

The Minor Parties: Policies and Attitudes

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Abstract

In 15 years of MMP Government in New Zealand, no party has ever been successful in governing alone. There are good reasons, then – National's current dominance in the polls notwithstanding – to assume that one or more of the minor parties will be included in governing arrangements after the General Election on November 26. This paper presents a descriptive summary of the employment relations policy positions of the six minor parties (ACT, the Green Party, the Mana Party, the Maori Party, New Zealand First and United Future) that have some chance of success at this year's Election, to assess the influence they might have on subsequent policy formation. The summary, based primarily on relevant publicly available documents, also considers the factors likely to influence how each party might engage with others.

Introduction

The make-up of the next Government is uncertain. While the National Party has polled above 50% since 2009 (Pundit, 2011), it is far from clear that this support will translate into a majority in the November 26 General Election. Support for incumbent Governments can evaporate during Election year as events unfold (Levine and Roberts, 2003); in addition, voting preferences can be volatile with many voters making their decision close to Election Day (Vowles, 2003). National has indicated that it will make further changes to employment laws if re-elected (Trevett, 2011a), but its ability to implement any changes will, most likely, depend on support from other parties. Labour has indicated a desire to raise the minimum wage and to reverse the 90-day trial period for new workers (Fenton, 2011), but unless it can boost its own support by an extraordinary amount, Labour will need support partners to form a new Government and pass legislation. To date, no party under MMP has been able to form a majority single-party Government.

It is reasonable, therefore, to assume that governing arrangements after November's Election will be built around agreements between one of the major parties and one or more support parties. With this in mind, this article surveys the explicit policies and the underlying attitudes towards employment relations held by the minor parties that are most likely to be represented in Parliament after this year's Election. We present this survey in (mostly) alphabetical order, to avoid the possibility of suggesting priority. It is based on a range of documentary data: publicly available statements taken from the parties' websites, public speeches made by members of the parties, and Parliamentary records of debates of relevant issues. The parties considered here were also given a chance to respond to a standard set of questions put to them by the authors, although only the Green Party responded. This failure to respond is entirely understandable, given the constraints on the time and resources available to minor parties, especially in an Election year.

There are five minor parties in Parliament that will be contesting the 2011 General Election: the ACT Party, the Green Party, the Mana Party, the Māori Party, and the United Future Party. We survey each of these below, along with New Zealand First, who narrowly missed out on re-election in 2008 and is campaigning again in 2011. Our survey is primarily a descriptive piece in which we set out the parties' positions as objectively as possible. Where appropriate, it derives a degree of cohesiveness from the observation that the

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policy prescriptions of political actors are logically connected to the ways in which those actors construct and represent the nature of the relevant policy ‘problem’ (Fischer, 2003; Stone, 2002).

We focus, then, on how the parties under consideration construct the employment relations ‘problem’, and assess how their policy prescriptions make sense within a broader understanding of the social and political world. We note, however, the limitations of this focus in fully apprehending the decisions of some of the minor parties. Within a governing arrangement, their values and ideologies are often in tension with pragmatic considerations of what they can and should demand of larger parties. Unless employment relations policies are crucial to a party’s core beliefs – as they appear to be with ACT, the Greens and Mana – there is every possibility that a minor party will compromise in this policy area for the sake of influence in another. Or, as witnessed by the Māori Party since 2008, a minor party may support a major party in Government, oppose its employment relations policies but, for lack of influence, still see those policies pass through Parliament.

If one or more of the minor parties is included in governing arrangements after the Election, the included parties will have achieved what Muller and Strom (1999) call their “office-seeking goal”. While a presence at the ‘top table’ of Government confers a certain amount of prestige, exposure and financial benefit, it is not the only aim of political parties. As Muller and Strom (1999) argue, parties are also motivated by their “policy-making” and their “vote-seeking goals” (see also Miller, 2005). The tensions between these three goals are felt in a particularly acute way by minor parties for whom a formal arrangement with a larger party offers more influence but no guarantee of success in achieving its “policy-making goal”. Being formally aligned with a larger party includes undertaking to support that party on matters of supply and confidence, which involves voting for the major party’s budget. The budget process is intertwined with policy programmes as programmes typically require money; thus the minor party may find itself tacitly supporting policies that it opposes (see Sharples, 2011). This support may well threaten the smaller party’s long-term “vote seeking” goal if they are perceived as too closely aligned with a policy agenda that diverges from the expectations of their constituency.

