

# **New Zealand First: parallels between the man and the party**

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## ***Abstract:***

*This paper will address the likelihood of the New Zealand First party returning to parliament at the 2011 General Election. Following fifteen years in parliament, in 2008 New Zealand First failed to reach the five-per cent threshold, or to secure an electorate seat. With a few exceptions, notably the Social Credit/Democratic party (1953-1987), small parties in New Zealand have tended to come and go and are rarely long-term movements. By focusing on the emergence and decline of New Zealand First, this paper engages with the wider study of New Zealand's modern party system, specifically the phenomenon of the limited lifespan of small parties, and the notion advanced by a number of scholars that parties are profoundly influenced by their origins (Downs 1957; Duverger 1959; Rawson 1969; Panebianco 1988; Jaensch 1994; Hug 2001). This paper posits that New Zealand First emerged primarily as a political vehicle for the frustrated ambition of its mercurial leader, Winston Peters. Parallels have been identified between the man and the party as it progressed through an oscillating pattern of success and failure, thereby confirming that Peters continues to be the personification of the movement. While political parties tend to rejuvenate following electoral downturn, which typically involves leadership change, the findings here question the effectiveness of such a strategy for a party so reliant on its leader for voter identification.*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper constitutes the initial findings for research undertaken for my MA thesis which examines the emergence and development of New Zealand First. As such this paper constitutes work in progress.

## **Introduction**

Small parties, particularly those of splinter origin, are typically dependent on the coattails of a strong and charismatic leader in infancy. As the small party matures various developments bring about the consolidation of an identity of its own, surpassing the dominance of the leader as the personification of the movement. This was indeed the path of development for the Canadian Reform Party and New Zealand's Social Credit Party. In the case of New Zealand First however it can be argued that the consolidation of an identity separate from the founding leader has not occurred, with Peters continuing to be the personification of the party as it has matured. A central theme of this paper is thus the notion of parallels between the man and the party as it has passed through various ages. Such parallels are overtly evidenced by three aspects: (1) the voter profile of New Zealand First has continued to reflect those social groups nurtured by Peters in his early political career; (2) the policy platform and achievements have continued to cater to these groups; and (3) the party has continued to assume a personality based model of organisation.

## **The political philosophy of Winston Peters**

Scholars of political parties and party systems point out the importance of a party's origin for explaining its development, understanding why it differs from other parties, and for predicting its fate in the party system (Downs 1957; Duverger 1959; Rawson 1969; Panebianco 1988; Jaensch 1994; Hug 2001). Indeed Maurice Duverger stated that 'just as men [and women] bear all their lives the mark of their childhood, so parties are profoundly influenced by their origin' (1959: xxii). Given the profound and enduring influence of New Zealand First's founding and only leader, Winston Peters, a comprehensive understanding of the party's origin begins with an appraisal of the early political career of Peters and the factors which have shaped his political philosophy.

A former New Zealand First Chief of Staff who worked for Peters for five years has recently advanced an astute observation. When discussing Peters, Damien Edwards (2009) describes 'a man part Māori and part Scottish – a dichotomy that shaped his

political philosophy'. Indeed, in his early political career Peters developed a political philosophy based on support for the centrist practicalities and conservative economic management espoused by Sir Robert Muldoon in his two terms as Prime Minister. The Muldoon era corresponded with Peters' entry into national politics as the Member for Hunua in 1978. In 1982 the Muldoon Government had introduced a wage and price freeze and pursued policies in the area of industry assistance and monetary policy and exchange rate management (Boston 1992b: 207-8). "Rob's Mob" was the term used to describe those voters attracted to the centrist practicalities of the Muldoon-led National Government from 1975 to 1984. Colin James likens the political orientation pursued by Muldoon that attracted this group of voters, to the right-wing bourgeois political movement in France in the 1950s lead by Pierre Poujade; a 'small-people's right wing', underpinned by xenophobia fuelled by fear of big foreign companies and a desire for a highly protective government to ensure the economic prosperity of 'ordinary' New Zealanders (James 1997: 77).

With the decline and ultimate resignation of Muldoon, Peters had begun to pick up the support of "Rob's Mob". Disquietude felt by this group of voters was heightened by the drastically transitioning social and political environment. As James (2009) commented in an interview with the author, there was wisdom in Peters' instinct to reach backwards to "Rob's Mob" and pledge to look after them as they aged, given the potential to exploit their disorientation with the changing political environment. From this stemmed Peters' personal opposition to successive government's commitment to economic liberalisation, implemented between 1984 and 1993 with unorthodox swiftness and rigour (Miller 2006b: 378). The program of reform, subsequently coined "Rogernomics" and "Ruthanasia" after the Ministers in charge of the finance portfolio, Labour's Roger Douglas and National's Ruth Richardson, was the antithesis to Muldoon's conservative economic management. Over the course of three terms government intervention was significantly lifted, New Zealand's borders were opened to international competition and foreign investment, state assets were privatised, the labour market was deregulated, and there was a breakdown in the post-war Keynesian consensus with social policy reforms in such areas as health care and retirement income. The backdrop to the reforms was prolonged economic recession and burgeoning unemployment.

