

# "Coat-tailing" MPs. What's the Problem?

by Keith Rankin, 20 June 2014

We have a great MMP electoral system. It delivers proportional representation. And it gives voters a personal vote for their electorate MP as well as a party vote to choose who will govern.

But it has a problem: the five percent threshold on the Party Vote. This means, in principle, that 10 to 20 percent of votes could be wasted, if voters incline to stray from the two larger parties. The good news is that there is a solution to this problem: the electorate-seat rule (inappropriately called the "coat-tail" provision) that allows parties to avoid disqualification if a representative of that party is elected through the personal (electorate) vote.

For the electorate-seat rule to work effectively (indeed brilliantly), the main political parties, the media, and the voters need to understand the principles of effective voting. By and large, I think most voters do understand, though often they do not know that they understand.

We should not end up making decisions that we will later come to regret, simply because we are persuaded by pejorative language used by journalists skimming lightly over issues that they may not be predisposed to think through. When these kinds of issue come up, we use such language to dismiss what we think we don't like, and we don't even engage with the issue of whether the alternative might be better or worse.

## **What do voters want?**

Voters want parties that will work together for the collective benefit of all New Zealanders. Thus making accommodations ("doing deals" to the cynical) to facilitate both your business (the business of governing) and your business partners should be seen as virtues rather than as wicked manipulations of the system. Acting to ensure that votes for parties you wish to govern with are not wasted is not only good for them; it's a way of showing that you are committed to success.

Voters want to vote for their favourite party. No problem. MMP facilitates that; it's what the party vote is for.

It's getting our heads around the electoral vote that's trickier. Here we vote for a person, not a party. In almost all cases voters know who has a chance of becoming their electorate MP. And they know that, realistically, only two candidates in each electoral contest have any chance. Thus a vote for any other candidate is an intentionally wasted vote.

In Epsom this year, all voters, whatever their party affiliations, should vote for either David Seymour or Paul Goldsmith if they want their vote to contribute to the electorate contest. Because of the wider political circumstances, people wanting a National-led government should vote for Seymour. And all people in Epsom wanting a Labour-led government will want Act party votes to be wasted, so they should vote for Goldsmith.

Likewise, in all other electorates where the leaders of the parties in (or wanting to be in) the present governing coalition (using the term 'coalition' in its loose New Zealand sense) are standing. Wherever Te Ururoa Flavell, Peter Dunne, or Colin Craig are standing, supporters of the present government should support those candidates. And opponents of the present government should vote for the only other candidate who can win.

The matter of accommodation is no more than the leaders of National or Labour gently reminding their voters to (i) vote for National or Labour, and (ii) vote for the candidate in your electorate whose success will do the most to achieve a National-led or Labour-led government. (We must always remind ourselves – and especially remind the media – that the electorate vote is a vote between candidates [eg between Seymour and Goldsmith] and not a vote between parties. No National Party supporter in Epsom is being asked to vote for Act. However, it is in the interests of such a supporter to vote for Seymour over Goldsmith in the electorate (ie non-party) vote.

### **What about 2017?**

While it's looking unlikely at the moment, let's assume we get a Labour-led government this September. This would most likely mean a coalition with Green, NZ First, Internet Mana and possibly Maori. It would also mean that Green, NZ First and Internet Mana would all inevitably lose support between 2014 and 2017. (Poor Nick Clegg in the UK. His party has become so unpopular for simply doing what they had to do; form a government with the only bigger party with enough votes.)

Should David Cunliffe act to ensure that Green, NZ First and Internet Mana votes are not wasted? Of course he should, and for two reasons. First, the wasting (or not) of those votes could easily determine whether Mr Cunliffe gets a second term as Prime Minister. Second, by dropping big hints that Labour voters should vote Norman, Peters and Harawira in the electorates that these leaders stand in should be seen as itself part of a process of coalition-building, as well as simply doing the right thing by those who have stood with him, and taken plenty of knocks in the process.

Now, let's imagine that the electorate-seat non-disqualification rule is abolished by a Cunliffe-led government. Would Cunliffe be expected to stand idly by as those three parties looked to fall below the 5% or 4% threshold in the party vote? Could Cunliffe afford to lose those votes? Of course not.

What would happen is that parties like Labour would have to find other ways of ensuring that their partner parties' votes count. The most obvious way would be to drop hints that people towards the left of Labour should consider giving Internet Mana their party vote. Labour's present 'vote Labour' message would then be severely compromised.

Basically, if you change the rules to increase the proportion of party votes that are wasted, then the need to do "deals" with a nod and a wink is increased, not decreased.

## **1-2-3 Voting**

If we did, perchance, abolish the electorate-seat rule, then there is an alternative rule that could eliminate the problems that people say they don't like about "coat-tailing". This alternative also eliminates the problem of wasted votes that the 5% threshold on party vote creates.

Essentially, it would be to introduce preferential party voting.

First, we should note that people find different voting systems – eg in local body elections – confusing. A process of 1-2-3 voting could be applied to any voting system: MMP, STV, FPP, SM or whatever.

1-2-3 voting is to simply choose three candidates or parties in order of preference. In the Epsom electorate poll, a Green voter might choose Genter (1), Wood (2), Goldsmith (3). That would ensure that, after the elimination of Genter and Wood, the vote would count for Goldsmith over Seymour.

We still use FPP ('first past the post' voting) in electorates (such as Epsom), and in most mayoral contests. And we use a kind of multiple FPP system in most council elections. FPP works as a kind of DIY (do-it-yourself) preferential system. Voters knowing that Genter and Wood will not be elected simply skip to the chase, and vote for Goldsmith. It's an inefficient form of preferential voting, though.

In some local elections we use STV. That means we already number candidates in order of preference. Here 1-2-3 voting is a minor simplification, and still gets the correct result. Further restricting to 3 choices eliminates those snide comments about STV, about having to number every single candidate.

It is in MMP that the 1-2-3 system could work a treat. MMP is really all about the party vote. The electorate vote is an FPP side-dish.

What say we could choose three parties, in order of preference? Then we could freely give a 1 to NZ First (if that really is our choice!) without worrying about our vote being wasted if NZ First didn't get 5% of the 1-votes. We could give our number 2 vote to Internet Mana. And our number 3 vote to Labour. Thus, in the event of NZ First or Internet Mana falling foul of the 5% threshold, our vote would still count for a Labour-led government.

## **Conclusion**

The campaign against the electorate-seat rule is a campaign of cynicism rather than of substance. Those opposing what they for rhetorical reasons choose to call "coat-tailing" have not addressed the issue of how parties would show loyalty towards their partner parties. The present electorate seat rule substantially offsets the problems created by the party-vote threshold. 1-2-3 voting (with the party-vote threshold still in place) would achieve the same ends as the electorate-seat rule, and in a more efficient way, without the need for party leaders to give the occasional nod or wink.

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