Being a support party, thus, carries definite dangers for the long-term prospects of a small party. The history of MMP Government in New Zealand is filled with such cautionary tales, including the rise and fall of United Future, New Zealand First and, most dramatically, the Alliance. In a contemporary example, the Māori Party is currently contemplating the double-edged sword of its participation in governing arrangements since 2008. While the Party defends its relationship with National as the best way to exercise influence and secure “gains for our people” (Pita Sharples as cited in Trevett, 2009), it has come at a high price. The Māori Party has faced criticism from those who see it as enabling (through their annual support for the Government’s budget) a right-wing policy agenda that contradicts its stated commitment to greater equality (Godfery, 2010), even when that agenda – as in the case of employment relations policy – has proceeded in the face of Māori Party opposition.

The Minor Party Landscape

ACT, the Māori Party and United Future are currently in a governing relationship with National, providing votes for confidence and supply in exchange for some policy influence and Ministerial posts outside Cabinet. Each party has its own agreement with National that outlines which policies both must support, the extent of the minor party’s freedom to negotiate support on a case by case basis, and the conditions under which they may speak against National’s policies (ACT, 2008c; Māori Party, 2008a; United Future, 2008). National, being only four votes short of a majority, can pass legislation with the support of either the Māori Party (who represent four votes), or the ACT Party (five votes). This support arrangement has enabled National to downplay the fears of its moderate voters about the influence of ACT while simultaneously increasing National’s bargaining power when negotiating with its support parties (Smith, 2010). National

has been able to pass a wider range of policy by appealing to one or the other of these two very different parties. The arrangement, however, is not always a comfortable one for ACT or the Māori Party. The major governing party after the 2011 Election may not enjoy so much flexibility.

2011 gave rise to two political events involving minor parties, both of which have the potential to alter the results on Election night. The ACT Party experienced a coup in which Party leader and Minister outside Cabinet Rodney Hide was replaced by a non-MP, former National Party leader Don Brash. Claiming he could increase ACT's polling, Brash was installed as extra-Parliamentary leader. Hide will not stand again in the Epsom seat, an electorate he won for the ACT Party in 2005 and 2008. Because ACT has polled below the 5% threshold since the 2002 Election, Hide's success in this electorate has been the key to the Party's Parliamentary representation. In polls to date, Brash's leadership has not significantly improved ACT's fortunes (Pundit, 2011); furthermore, polling indicates that unless Prime Minister John Key explicitly instructs National supporters in Epsom to cast their candidate vote for ACT, ACT will fail to win the seat and thus fail to return to Parliament (Grafton, 2011). Brash's history on race-based issues has the potential to further complicate any governing arrangements that include the Māori Party.

The second upheaval in the minor party landscape was Hone Harawira's resignation, under threat of expulsion, from the Māori Party following his continued criticism of the Party's relationship with National. Harawira established the Mana Party in April and his subsequent win in the Te Tai Tokerau by-election in June gives the Party a strong chance of on-going representation in Parliament. Prospects for the two Māori parties in the General Election will depend on their relationship leading up to poll day. Strategic voting in the Māori electorates could potentially result in the Mana and Māori Parties winning as many as 9 MPs between them (Farrar, 2011), giving them a larger bargaining position for policy designed to advance Māori interests. Such a Māori-Mana bloc could determine the make-up of the next Government, especially if United Future and ACT fail to win more than one or two seats. While such an outcome might seem mutually beneficial, personal animosity and policy differences between Harawira and the Māori Party seem certain to prevent such collaboration (New Zealand Herald, 2011), possibly enabling Labour to recapture some of the Māori seats.

These political upheavals increase the difficulty of predicting the policy outcomes of the Election.