On his Māori side Peters' had been introduced to the 'idiosyncratic world of Māori politics beyond parliament' as a land claim lawyer for his iwi, Ngati Wai (Edwards 2009). As a National Party MP, Peters maintained strong personal relationships with key Māori figures, such as the late Māori Queen and the Paramount chief of Tuwharetoa (Edwards 2009). Such relationships were built on Peters' concern for Māori development, an issue that had also been enhanced with the transitioning political environment as Māori were some of the worst affected by the social and economic reforms. There was growing concern for the fact that 'Māori were disproportionately less education, less healthy, and less well-housed but were more unemployed and more imprisoned' (Sharp 1990: 255). What underpinned Peters' philosophy on Māori development was a belief that 'Māori should succeed through health, education, housing, employment' rather than looking backwards to the Treaty of Waitangi and using it as 'an excuse for Māori not to succeed through these avenues' (Edwards 2009).<sup>2</sup>

A second useful observation made by Edwards (2009) was that Peters' early political career was characterised by an oscillating pattern of success and failure. His first attempt at entering parliament was at the 1975 general election as the National candidate in the Northern Māori seat. Although there was an over nine per cent swing towards National, Labour's candidate Matiu Rata secured the seat with a 4, 151 majority (McRobie and Roberts 1978).<sup>3</sup> Ultimately Peters' had a controversial path into parliament as the Member for Hunua. He stood in the seat at the 1978 election and became the Member in May 1979, not before a two-month-long Supreme Court dispute. Hunua was a newly created electorate with a disparate mix of voters.<sup>4</sup> At the

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<sup>2</sup> The political philosophy of Peters' is also strongly underpinned by his ingrained partisanship to conservative politics. The Peters family had pursued strong partisan involvement in the National Party for many years that, on more than one occasion, went beyond longstanding membership. Marie Peters stood as the National candidate in the Northern Māori seat, Jim Peters was active in the campaign for National's candidate, Sir James Henare, in the same seat, and Ian Peters was the successful National candidate in the central North Island seat of Tongariro at the 1990 election. Peters himself was a member of the Auckland University Young Nationals from 1967 to 1970, going on to become the chairman of the Northern Māori Electorate from 1976 to 1977. In 1975 he was the candidate for Northern Māori, before moving on to join the Hunua Electorate Committee in 1977. (Gustafson 1986: 337).

<sup>3</sup> This was not surprising as Labour had maintained a stronghold in all Māori seats since 1943, and the Northern Māori seat had been held by the Labour Party since 1938 (Miller 2005: 33).

<sup>4</sup> By positioning the boundary line across the width of the bottleneck on the southern outskirts of Auckland it combined the wealthy eastern suburb of Howick with the low socio-economic demographic found in various southern suburbs.

1978 election, Labour's candidate, Malcolm Douglas, won the seat of Hunua with a narrow majority of 301 votes (NZ Labour Party Hunua electorate 1979). Peters, with the support of party leader Robert Muldoon, claimed irregularities and presented a petition to the Electoral Court, which ordered a recount. On reassessment nearly 500 votes were classed as informal and disallowed (NZ Labour Party Hunua electorate 1979). As a result of the recount Peters won the seat with a majority of 192 votes.<sup>5</sup> Among Labour MPs he was immediately ill-favoured for being 'the court-appointed member' (Hames 1995), a reputation which came without the due respect a parliamentarian would normally acquire. It was a short stint in parliament as Peters was defeated in the seat of Hunua by Labour's Colin Moyle at the following election. National had secured only a narrow victory in the 1981 election, with the Springbok Tour issue contributing to a loss of ground in the cities, and National in the end won fewer votes than Labour nationwide.<sup>6</sup> At the 1984 election Peters was once again successful, this time in the electorate seat of Tauranga, a seat he would retain for the ensuing seven parliamentary terms.

Although Peters secured a safe electorate seat, the oscillating pattern of success and failure continued within the ranks of the National Party. Peters was promoted to the opposition frontbench following the 1987 election, presumably due to his effective attack on the Labour government in early 1987 over the "Māori Loans Affair". This attack seriously damaged the reputability of Labour's Minister of Māori Affairs, Koro Wetere, by exposing plans within the Māori Affairs Department to pursue a fraudulent six hundred million dollar development loan (TVNZ 1993a). Retaliating against the internal pressure from advocates of market liberalisation, led by Richardson, Peters began to divert from the National Party line, establishing a contradictory position on anti-nuclear and Treaty issues as well as outspoken criticism of Bolger's leadership (Munro 1991: 8; McLeay 1995: 99). Consequently, in 1989 Peters was demoted in the National caucus.

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<sup>5</sup> For further investigation the University of Auckland Library's Special Collections MSS & Archives 94/7 is a collection of documents from the hearing in the Supreme Court. The archive contains examples of interview sheets, registration cards, allowed and disallowed special votes, submissions and court papers.

<sup>6</sup> Former-National Prime Minister, Norman Kirk, had made a promise in 1972 that the National government would not let its opposition to apartheid interfere with sporting contacts (Gustafson 1986: 121). In honour of this promise, the Muldoon government did not intervene to prevent the winter 1981 Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand, despite large scale protests against the tour in cities across the country (Gustafson 1986: 144).

