

Reflecting on the Northland By-Election

Keith Rankin, 30 March 2015

National's vulnerability in Northland should have taken nobody by surprise. Winston Peters is a very natural fit in his tūrangawāeae. National, on 49% in Northland at the general election did not even have a majority of party votes. Patrick Gower finally noted this in *The Nation* this weekend, but was completely unaware of its significance; a majority of votes in 2014 were cast for other parties. Instead Gower told us that Northland had been a safe National seat since its inception in 1966! (When will the media stop calling the winning margin in an FPP election a 'majority'?)

Who does Gower's research? The Northland seat has existed of course since New Zealand became a self-governing colony (long before 1966); albeit under different names. In 1966, under the name of Hobson, Northland was won by the Social Credit leader Vernon Cracknell. Of all the 'expert' commentators, the only one I ever heard mention this was Don McKinnon on Q+A yesterday.

In character, Northland may be closer to Westland (now West Coast - Tasman), a conservative electorate that is quite different to more typical farming regions such as those in Waikato, Taranaki and Southland. Northland has always been fertile territory for a party like New Zealand First, when the moment was propitious.

The most significant presence in Russell on Saturday night may have been Shane Jones, another Maori blokey populist from the North. I can certainly see Jones coming back to Parliament in 2017 on the New Zealand First list, and becoming NZ First leader and Northland candidate in 2020.

Now that New Zealand First have this electorate, it has become New Zealand First's 'home' electorate. I cannot see National coming up with a man or woman of the north who could win this seat from a Winston Peters or a Shane Jones.

Another significance of Northland is that even the mainstream media is just about getting to understand both FPP and MMP voting. Electorate contests are FPP, a system that only works in a head-to-head contest (and then only at the local level; watch out for lottery-like happenings in the upcoming United Kingdom election). Andrew Little figured this out quick enough. In an FPP contest, the only reason to vote for an 'also-ran' electorate candidate is if you are completely indifferent about who actually wins, or if the contest appears to be 'no contest' (such as Selwyn or Waikato).

What the media present to their consumers as scandalous 'deals' (eg around Willow-Jean Prime this time) are now seen as what they always have been; common-sense politics.

In general elections, it is the party vote, not the electorate vote that National and Labour need from Northland. At a national level, these head-to-head FPP electorate contests mainly give local colour and ensure a semblance of geographical balance. They also give smaller parties a home base, an opportunity to maintain their proportionality in the party vote without having to meet a 5% threshold.

Because in MMP elections (not FPP by-elections) the actual election is the Party Vote, tribal voters do not have to vote for their party's candidate when they can actually vote for their party (unlike in the UK). It frees them to vote in their electorate for someone who can win, and who they believe will represent them better than the other man or woman who could win. The mainstream media are on the verge of getting this. Almost everyone else got it long ago. The outrage about electorate 'deals' has always a mainstream media beat-up.