Table One: Summary of ER Positions of the Minor Parties

	ER policy closest to which major party*	Current Number of MPs	ERA Bill (No. 2)	Holidays Amendment Bill	ERA (Film Production Work) Bill	Minimum Wage	Youth Minimum Wage
ACT Party	National	5	Support	Support	Support	Opposed to increases to minimum wage (ACT Party, 2011) and sceptical of the very concept (ACT, 2008b)	Support (but unnecessary if the minimum wage scrapped)
Green Party	Labour	9	Oppose	Oppose	Oppose	Increase "to 66% of the average wage, with an immediate increase to \$15 an hour" (Green Party, 2011b)	Oppose
Maori Party	Labour	4	Oppose	Oppose	Support (3 votes only)	Increase to \$15/hour (Māori Party, 2008b)	Oppose
Mana Party	Labour	1	Oppose**	Oppose**	Oppose**	Increase to \$15/hour, and to 2/3 of the average wage by April 2013 (Mana Party, 2011b)	Oppose
NZ First	Labour	-	-	-	-	Increase to \$15/hour (New Zealand First, n.d.)	Unclear
United Future	National	1	Support	Support	Support	Unclear	Unclear

(Green Party, 2011b)

* See also additional comments and caveats in the text.

** The Mana Party did not exist in parliament at the time of these bills. Its position is presumed on the basis of Harawira's speeches at the time and the party's stated positions.

The ACT Party

The ACT Party was established to promote the economic liberalisation policies that Roger Douglas began as Finance Minister of New Zealand from 1984 to 1988, commonly known as Rogernomics (Reid, 2003). Since the leadership (from 1996-2004) of Richard Prebble, ACT has adopted some populist social conservative policies such as a tough line on crime (Edwards, 2010), but its approach to employment relations remains with the Party's classical liberal roots.

Following the 2008 General Election, ACT entered into a confidence and supply agreement with the minority National-led Government. It gained two Cabinet positions (reduced to one following the leadership change in May 2011), neither of which was in the employment relations area. The confidence and supply agreement listed seven policy areas that the two parties agreed to move on; none of these had a strong employment relations focus.

Although ACT's representation in Parliament is small (five MPs), they have had some influence over Government policy and have been supporters of the more right-wing policies proposed by National. ACT's support has enabled National to pass legislation that its other main supply and confidence partner, the Māori Party, has objected to: the Employment Relations Amendment Bill (No 2), and the Holidays Amendment Bill, for example.

ACT constructs the employment relations problem as Government getting in the way of free negotiations between employers and employees. There is an unspoken assumption that all parties to such negotiations have equal power. ACT views the employment relationship as being one of contract law, in which

The freedom to offer one's labour as one sees fit is a fundamental right. To deny adults freedom of contract in the name of 'protecting them' from exploitation, demeans and patronises all workers and all employers (ACT, 2008b).

There is an assumption that this increased freedom will lead to greater efficiency for firms, and that firms will pass the benefit of this greater productivity onto their workers. As part of their 2008 Election policy, ACT explained the chain of events from freedom to higher wages like this: "Allow freedom of contract to make it easier to trial new workers and replace poor performers.... Business runs better with right staff. *Workers and company earn more*" (ACT, 2008a. The authors' emphasis).

ACT frames its employment relations policies as breaking down privilege and benefiting the disadvantaged. ACT supports the 90-day trial period for new workers as it gives the vulnerable and the disadvantaged an opportunity to get a start in the job market. ACT claims opposition to trial periods protecting existing workers and locking out the unemployed, especially Māori and Pacific workers who might find work if employers could hire them on trial (Douglas, 2010). Similarly, ACT supports a lower minimum wage for young workers, claiming youth rates will help young people, who are disproportionately unemployed, get a "foothold on the job ladder" (ACT, 2011). ACT has been openly critical of National for not adopting a youth minimum wage, claiming current subsidies for youth work schemes would be unnecessary if youth wages were in force (Douglas, 2011). The Party's employment relations policy encapsulates welfare policy, rewarding and incentivising work over benefits by lowering the tax that workers pay and placing time limit and workfare requirements on welfare for the able-bodied (ACT, 2008b).