Indicative of Bolger's pragmatic political style, Peters was however accommodated in cabinet following National's 1990 victory. This was a short stint of success however as Peters was dismissed from cabinet in October 1991. Despite the appointment of Richardson to the finance portfolio exhibiting a clear shift away from the centrist practicalities of the Muldoon era, Peters continued to espouse this platform as a cabinet minister. He publically accused National of not following the economic policies in its 1990 manifesto (Hames 1995: 126) and constantly criticised Richardson's policies (Long 1991a).<sup>7</sup> Outspoken deviation from the party line was compounded by Peters' attempt to 'railroad cabinet into accepting his scheme for Māori development, *Ka Awatea*' (McLeay 1995: 200). The policy document was created by a planning group commissioned by Peters to research areas requiring improvement. It proposed solutions to these shortcomings, such as a new ministry responsible for Māori health, education, training and resource management.<sup>8</sup> Peters perceived it to be a blueprint for Māori development and directed a large budget to launch the scheme and ratify it with Māori (TVNZ 1993a), yet had failed to table the document in cabinet prior to its public launch, thus overruling the normal practice of debating the issue 'within the confidential setting of cabinet meetings' (Cabinet Office 1996: 144), undermining the strength and unity of the government by forcing the issue to be debated in the public arena. When Bolger dismissed Peters from cabinet he explained that Peters' behaviour had been 'inconsistent with continued membership in the cabinet and inconsistent with the convention of collective responsibility among cabinet ministers' (quoted in Long 1991b: 1).

From the backbench Peters continued to deviate from the party line giving rise to the motion moved to expel him from the National Party caucus, which was formalised when the party executive vetoed Peters as a National candidate at the 1993 general election under Rule 108 of its constitutional powers. The oscillating pattern of success and failure continued, with a One Network News/Heylen poll at the end of March 1993 showing Peters to be the most preferred Prime Minister, ahead of Prime Minister

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<sup>7</sup> Peters was the only minister in cabinet to not support the Bank of New Zealand (BNZ) rescue package tabled by Richardson in November 1990, arguing that 'the government should let the BNZ fall over' (Hames 1995: 140).

<sup>8</sup> See Ministry of Māori Development 1991, *Ka Awatea*, Report of the Ministerial Planning Group, The Group, Wellington.

Jim Bolger by just under twenty per cent, and Labour party leader Mike Moore by nearly ten per cent (Heylen Research Centre 1993a). A second poll held in May 1993 reported that over thirty per cent of the voters polled had indicated support for a hypothetical party formed by Peters (Heylen Research Centre 1993b). The overwhelming public support for Peters reflected distrust of the two established parties, and the favourable conditions for the emergence of a small party in New Zealand's party system, hence Peters' defection to a political vehicle of his own, launching New Zealand First in July 1993.

### **New Zealand First's oscillating pattern of success and failure**

The first parallel between the party and the man is evidenced by the fact that New Zealand First has also experienced an oscillating pattern of success and failure since its inception. Having formed just four months out from the 1993 general election New Zealand First was able to secure over eight per cent of the vote, and two electorate seats,<sup>9</sup> largely due to the popularity of its leader in the opinion polls following his defection from the National Party. The Party's electoral fortunes peaked at the 1996 general election, securing six electorate seats and 13.4 per cent of the nationwide party vote. With the advent of MMP came representation in proportion to share of the party vote, which meant the 1996 result awarded New Zealand First seventeen seats in parliament. It not only became the third largest party in parliament, it also held the balance of power, with all four possible governing options requiring either the formal coalition commitment or the less formal support of New Zealand First.<sup>10</sup> Nine of its MPs became ministers following the announcement of the National-New Zealand First coalition agreement in December, with Peters securing the position of deputy

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<sup>9</sup> The number of MPs increased from two to five in the months leading up to the 1996 general election as three major party MPs defected to New Zealand First, Peter McCardle and Jack Elder from National and Labour, respectively, as well as Michael Laws from National. Soon after shifting to New Zealand First, Laws resigned from parliament, bringing New Zealand First's MP numbers back to four.

<sup>10</sup> The two options requiring a formal coalition commitment were: (1) a National-New Zealand First majority coalition government; or (2) a Labour-New Zealand First minority coalition government, with explicit support from the Alliance. The two remaining options requiring the less formal support of New Zealand First were: (1) a National minority government with support from New Zealand First, and possibly ACT and United; or (2) a Labour minority government with explicit support from the Alliance and New Zealand First (Boston and McLeay 1997: 212). New Zealand First also influenced the ruling out of options beyond these four, for instance 'any coalition deal between National and ACT was always improbable...because it was not likely to secure the support of New Zealand First (Boston and McLeay 1997: 213).

Prime Minister and treasurer. The decision to coalesce with National was however at odds with a number of Peters' supporters, especially the Māori, and it was largely due to this as well as the controversial collapse of the coalition in October 1998, that New Zealand First suffered a decline in electoral support at the 1999 general election. Although the Party's electoral support fluctuated at ensuing elections, it has never fully recovered membership numbers nor the level of parliamentary representation that it had achieved at its peak in 1996.

The slump in Peters' popularity at the 1999 general election was evidenced by the extremely slim majority achieved in his ordinarily safe electorate seat of Tauranga. Peters defeated National's candidate, Katherine O'Regan, by just sixty-three votes (Chief Electoral Office 1999). By association, the party's nationwide vote also suffered a severe drop, to just 4.3 per cent. The party's entry into parliament, with five seats, thereby rested on the sixty-three votes that had secured Peters' victory in Tauranga. Following a period of recuperation in opposition, in 2002 the party launched a simple campaign focused on Peters (Donnelly 2003: 118). Peters' majority in Tauranga increased to over ten thousand (Chief Electoral Office 2002), and by association New Zealand First was once again the third largest party in parliament, with 10.4 per cent of the nationwide party vote providing the party with thirteen seats in parliament.

