

## Is the System Really to Blame?

*Graeme Hunt, Why MMP Must Go: The Case for Ditching the Electoral Disaster of the Century, Waddington Press, Auckland, 1998*

*Reviewed by David Denmark*

**G**RAEME HUNT, a staff writer with New Zealand's weekly *National Business Review*, has written a provocative book which highlights the most important tension underlying New Zealand's tumultuous experiment with electoral reform: that between decisive party government and the potential such government has for breeding a delegitimising lack of accountability or 'elective dictatorship'.

Clearly fearing a curtailment of New Zealand's liberal economic reforms under proportional representation while generally affirming the benefits of the first-past-the-post (FPP) electoral systems and single-party government, Hunt argues that government must, above all else, be sufficiently powerful to deliver necessary — even if frequently painful and unpopular — economic and social policy outcomes. Unlike the majority of his fellow citizens in the decade 1986-96, Hunt contends that politicians 'do not exist to make promises or indeed to deliver on those promises but to make good government' (p. 141). He views the painful economic adjustments and social policy reversals which led voters punitively to 'restructure' the nation's electoral system (see Denmark, 1996) as just the sort of bitter policy medicine with which 'good' governments must persevere, irrespective of the electorate's sentiments. Hunt taps an issue of governmental legitimacy which, in many respects, remains unresolved in New Zealand.

Hunt argues that New Zealand's new mixed-member-proportional (MMP) electoral system, used for the first time in the 1996 election, has precluded decisive government and, to date, failed to live up to its own promise to ensure open, consensual and accountable government. Hunt concedes that New Zealand's erstwhile FPP electoral system was susceptible to the arrogance of unchecked power. But he thinks that this danger pales by comparison with the harm inherent in a (likely) coalition MMP government which is hamstrung by compromise and patchwork policy accords. Hunt contends that the piecemeal accommodations of minority interests in multi-faceted governments do not enhance representation but destroy vibrant programmatic government and policy innovation which, if left alone, would have better served the nation. But since neither voters nor parliament would be likely to return to the old system, Hunt's equivocal solution for New Zealand is a citizen-initiated referendum to commit the country to an FPP system slightly modified by a modest role for supplementary-member proportional representation. Indeed, a movement to initiate such a referendum is already under way and has accrued increasing support, reflecting the steadily mounting unpopularity of MMP since the 1996 election.

Two problems undermine Hunt's prescriptive agenda. First, though his account of scandal and extravagance under the first MMP National-New Zealand First

coalition government is fair, he fails to demonstrate that these shortcomings are inherently the consequence of MMP rather than the self-serving arrogance of politicians irrespective of the electoral rules under which they assumed the parliamentary stage. Second, he doesn't convincingly demonstrate that his preferred system of 'FPP with attitude' would avoid the lack of accountability that drove the call for electoral reform in the first place. The result, ironically in view of its self-proclaimed intention of stirring a voter-led revolt against the 'electoral disaster of the century', is a book which is perhaps strongest in its review of Labour's and National's counter-productive and cynical manipulations of the electoral reform issue in the approach to MMP's endorsement by referendum in 1993, and weakest in its case for a return to (a slightly modified) FPP.

An interesting component of Hunt's argument is his account of a missed opportunity for New Zealand to pursue effective electoral reform. Hunt argues that the country may well have avoided its recent tumult if, in 1950, it had set up an elected senate as an institutionalised brake on parliamentary power. Instead, faced with the need to abolish the discredited appointed Legislative Council, the Holland National Government opted to abolish the second chamber altogether. But a popularly elected upper house using, as does Australia's Senate, a system of single-transferable vote/proportional representation (STV-PR) may well have been an effective check on House of Representatives power which was otherwise 'ripe for abuse' (p. 19) and thus provided a functional outlet for voter frustrations. In the absence of such a check, Hunt argues, voters turned against the electoral system itself in the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, reformist zeal by Labour's Geoffrey Palmer, a 'stacked' Royal Commission in favour of MMP, and an almost mind-numbing combination of cynical and strategically bankrupt manoeuvres by the two major parties ensured not only that MMP would be accorded disproportionate credibility as a desirable alternative, but that New Zealand's voters would have the chance to vote on the issue of electoral reform *and* to replace the existing system with the affirmation of only 50 per cent of the voters in the 1993 binding referendum. Yet neither major party leader, and only a handful of MPs, wanted electoral reform.

However, Hunt's tone of ironic incredulity at the cynicism of these manoeuvres works against his own agenda of restoring aggressive FPP government, since it helps to explain why New Zealand's voters, with some justification, came to punish their major parties for their arrogance. In the end, the pro-MMP forces had merely to 'play on public anger' while citing the Royal Commission's endorsement of MMP as a desirable alternative in order to assure themselves victory in the referendum.

Hunt's argument for once again reforming New Zealand's electoral system hinges on two points that are less persuasively conveyed than his depiction of electoral arrogance under the old system. The first is his attempt to discredit MMP by laying the predominant share of the blame for post-election scandals at the doorstep of the electoral system. While it is true that New Zealand First's neophyte MPs would probably not have been elected under the old electoral system, it is less obvious that MMP is responsible for their excesses. Hunt may well be right that MMP

broadens small-party representation and, as a consequence, can serve to promote the elevation of 'political greenhorns to positions of power' (p. 119). Indeed, this was virtually inevitable in the first election under the new electoral rules. Nonetheless, it is not inevitable that parliamentary freshers will abuse the public trust.

Similarly, while MMP may indeed promote two distinct degrees of party attachment for constituency and list MPs, it is not inherent in MMP that list MPs will be disciplinary loose cannons. At the same time, FPP systems can create incentives for MPs to establish and sustain a personal vote through constituency service and local activities, which, to some degree, can immunise them from the fortunes of their party. Though these are strongest in non-party governmental systems such as in the US, small but significant constituency-level effects on MPs' electoral fortunes, with clear implications for their attention and their loyalties, have been shown in such parliamentary systems as the UK and Australia (Bean, 1990; Cain et al., 1984).

In short, New Zealand First's extravagances since the 1996 election should be blamed on the individuals concerned and not the electoral rules that promoted them to parliament.

Finally, Hunt's call for electoral reform rests on a return to FPP with a modest role for supplementary-member proportional representation, because, though 'logic would dictate a return to FPP ... parliament would not support such a radical about-face and neither would the electorate' (p. 135). But it is not clear why these list MPs would be less susceptible to parliamentary independence than list MPs under MMP. Hunt seems convinced that, because there would be only 19 of them out of a total of 99, as opposed to 55 out of a total of 120 under MMP, and because they would be apportioned using the parties' overall constituency vote totals rather than a separate vote as under MMP, they would never be sufficiently powerful to constitute a 'tail wagging the dog' (p. 137). But if these 19 list MPs could never 'wag the dog', voters may not view them as providing a credible check on the parties' power, or as constituting an alternative avenue of parliamentary access for minority interests. If so, then Hunt's formula, skewed as it is toward party-governmental power, might well be caught, like New Zealand's previous FPP system, between the need for decisive party government and the need for sufficient accountability and checks to sustain the support of the electorate.

## References

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