ACT has not been able to use its time in Government and its policy wins to increase its popularity. There have been a series of messy personality-based scandals since 2008, this year's unconventional coup and the extraordinary situation whereby no current ACT MP is seeking re-election. These upheavals and the unpopularity of some of ACT's policies – such as the creation of the Auckland super-city – have not helped its electoral chances. Currently polling well below 5%, ACT almost certainly needs to win Epsom in order

to return to Parliament (Pundit, 2011), and has selected former Auckland mayor John Banks to run for the seat. A tactical deal between National and ACT to not split the right-wing vote in Epsom and marginal electorates would increase both Parties' electoral chances (Bennett, 2011). Such a deal between National and ACT makes sense; if ACT does not return to Parliament, or returns with only a small clutch of MPs, National may be dependent on the Māori Party for Government formation, lessening its chances of progressing the employment relations policy agenda it has signalled for its second term.

The Green Party

While the Green Party was formed in 1990¹ around an explicit environmentalist agenda, it has always included a significant left-wing, social justice element (Green Party, n.d. a). The Party has consistently advocated for the rights of workers, and for the regulation of employment relations to ameliorate the power of employers and the supposed demands of a flexible market economy.

The Green Party is currently the biggest of New Zealand's minor parties, represented in Parliament by nine members. Indeed, it was recognised this year by the Electoral Commission as occupying a unique space in New Zealand politics, with its voter support over an extended period of time distinguishing it from the other minor parties (Electoral Commission, 2011; Green Party, 2011). The Party's size has allowed it to develop and articulate relatively comprehensive positions across a range of policy areas. It has also allowed it to have a representative on the Transport and Industrial Relations Select Committee, along with five National and three Labour members.

The Party envisages society in general, and employment relations in particular, as marked by conflict and unequal relations of power, such that the interests of labour and capital are often opposed to each other. In their minority view (co-authored with the Labour Party) on the Employment Relations Amendment Bill (No 2), the Green Party argued that the legislation represented an unfair and unjustified shift "towards the interest of employers at the expense of employees", and that it was at odds with the Employment Relations Act's acknowledgment of "the inherent inequality of power in employment relationships" (Transport and Industrial Relations Committee, 2010: 5). In Parliament, Industrial Relations spokesperson Keith Locke (as cited in NZ Parliament, 2010c: 15663) argued that the Bill "will give more power to employers *against workers and against members of unions*" (the authors' emphasis).

In Parliament, the Green Party has consistently voted against the Government's employment relations policies. In their minority view on the ER Amendment Bill (No 2), Labour and the Greens described some of its provisions as "supposed solutions to problems that do not exist", citing Treasury and the Ministry of Economic Development's complaint of "the lack of robust evidence on the impact of the proposed amendments" (Transport and Industrial Relations Committee, 2010: 5). Locke (as cited in NZ Parliament, 2010a) argued further that the Bill's provisions also ignored advice and concerns voiced by the Department of Labour. According to Locke (2011, Personal Communication), the Greens' top employment relations policy priority is to "raise the minimum wage – initially to \$15 an hour and then progressively over a four year period to two thirds of the average wage". Beyond this, they would seek to enact a range of measures designed to "improve collective bargaining, and widen the number of workers covered by collective agreements, as a mechanism to reduce inequality in New Zealand" (K. Locke, Personal Communication – 10 June, 2011). The Greens have also drafted a Bill to promote gender pay equity (Delahunty, 2011) that gained unexpected prominence amid the public furore over statements made by – and the subsequent dismissal of – Alasdair Thompson, Chief Executive of the Employers and Manufacturers Association (Northern) (Delahunty, 2011).