Both major parties were strong and evenly matched in the 2005 campaign (James 2007: 52) which saw the closing of the gap that had opened up in previous elections for small parties as a result of the weakness of one or other, or both, of the major parties.<sup>11</sup> The decline in Peters' popularity was indicated by a defeat in the seat of Tauranga, and by association New Zealand First dropped down to just 5.7 per cent in the party vote. With seven seats in parliament New Zealand First agreed to support the Labour-Progressives minority government on matters of confidence and supply, ending its seven years in parliamentary opposition. Peters was the only member of his caucus to be appointed to a ministerial position, assuming the portfolios of Foreign Affairs, Racing, and Associate Senior Citizens, outside of cabinet. To a large extent his ministerial post was seen as contradictory to an election campaign speech he had

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<sup>11</sup> The combined vote share for the two major parties exceeded eighty per cent at the 2005 general election, over ten per cent higher than any other election under MMP in New Zealand (James 2007: 52).

given, stating that ‘genuinely we don’t care about the baubles of office’ (Peters 2005). This perception, coupled with Peters’ central position in a donations scandal emerging in 2008, contributed to the poor electoral fortunes of the party at the 2008 election, and ultimate removal of New Zealand First from parliament. Thus a turbulent pattern of rise, first fall, partial revival and fall again can be identified in the development of New Zealand First since its inception, in a similar vein to the oscillating pattern of success and failure that characterised Peters’ early political career. This paper posits that Peters’ personality and political philosophy was central to the dramatic changes in parliamentary representation and public support, and concomitantly the rollercoaster nature of New Zealand First’s development indeed impeded the consolidation of the party organisation and identity, thereby lending itself to an enduring dependence on its leader.

### **Influence of personality on electoral support**

The party’s electoral fortunes across the six general elections have been overtly correlated with Peters’ personal popularity in opinion polls and his level of support garnered in the seat of Tauranga. Furthermore, the voter profile of the party at each election has been dominated by those social groups nurtured by Peters in his early political career, the conservative elderly or “Rob’s Mob”, and Māori. Given the disparate nature of this combination the party lacked a tight-knit support base, relying on the personality of Peters to reconcile its supporters.

New Zealand First’s 1993 voter profile reflected the party’s lack of a tight-knit support base, with it being ‘partly class-based, partly ethnic, partly regional and partly religious’ (Vowles et al. 1995: 15). It also reflected the disparate groups making up Peters’ personal support base. Voters aged sixty-five and over made up thirty-two per cent of New Zealand First’s voter profile, and the party secured over twenty per cent of the total valid vote across all Māori electorates, including the victory of its candidate, Tau Henare, in the Northern Māori seat (Vowles et al. 1995: 15-23). Eighty per cent of New Zealand First’s vote came from the lowest income bracket of voters earning less than 30,000 dollars per annum (Vowles et al. 1995: 15-23). The makeup of the party’s 1993 voter profile demonstrated the significance of the protest vote to

New Zealand First's electoral fortunes, as a result of public disquietude over prolonged economic recession and radical economic and social reform pursued over three parliamentary terms by both major parties, concomitant to Peters' personal opposition to Rogernomics during his early political career.

The 1993 vote was also geographically concentrated in the upper half of the North Island (Vowles et al. 1995: 28). A breakdown of individual electorates showed concentrated pockets of elderly, low income and Māori voters in the upper-North Island region, correlating with the personal support base of Peters. New Zealand First secured a victory in two upper-North Island electorate seats at the 1993 general election. Peters was re-elected in Tauranga, and Tau Henare won a majority in Northern Māori, previously a Labour stronghold. 1991 Census data showed that a quarter of the Tauranga electorate population were aged sixty years and over (Department of Statistics 1993: 14). This was the largest elderly population out of all general and Māori electoral districts (Department of Statistics 1993: 22). The Tauranga electorate also had above average unemployment, at 11.8 per cent, and almost seventy per cent of the population were earning 20,000 dollars or less per annum (New Zealand Parliament 1993c: 2). Similarly, the Northern Māori electorate profile had the largest population of voters aged sixty years and over out of all four Māori seats (Department of Statistics 1993: 23).

The pattern of Peters' personal support in upper-North Island electorates where the New Zealand First vote was concentrated continued with a closer look at two further examples: the Eastern Bay of Plenty and Far North electoral districts. The former had the highest percentage of Māori out of all general electorates, with over forty per cent of the voting population identifying with this ethnic group (Department of Statistics 1993: 14), sixty-six per cent of the population earned 20,000 dollars or under per annum and sixteen percent were registered as unemployed (New Zealand Parliament 1993a: 2-4). The latter example showed the highest percentage of voters in the bottom income bracket out of all general electorates, where seventy-seven per cent had an annual income of 20,000 dollars or less (Department of Statistics 1993: 14), and nearly forty per cent identified as Māori (New Zealand parliament 1993b: 1-4). This breakdown demonstrates how the electoral success of New Zealand First at its first

general election, having emerged only four months prior, can largely be put down to the existing personal popularity of its leader.

The disenchanting protest vote attracted to Peters can be seen to have played an important role in the party's significant rise in popularity at the 1996 general election. The centrality of Peters' personality was captured by the following astute observation made by Colin James at New Zealand First's 1996 party conference:

My discussions with New Zealand First supporters suggest they were attracted by the slogans, by the cudgelling of Labour and National and big business and migrants and other culprits for their misfortune, and by the attractiveness of Peters himself, battler for the "forgotten people", the "only politician who says it like it is". (James 1997: 80).

