged incomprehensibility of what this world-respected and well-spoken British academic had to say.

The next incident that disturbed me was Duncan Garner's over-the-top put-down of Green co-leader Metiria Turei on TV3's "The Vote" in 2013 (12 Sep, [transcript here](#)). Clearly, if house prices have been rising too quickly – the whole premise of the programme – then the preferred level of house prices must be lower than the current level. And the only way that house prices could get from an inflated level to an appropriate level would be for them to fall. That's simple arithmetic, and it's the way all markets are supposed to work. Falling prices are the bread of market economics. Yet Garner rudely lambasted Turei for making this simple and numerate observation. He accused her of wanting people to precipitate economic disaster. Garner then acted to prevent anyone from questioning his extreme interpretation of her answer: "So, if house prices fall as you would like, that means that some families could have negative equity which could be an economic disaster for New Zealand ... I think I've heard enough!."

The only people who would have negative equity would be those who had only just bought a house with a deposit close to zero, well aware that they were paying more for the house than it was worth. It would be no different to borrowing near to 100% to buy shares in an obviously inflated sharemarket, or borrowing to buy junk bonds. Such people, with speculation at least partly on their minds, should hardly be surprised to find themselves briefly in negative equity. If you like to gamble, just don't be surprised if you lose, and don't expect someone else to pay for your losses. Further, if some New Zealand gamblers incur losses then it is not an economic disaster for New Zealand, only a personal disappointment to the risk-takers concerned.

For genuine home-buyers, their loan contracts reflect their ability to service the loan. A price correction in the housing market does not imply that mortgagees will be forced to sell their homes.

I have already mentioned Patrick Gower's interview with David Cunliffe. Labour's present leader, more than most politicians, is a genuine intellectual. It doesn't mean he's right about everything. But he thinks about many things, including things that really matter. And he's in politics for reasons other than to promote interviewers' personality cults. He answered all of Gower's questions, certainly to my satisfaction, about fundraising trusts and on having a nice house. Gower didn't need to use repetitive questioning techniques on Cunliffe; techniques akin to those once used on little children to get them to make bizarre accusations against the likes of Peter Ellis. I'd much rather hear the views of Cunliffe than Gower. I wonder what President Obama would have made of Gower's interview. He's better than most at putting impertinent interviewers in their place.

Finally, I watched Simon Shepherd interviewing Act's new leader, Jamie Whyte (March 1). Whyte was an intellectual by profession, in the United Kingdom. A philosopher. I was interested to get some sense of who

he was. Sadly the first third of the interview was about incest, apparently because Whyte had in the previous week been asked a leading question on the topic.

The rest of the interview was reasonably interesting, but with no particular revelations. As an advocate of economic liberalism, Whyte is favours low flat taxes. (Like many others, his juxtaposition of the words "low" and "flat" is a crude rhetorical device that makes all advocates of flat taxes appear to be advocates of low taxes.) The interview also covered the National-Act electoral accommodation in Epsom. Shepherd, like so many other journalists, repeated the claim that National voters were being asked to vote for Act. Whyte himself carelessly described the Epsom accommodation in those terms.

At no stage have National voters ever been asked to vote for Act in Epsom. They have been asked to vote National. And they have voted National. The accommodation is about the second vote – the electorate vote. National voters in Epsom, unlike many Labour voters in Epsom, are politically numerate. Wanting a centre-right government, they knew that, as well as voting National, they should vote for Hide/Banks/Whyte/Seymour in order to prevent the disqualification of the nationwide Act party vote.

I wish I wish that we could have sensible media conversations on how voters in sensitive electorates can best use their electorate votes. Any Party that has played a constructive role in government deserves to not fall foul of the five percent party vote threshold. When MMP was first legislated for, the electorate-seat rule was a brilliant New Zealand adaptation of the German system. Let's accept that it allows more parties to participate in parliament, and that it significantly reduces wasted votes. Further it provides a bit of local drama to otherwise increasingly scripted contests between media and political egos.

Let the parties explain what they stand for, and why we should vote for them in September. And let the candidates have their local contests; contests that are personal and for the most part have no influence over party representation. One extra electorate MP for a party just means one less list MP for that party.

When media egos get in the way, the voters become infused with their cynicism. Democracy requires popular engagement, not popular contempt.