The most comprehensive statement of the Party's approach to employment relations issues can be found in the Industrial Relations Policy on its website (Green Party, n.d. b). This policy is entirely consistent with the

stance adopted in Parliament. In this document, the Greens situate employment relations at the heart of their political vision, stating that “decent pay and working conditions, a meaningful and secure job, and a safe working environment” are “hallmarks of a fair and decent society.” Work is understood not as a system of contractual arrangements between parties, but in more aspirational terms. Work, it is said, should be “meaningful” and reflect workers’ individual and cultural preferences; jobs should be “secure [and] empowering.” Against the “inherent potential for inequality of power between employers and employees”, the Greens insist on the facilitation of “workplace democracy and collective organisation”. In their alternative vision, “workers, employers, and unions should be involved in making decisions about issues in their workplaces, the economy, and the environment” (all quotes in this paragraph from Green Party, n.d. b).

Polling consistently and comfortably over the 5% threshold, the Greens will probably return to Parliament. While the Party has not ruled out supporting a National-led Government (NZPA, 2011b), their hopes for substantial legislative influence after the 2011 Election rely on a centre-left bloc getting over 50% of the seats. At the time of writing, this seems unlikely.

Māori Party

The Māori Party was formed in 2004 in opposition to the Labour-led Government’s passage of the Foreshore and Seabed Act (FSA). In 2005, the Party won four of the seven Māori seats (Electoral Commission, 2005), and in 2008, this increased to five of the seven (Electoral Commission, 2008). However, the Māori Party’s share of the party vote throughout the country was low at 2.12% and 2.39% respectively, with many voters in the Māori seats casting their party votes for Labour. Key policies of the Māori Party include the repeal of FSA, the promotion of the Treaty of Waitangi, support for Māori representation, and policies that advance tino rangatiratanga. Māori Party policies are explained in terms of traditional values. For example, support for “the alienated and the dispossessed” (Pita Sharples, in New Zealand Parliament, 19 May 2011), and those on low incomes (Māori Party, 2008b), are explained using principles of manaakitanga (hospitality or charity) and kotahitanga (unity).

The Māori Party has voted against most, but not all, of National’s employment relations changes. Against claims that the 90-day trial period for new employees would help the young, the unskilled and Māori and Pasifika gain employment, the Māori Party opposed the policy. Co-leader Tariana Turia (in New Zealand Parliament, 4 August 2010) doubted that the trial period made it any easier for Māori to overcome the “brown barrier” of systematic racial discrimination in employment, and MP Rahui Katene (as cited in NZ Parliament, 2010c) noted its potential to make work more precarious for existing employees. In the same speech, Katene quoted a letter from an education union, who wrote, “This amendment will further turn the balance of power away from employees, in particular young and vulnerable employees, and those employed in low unionised work sites” (p. 15666). In speaking against the Holidays Amendment Bill, Katene (ibid.) further stressed the unequal power between employers and employees, expressing concern that “there are no safeguards against employers wielding undue pressure on an employee to cash up their leave and sell away their holiday.” She also supported the need for workers to have time off work to rest and spend with their whānau (extended family).

The major piece of Government-sponsored employment relations legislation that the Māori Party has supported this term is the Employment Relations (Film Production Work) Amendment Bill, which designated film production workers as contractors not employees. Māori Party support for this Bill was based on the assumption that it would create jobs, a key policy platform for the Party. Their support, however, came with the proviso that they were “... on high alert to prevent the unscrupulous treatment of workers or conditions that might serve to erode the integrity of [New Zealand’s] reputation” (Katene as cited in NZ Parliament, 2010b: 15052).

The Māori Party achieved one of its founding goals by negotiating the repeal of the FSA with the National Party. The nature of that Act's replacement – the Marine and Coastal Areas Act – and the Māori Party's tacit support for other items on National's agenda, has caused dissatisfaction with some supporters (Godfery, 2011). The most notable expression of this dissatisfaction was Hone Harawira's departure from the Party, and the resulting establishment of the Mana Party. If the Māori Party continues its relationship with National after this year's Election, then these tensions will only be compounded as National has indicated a more radical agenda for its second term. On the question of a minimum wage, for example, National's consideration of a youth wage and ACT's preference for the removal of the minimum wage altogether (ACT, 2008b) stand directly opposed to the Māori Party's support (in line with the positions of Labour and the Greens) for an increase to \$15 an hour.