Five of the six electorate seats secured by New Zealand First were Māori seats, reflecting Peters' prominence in the environment of Māori politics outside of parliament. Indeed in an interview with the author Peters brought up achievements of his early political career when explaining the flood of support for New Zealand First from Māori voters:

We weren't coming in without a track record, we had *Ka Awatea*, we had the first private members bill to return church land to Māori hapu up North, this happened in 1979, so we had a lot of things we could point to with respect to our track record, and when Doug Graham brought out the fiscal cap I ridiculed it and evidence would prove me right, but I ridiculed it as a proposition for settlement because frankly whilst I always believed the Waitangi process was derailing legal processes, legal processes I believed would be far more remunerative or far more fair for Māori, you had other parties talking about the Waitangi process but their delivery was pretty scant. (Peters 2009).

The degree to which New Zealand First's successful Māori seat representatives rode on the personal coattails of Peters was demonstrated by their inability to maintain the same level of electoral success once the association was gone. Following the coalition collapse, three of the members, Tau Henare, Tukoroirangi Morgan, Rana Waitai, went on to launch Mauri Pacific in October 1998, a small Māori party that contested the 1999 general election under the leadership of Henare (Sullivan and Margaritis 2002: 75). Henare failed to retain incumbency in Te Tai Tokerau, in fact his share of the electorate vote plummeted to just 15.3 per cent; across all six Māori seats the Mauri

Pacific Party electorate vote was under three thousand, and the nationwide party list vote was just 0.19 per cent (Chief Electoral Office 1999). Delamare also contested his former seat as an independent, and together the four dissenters gained a total of only twelve per cent of the total Māori electorate vote (Sullivan and Margaritis 2002: 71). Although this demonstrates a degree of punishment for disloyalty, more interestingly it suggests that the success of those members in 1996 was largely due to their close association with Peters.

Furthermore, in his study of New Zealand First voters at the 1996 general election, Marcus Ganley (1997) found that the elderly and Māori were strongly represented, demonstrating overt parallels in the social groups nurtured by Peters in his early political career. New Zealand First was among the highest beneficiaries in those electorates where there were large numbers of superannuitants; and the greater the number of Māori in an electorate the larger the vote for New Zealand First (McRobie 1997: 171-2). The sudden influx of popular support has also been attributed to ‘Peters’ call for curbs on the level of immigration and foreign investment’ (Miller 1998b: 122), an issue that had risen in prominence due to recent increases in the level and diversity of New Zealand’s immigration intake.<sup>12</sup> The 1996 New Zealand Election Study showed the party to have been successful in tapping into the anti-immigration sentiments with fifty-three per cent of those surveyed who declared a party preference selecting New Zealand First as closely representing their views on immigration (Miller 1998a: 206). The geographic distribution of the 1996 vote profile remained concentrated in the northern half of the North Island and the party retained its status as the voice of provincial New Zealand (McRobie 1997: 168-9).

Similarly, the party’s first fall at the 1999 general election can be partly attributed to the disappointment felt by “Rob’s Mob”, a group of voters who had followed Peters in his retaliation against the National Party, and the disorientation felt by those Māori supporters who had shifted allegiances from Labour and following the 1996 election had found themselves supporting a party in government with National. The influence of Peters on the poor electoral fortunes is reinforced by the clear decline in his own personal popularity, coming close to defeat in Tauranga. However, to a degree Peters’

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<sup>12</sup> For further reading on changes to immigration policy in the late 1980s and early 1990s see New Zealand Immigration Service (1995), and New Zealand Immigration Service (1997).

popularity with Māori did sustain this decline as New Zealand First candidates came second in four of the Māori seats at the 1999 general election. Furthermore, the party's partial revival in 2002 can be attributed in part to a return of Māori support. Despite not standing candidates in the Māori seats, a decision based on Peters' longstanding opposition to special treatment for Māori, the party garnered over ten per cent of the party vote across all six Māori seats (Edwards 2009). The party's 10.4 per cent of the nationwide party vote at the 2002 general election can also be partly attributed to the position of its leader on the Treaty of Waitangi. Claims for compensation by Māori under the Treaty had disturbed a certain social groups within New Zealand, thereby 2002 was a campaign where a number of voters related to Peters' personal criticism of the "Treaty gravy train". Peters' exploited fears within his support base through warnings of 'the Treaty industry that thrives on fomenting division and separatism' (Peters 2002). The success of this campaign rhetoric was evidenced by a post-election survey that showed the Māori issue to be the domain of New Zealand First, with the party leading on this issue (Vowles 2004a: 43).

Besides the increased strength of the major parties, and subsequent overshadowing of all small parties, New Zealand First's downturn in electoral fortune at the 2005 general election can be attributed to a decline in the relevance of Peters' attacks on the burden of immigration on state services and warnings of separatism, and to the hijacking of Peters' position on Māori politics by the National Party. Once again, New Zealand First's low percentage of the nationwide party vote, just 5.7 per cent, was in correlation with Peters personal support as evidenced by his defeat in Tauranga, to National's candidate, Bob Clarkson. At the 2008 general election Peters once again failed to secure the Tauranga seat. Throughout the campaign Peters had been at the centre of negative publicity over an allegation that he had received illegal political donations, stifling his ability to run an effective campaign. By association, New Zealand First received its lowest share of the nationwide party vote, just 4.1 per cent, and thus failed to re-enter parliament (Chief Electoral Office 2008).

## **Influence of personality on policy achievements**

The outcome of the post-1996 election coalition bargaining process with the National Party reflected the strong impact of New Zealand First's leader, with the concessions by National overtly catering to the two social groups nurtured by Peters from his early political career. For Māori there was the discontinuation of the fiscal envelope which had capped total reparation payments for settlements ordered by the Waitangi Tribunal to one billion dollars. The agreement also allocated ten million dollars per annum to Māori Health provider development as well as key initiatives to establish a Māori Education Commission and a Māori Economic Development and Training Unit. Peters' unsuccessful Māori development policy initiative, *Ka Awatea* was also included. The agreement included numerous other pro-Māori initiatives including marae development programmes funded through Lotteries and additional resource allocation to Te Kohunga Reo and Kura Kaupapa.

For the Elderly, the coalition agreement included the non-negotiable abolition of superannuation surcharge to come into effect in April 1998, as well as a pledge to remove income and asset testing for long stay geriatric public hospital care services and asset testing for long stay geriatric private hospital care. It was agreed that Peters' compulsory saving scheme would be put to a referendum, and implemented should the public accept it. The socially conservative elderly group were appeased with initiatives to ensure that the control and ownership of important New Zealand assets and resources be held by New Zealanders, with a pledge not to privatise the likes of Electricorp, Contact Energy, Transpower New Zealand Post, *Television One*, and *Radio New Zealand*. The issue of immigration, which had caused widespread frustration among Peters' supporters, was to be addressed in a population conference and the fears of these voters were put to rest by a pledge to 'clamp down on refugee scams' (New Zealand Government 1996).

One of the more noteworthy influences of New Zealand First during its first term in opposition had been the party's support role in the success of Jim Anderton's policy initiative to re-establish a New Zealand-owned bank. Kiwibank was launched in September 2001 as a subsidiary of New Zealand Post, and became the signature policy achievement attributed to the Alliance (Aimer 2004: 10). The party's

involvement in this initiative re-established Peters' personal opposition to Rogernomics, and the privatization brought about by market liberalisation. New Zealand First also supported the Cullen Fund, which was established to ease the tax burden of the cost of New Zealand Superannuation, a signature policy for Peters.

Interview comments have suggested that the decision to enter a support agreement with the Labour-Progressives government following the 2005 election was largely driven by Peters and his desire to attain personal triumph in retaliation to the party's immaterial position over the past two terms. Peters explained to the author his feelings in 2005 as follows:

Well here we are out of power for now six years, when are we going to be able to bring some of our critical policies into play?...being in parliament and not being able to have the kind of influence on the events that your party's supporters want you to have is very frustrating. (Peters 2009).

Deputy leader and party whip, Peter Brown, did share the views of Peters, commenting in an interview with the author: 'I didn't get into politics to sit on the sideline; I wanted to see us in government' (Brown 2009). Yet, with the protest vote largely shelved by the prominence of the major parties New Zealand First, along with other small parties, was struggling for survival and in an interview with the author the party's president Doug Woolerton explained the internal divide over the appropriate reaction to this situation:

In 2005 the party was polling below four per cent, I advised Winston to make the speech that the party will not be accepting any ministerial posts. He went away and added weasel words to the speech, one of which being the "baubles of office"...you can see a blip on the opinion poll bell curve directly after the speech was given, then it went downhill from there. (Woolerton 2009).

Woolerton believed that giving priority to ministerial posts undermined the small party's ability to secure policy concessions:

At the top of the wish list for a support party is ministerial positions, so if you remove those you get to the policy concessions a lot earlier and get more done. The major party would rather allocate ministerial posts over policy concessions because with policy concession it is unknown ground, the minor party can pull anything out of the hat. (Woolerton 2009).

Peters chose not to take heed to the opinion of Woolerton, accepting the ministerial post of Foreign Affairs, Racing and Associate Senior Citizens, outside of cabinet. In an interview with the author Peters acknowledged that ‘most of caucus were surprised’ with his decision and initially ‘very negative’, yet he convinced them that this was the only way to achieve New Zealand First policy initiatives (Peters 2009).

Brown supported Peters’ decision to accept the ministerial post, stating in an interview with the author:

Put it this way, I welcomed Winston taking foreign affairs. When it first came up in talks with [Prime Minister Helen] Clark and [Deputy Prime Minister Michael] Cullen I was concerned due to the baubles of office speech, and the potential for it to backfire....Peters made a plea to his caucus colleagues, he went around the table and I was the last person whose opinion he asked. I thought this guy really wants to do it, he had never completed a term in a ministerial position and he really wants to make a success of something. (Brown 2009).

Ultimately all members of caucus voted for Peters to take the ministerial position except for Woolerton. In an interview with the author Woolerton also described the process of this caucus meeting, where:

Peters would go around the table and ask what each person thought, “Ron what do you think? Doug what do you think?” I said I thought it wasn’t a good idea and that if he did go ahead and do it I would resign. (Woolerton 2009).