Mana Party

As the newest of the parties considered here, it is difficult to assess not just the policies of the Mana Party but also their prospects for electoral success. The Mana Party might expect to draw support from those Māori disaffected by the Maritime and Coastal Areas Bill and, more broadly, from those in favour of greater self-determination and ownership rights for Māori. Yet, the nascent Party has also positioned itself as the champion of those marginalised in socio-economic terms, specifically the poor and the unemployed. A number of social justice and worker rights activists, such as Sue Bradford, Matt McCarten and John Minto, have been associated with the early development of the Party; Bradford is standing as a candidate for Mana in the general electorate of Waitakere.

Mana's position, derived from public speeches, interviews and its website, is consistently informed by a vision of society divided along class lines in which Governments support the dominance of the capital-owning class through "economic policies that drive people into poverty, and then penalise them for being poor" (Harawira, 2011). Accordingly, the current Government is charged with,

giving tax breaks to the rich, bailing out failed finance companies, selling off our natural resources, turning prisons into private profit ventures, and spending \$36 million on a yacht race on the other side of the world, while ordinary New Zealanders are starving, workers are being forced into slavery by the 90-day bill, and Māori rights are being drowned in the Raukumara Basin (Mana Party, 2011a).

In more concrete terms, Mana commits itself to the pursuit of full employment, to increasing the minimum wage to \$15 an hour immediately, and to two-thirds of the average wage by April 2013, to opposing the introduction of a youth minimum wage, to giving workers "greater bargaining power to negotiate wages and conditions with their employers" and to opposing "changes that reduce the bargaining power of workers and unions" (Mana Party 2011b). The Party promises to provide a "natural home to a growing number of ordinary Kiwis cast adrift by this National government" and to promote "the pride and dignity of workers who built this country into the special place that we all call home" (Mana Party, 2011a). Harawira has also stated his intention to ensure "a decent days wage for a decent days work", to "overturn National's 90-day Slave Bill" and to "support the rebuilding of a strong union base to give workers back the rights they've lost over the last 20 years" (Harawira, 2011).

Having won the Te Tai Tokerau by-election in June, Mana is likely to be back in Parliament after the General Election. Judging by the Party's origins and early rhetoric, they are unlikely to support any National-led Government. Phil Goff has stated that Labour would not work with any Party led by Harawira, citing his unstable record in Government and his extreme and offensive statements (NZPA, 2011a). Whatever their status after November, Mana can be depended on to oppose any initiatives that erode the security and the status of workers in employment relations. The Party may well find it appealing to stay

outside of governing arrangements in order to maintain maximum freedom to speak against the initiatives of any Government.

New Zealand First

From a high-point of 17 MPs after the 1996 Election, New Zealand First's support has steadily declined. Having become dependent for their Parliamentary presence on Winston Peters winning the Tauranga seat, the Party disappeared from Parliament in 2008 when he failed to do so. Current polling suggests that New Zealand First is attracting 2.5% support which, while significantly above most of the other parties considered here, is still well below the 5% threshold (Pundit, 2011). With insufficient concentration of support in an electorate, the Party faces an uphill struggle to return to Parliament in 2011.

New Zealand First's founding principles include an appeal to economic nationalism (Miller, 2003), and their 2011 employment policies are framed in terms of developing the local economy and the local manufacturing sector (New Zealand First, n.d.). Its stated positions fit well with a broader pitch to those 'ordinary New Zealanders' who feel disenfranchised and alienated by social and economic change. New Zealand First advocates a limited engagement with globalisation, supports New Zealand ownership of key assets, and opposes trade deals with countries that have lower wage structures than New Zealand. While its guiding principles espouse the ideal of "less government", New Zealand First also suggests a more active approach when it states that "employment of New Zealanders is our first planning priority", and that "[h]igh unemployment is not acceptable". The Party aims to train unskilled New Zealanders to fill skill gaps, promising that immigration will cease to be used as an excuse for our failure to train, skill and employ our own people." It also believes that wages in New Zealand are too low, and argues that lifting the minimum wage to \$15 an hour and lifting "all our income" through "using all our resources and our people, to benefit us" will decrease the exodus of skilled workers to Australia (New Zealand First, n.d.).