Although this internal division over the post-election decision led to the resignation of New Zealand First’s long standing president, during the party’s second stint in government it secured further policy achievements, once again catering to the two social groups from which Peters had garnered support throughout his political career. The elderly benefited from the Super Gold Card, a New Zealand First election pledge that had been written into the confidence and supply agreement. The Super Gold Card offered additional entitlements in the form of commercial discounts on goods and services, including public transport and health discounts.<sup>13</sup> It generated widespread popularity for Peters as it was available to all New Zealanders aged sixty-five and

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<sup>13</sup> This initiative was part of the Social Security (Entitlement Cards) Amendment Act 2007, replacing the Super Card and Community Service Card.

over or aged under sixty-five and receiving superannuation or a Veteran's Pension, without income testing. For Māori, the coalition agreement required enhanced funding for Māori Wardens, with the 2007 Budget allocating two and a half million dollars for capacity building for Māori Wardens (New Zealand First 2007). Indeed, in an interview with the author Peters' comments around the achievements of this term reflected personal and long awaited triumph attributed to this particular initiative, whereby he described 'a Māori Wardens Association that is today properly funded for the first time ever....it was part of *Ka Awatea* but I never got it into place until 2006' (Peters 2009). Fittingly, Peters (2009) commented on the 2005 term: 'I count it as a very successful time'.

Brown made an interesting comment during an interview with the author, with regard to how he and his caucus colleagues initially felt about Peters' absence on business as Minister of Foreign Affairs:

We saw Winston being abroad on ministerial business as an opportunity to show the public we weren't just a Winston Peters party. We considered ourselves a capable bunch. (Brown 2009).

Thereby initially the feeling was positive, however Brown's comments also reinforce the enduring dominance of Peters' on caucus decisions, particularly with respect to support for government sponsored legislation (Brown 2009). Discussions around this subject brought into question Labour's Emissions Trading Scheme legislation. It has been alleged that New Zealand First supported this legislation at the behest of Peters. Brown had made his feelings against the Bill known to caucus, stating that he was intending to vote against the government, in an interview with the author he explained:

I had talks with Winston on this matter and he suggested what I should do if I wanted to do this was stand aside as whip. But I didn't want to show signs of dissent too close to an election....he [Peters] was having private discussions with the government. I was concerned about this, I knew another colleague who wanted to vote with me but felt he couldn't, I don't know why, and one other colleague said "sometimes in politics you have to do things you don't want to". I said to Winston, now four of us out of seven have concerns and now we are going to support the bill. (Brown 2009).

Interview comments thereby suggest that the party's support for this legislation was largely driven by Peters. The Electoral Finance Act 2007 was a second example used

to demonstrate how the position of caucus was at the mercy of Peters and his priority to nurture the relationship with the Labour-Progressives government, and Brown (2009) stated that he believed incidents such as these demonstrated that Peters had ‘compromised his position’. In this discussion with the author Brown (2009) reiterated one of the principles on which New Zealand First had been founded, stating that ‘New Zealand First always gave the right to MPs to vote however he or she feels fit, it was in our makeup’, yet it seems Peters has the last say with such decisions.

### **Leadership model of party organisation**

Miller identifies three distinguishing features of the leadership model: (1) a strong and sometimes charismatic leader; (2) a small group of followers more inclined to identify with the personality of the leader than the party itself; and (3) weak organisation (Miller 2006a: 114). Previous sections have developed a strong argument that New Zealand First was a political vehicle for the frustrated ambitions of its mercurial leader, thereby fitting the leadership model of small party organisation. Lacking a tight-knit support base the party has continued to rely heavily on the personality of Peters to reconcile its supporters.

In its infancy New Zealand First had a driving force and a personality, which established a support base of dedicated followers, yet lacked the required organisational structure and policy to exploit it in the fast approaching general election. Evidence of this is the fact that over half of New Zealand First voters in the 1993 general election lacked any sense of identification with the organisation and only a quarter directly identified with the party (Vowles et al. 1995: 207). A small party will often have a less sophisticated organisational structure in the absence of the electoral machine that underpins the major parties. Instead the leader carries out a more hands on role. Miller has noted that Peters was ‘less attentive to routine organisation’ than other small party leaders such as Jim Anderton (Miller 2006a: 127), this observation was also made by James (1993: 90), and as a result the party never established an organisational foundation.

Writing at the time of the party's emergence James (1993: 92) predicted that given Peters' independent nature, his endurance as a leader of a small party would be dependent on 'close and enduring working relationships with at least a small group of good organisers'. Woolerton, in his capacity as party president for twelve years, appeared to fill this role. Peters (2009) commented recently in an interview with the author on the prominence of Woolerton's role as 'a key operative'. Specifically in the area of their ability to work together Peters commented that:

He was a key person because he and I had been on the Dominion Council of the National Party in 1976 so we'd had long experience in organisational management. (Peters 2009).

Woolerton was instrumental in establishing the New Zealand First Constitution, introduced in 1994, detailing the organisational restructure aimed at strengthening the communication channels between the extra-parliamentary and parliamentary wings via a four-tiered structure consisting of a national council, fourteen regional committees, sixty-five electorate committees and local branches (New Zealand First 1994).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Woolerton (2009) commented in an interview with the author that New Zealand First had 'a more sophisticated organisation than people gave it credit for'.