It is unlikely that New Zealand First will return to Parliament this Election. Even if they do, they are unlikely to have any influence over the policies of a National-led Government following John Key's emphatic refusal to work with leader Winston Peters (Trevett, 2011b). Their policies have more in common with the Labour Party and others who support lifting the minimum wage and rejecting the sale of state assets.

United Future

The United Future Party (originally the United Party) was established in 1995 as a centrist party in the new MMP environment (Aimer, 2003). Formed by seven existing National and Labour MPs, the Party was designed to be to work "with either of the major parties in government, to blunt their extremes and knock off their rough edges" (Dunne, 2007). While United Future has had a presence in Parliament since the first MMP Election in 1996, this has largely been due to leader Peter Dunne's hold on the Ōhāriu electorate: 2002 was the only Election where it exceeded the 5% threshold. Despite its low polling, Dunne has secured a Ministerial post in three of the five MMP administrations (Aimer, 2003; Edwards, 2010) and, with the exception of 1999-2002, the Party has had some sort of arrangement with the Government of the day.

As in many other policy areas, United Future frames the employment relations problem with the need for more common sense, practical support for small businesses, community groups and individuals. Its employment relations policies include reviewing "employment law to ensure that it reflects the reality of workplace relations in small businesses", but policy available on the Party website does not clarify what this

means (United Future, n.d. a). Many of United Future's employment policies are aimed at assisting the new migrant community, older people, the disabled and the unskilled gain work (United Future, n.d. b).

While describing himself as centrist, and he has demonstrated the capacity to work with both National and Labour, Dunne appears more comfortable with National's employment relations policies. Despite being a Labour Party MP in the 1990s, Dunne did not oppose the Employment Contract Act 1991 (Aimer, 2003). As a Minister outside of Cabinet since the 2008 Election, Dunne has voted with the National-led Government in its employment relations reforms. He did not speak in the Employment Relations Amendment Bill (No 2) or the Holidays Amendment Bill debates, but his Party has promoted the 90-day trial period as a way for youth and migrants to enter the work force (United Future, 2011). Dunne voted in support of the Employment Relations (Film Production Work) Amendment Bill in 2010, but later attacked the Government for misleading him over the role of the unions in the stand-off (Dunne, 2010).

A rolling average of major polls puts United Future's support at 0.6%, the lowest of all the parties considered here (the Mana Party was still too new to be included) (Pundit, 2011). As such, the Party's electoral prospects this year are dependent once again on Dunne retaining his Ōhariau seat. This is by no means certain as Dunne's support has fallen in recent elections: he won the seat in 2008 with a 1006 vote majority and only 32.6% of the vote. If it is returned to Parliament, United Future is unlikely to adopt a strong stance on employment relations issues, although it would seem that the Party will be more comfortable supporting a National-led rather than a Labour-led Government.

Conclusion

It is difficult to predict coalition or support arrangements after the Election let alone how these will impact on employment relations policies. To do so would require not only prescience about how seats and votes will fall, but the subsequent outcome of negotiations around governing and policies. Some parties, such as ACT, the Greens and Mana have located employment relations near the centre of a coherent ideological position, and they are more likely to prioritise a strong stand on these issues. Other parties do not place the same amount of stress on employment relations, and may be more willing to make strategic compromises in that policy area in return for other gains.

Complexities in prediction notwithstanding, it is worth paying attention to the minor parties and the strategic challenges they face in gaining re-election and policy traction as their positions may well be influential. While entering into a governing relationship offers a minor party no guarantee of achieving its preferred policy position, in employment relations or any other area, one or more of the parties considered in this article may well be able to extract policy wins from their larger partners if the numbers dictate and if they negotiate skillfully. In the process, the small parties will have to weigh up the advantages of being in Government – including a certain amount of prestige, exposure and financial benefit as well as policy gains – alongside the inevitable dangers of being perceived as too closely aligned with a policy agenda that may diverge from the expectations of its constituency.

Notes

¹ The party was, however, a part of the five-party Alliance from 1991 to 1997

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