Despite the organisational restructure Peters maintained central control over the party list. The past five MMP elections have shown that it is not uncommon for the leader of any party to have veto over the list, yet it was alleged that the ranking of the 1996 party list was the domain of Peters and a close advisor alone (Laws 1998: 342). This allegation was elaborated on by Woolerton (2009) during an interview with the author, where he noted that 'most people on the list ordering committee go to the meeting with a privately written list, not only Winston'. Although Woolerton refuted that Peters had personally ranked the list in 1996, he did confirm that Peters had 'the major influence' (Woolerton 2009). One member who had been with the party since its inception, Terry Heffernan, felt the impact of this centralised decision making. Having disagreed with Peters on a number of scores during the party's first term in parliament he suffered a subsequent demotion within the party's ranks. Woolerton

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<sup>14</sup> The regional committees were later dissolved following amendments made to the constitution at the 2003 Annual General Meeting (New Zealand First 2003).

confirmed a personality conflict between Peters and Heffernan as a result of working side by side in a stressful environment and contributed to by Heffernan's complaints about Peters' lack of punctuality, particularly to early morning meetings (Woolerton 2009).

Although the party's weak organisation can be attributed to its size, with relatively few rank and file members,<sup>15</sup> and its turbulent pattern of electoral fortunes, it can also seemingly be attributed to the significant influence of Peters. Indeed Panebianco (1988: 57) identifies such unsophisticated organisation with strong and charismatic leadership, arguing that institutionalisation is seen as a threat to the leader's power within the party. Peters' decision to not take heed to the opinion of the party's longstanding president and allow him to subsequently resign, was the ultimate display in Peters' continued influence over the party organisation. In an interview with the author Woolerton commented that his dual role of MP and president had helped to bridge the gap between the party's parliamentary and extra-parliamentary wings: '...it made the party wing feel included, I was able to talk about the party with gravitas', and he went on to state 'when I left the party missed the level of interaction with parliamentary business' (Woolerton 2009). The resignation of Woolerton also marked the end of Peters' working relationship with a good organiser, a working relationship which according to the prediction of James (1993) would ensure the endurance of Peters as a leader of a small party.

Although the endurance of Peters as the personification of the party has garnered at times substantial electoral fortunes, it has also contributed at times to the equally substantial electoral fall of the party. New Zealand First's first fall following the coalition agreement with National can be in part attributed to an inability to tread the thin line between loyal cooperation with government and making it clear that New Zealand First policy objectives went 'far beyond the rather limited reforms that are possible under the constraints of coalition government' (Poguntke 2002: 144). The party's ability to do this was no doubt inhibited by the lack of a clear identity separate from the leader, whereby more voters identified with the protest rhetoric and

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<sup>15</sup>Following the 1998 coalition collapse, Woolerton (2009) recalled 'losing a third if not half of the 18,000 members' that the party had had at its peak in 1996, and commented that the party has never fully recovered these membership numbers.

personality of its leader, rather than a strong policy platform and organisation. New Zealand First is thereby comparable to The National Socialist Party, the Italian Fascist Party and the Gaullist Party, examples offered by Panebianco of parties where their ‘existence was inconceivable without reference to their leader’ (1988: 52). As such, over the past sixteen years Peters became ‘the undisputable founder, conceiver, and interpreter of a set of political symbols (the party’s original goals) which became inseparable from his person’ (Panebianco 1988: 52). As the popularity and public rapport of Peters plummeted in the 2008 campaign, the correlation between Peters’ personal popularity and New Zealand First’s electoral fortunes was just as evident as it had been at the party’s first general election in 1993. As a result of Peters being at the centre of an extremely publicised political donation scandal, the party found itself without parliamentary representation for the first time in its sixteen years.

### **Rejuvenation?**

There is considerable wisdom in Peters’ nurturing of the aging social group, known as “Rob’s Mob”. They are typically angry, frustrated and fearful (Ganley 1997), which propels them to vote diligently at every election. They are also of an era of strong partisan loyalty, transferring their allegiances from National when it shifted to the other extreme of Muldoonism, to Peters with his positive nostalgic rhetoric. Once there it would arguably take more than negative media coverage to unsettle this bond. Indeed, discussions with the party faithful at the Annual General Meeting earlier this year suggest that it is business as usual for this sector of Peters’ support base. When questioned on how they were feeling about New Zealand First’s chances at the 2011 general election, the replies were rather placid, along the lines of ‘well that’s Winston’s job’. Members at the AGM were more concerned with sharing fundraising initiatives between the various electorates; a successful weekly raffle and jam sales in Wairarapa, a cookbook in progress in Tauranga, and a wider community concert run by the Hamilton East electorate. Although loyal and diligent voters, the aging “Rob’s Mob” is a gradually diminishing pool of support. Those voters approaching retirement now are not as frustrated and disoriented, having had longer to adjust to the changing political and social environment of New Zealand.

A similar trend can be seen in the second social group nurtured by Peters since his early political career, Maori. As observed by a longstanding employee of Peters, Damien Edwards (2009), 'as the Treaty of Waitangi took on increasing political prominence – Winston's and New Zealand First's ambivalence toward it would become a barrier to ongoing large scale Maori electoral support'. Younger Maori voters have been exposed to aspirations for Maori in politics that go beyond what is able to be represented in a mainstream political party, such as Labour or New Zealand First, hence the rise of the Maori Party and the concomitant decline in Maori support for New Zealand First.

By this vein, the detrimental downturn of electoral fortune for New Zealand First in 2008 was undoubtedly less to do with the negative publicity generated by the donation scandal, although this certainly played a part, and more to do with the longer term gradual drain of Peters' pool of electoral support. Thus, to succeed in 2011 rejuvenation is necessary, the conundrum being that effective rejuvenation involves leadership change, and as this paper has demonstrated, Peters continues to be the personification of the movement, with New Zealand First lacking a separate identity under which to reconcile its support base.

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