

What New Brunswick Can Learn from New Zealand about Electoral Reform

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As my personal contribution to the smooth functioning of parliamentary democracy, I recently suggested that the New Zealand National party caucus be made to watch all three series of the lauded Danish TV drama *Borgen*.

If you haven't seen it, the program follows the rapid rise of a young, charismatic female politician to leader of a minority government, requiring skillful coalition negotiations and the constant management of compromise and competing agendas.

Big issues such as immigration, environmental standards, health care, and state pensions force the various parties to balance their political ideals with the pragmatic solutions required to govern and stay in power.

To New Zealand voters, having just witnessed the remarkable rise of their new prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, the parallels are striking.

Denmark is not a perfect mirror of New Zealand, but the core ingredients of proportional politics in the two countries are broadly similar. Which is why a good old binge-watch of *Borgen* might be just what certain MPs from the conservative New Zealand National party (and their cheerleaders) need to help them adapt to the realities of a new era.

Put simply, 2017 was the year when MMP (mixed-member proportional) came of age in New Zealand. The origins of electoral reform here go back at least to 1984 when the reforming Labour government under Prime Minister David Lange established a royal commission to investigate change—largely because the previous National government had won successive elections with less than 40 per cent of the vote (less even than Labour). For most of the post-war period, Labour and National had dominated electoral politics, but the game was rigged in favour of the latter by a geographically based electorate system weighted toward the conservative, rural towns and provinces.

It took until 1992 (under a new National government, ironically) for a referendum on the issue, in which New Zealanders voted overwhelmingly for change, and chose MMP as their preferred system. At the following year's general election, a second referendum was held. The result was much closer, but after a bitter campaign to retain the status quo, MMP eventually got the big tick from nearly 54 per cent of voters.

With seven MMP elections having now delivered a variety of coalition governments, you couldn't say the system was new or untested. Yet, like aging duffers exasperated by newfangled technology, the once-dominant National party has blamed everything and everyone except itself for the MMP system not working to *its* liking.

Central to their dismay has been the fantasy that being the largest single party in parliament should automatically confer the right to be part of a government. It's hard to know precisely what

informs this self-delusional thinking—a sense of entitlement, hubris, an inability to count perhaps—but it should be enough on its own to disqualify them from running a country.

To be charitable, you might say they didn't see it coming. With Labour sleepwalking to defeat and the polls routinely flattering them, the National party might have been forgiven for feeling a little born-to-rule. Then the former Labour leader Andrew Little did the decent thing and quit, his deputy Jacinda Ardern accepted the poisoned chalice, the Green party made a near-fatal strategic error that saw them shed support back to Labour, and suddenly the future wasn't what it used to be.

After the dust settled on election night it became clear that the centre-right nationalist party, New Zealand First, might in fact tip the balance of power in favour of Labour, despite National having won about 6 per cent more of the vote. With the Greens guaranteeing confidence and supply but outside a formal coalition, Ardern was suddenly able to form a government—and seemingly blow the collective mind of political opponents who lacked the wit or imagination to conceive of such a solution.

The first of its campaign TV commercials perfectly encapsulated National's inability to recalibrate: a hobbled quartet of bewildered Labour-Green-NZ First representatives being passed by a uniform squad of purposeful, monochrome joggers on the road to a one-party future. National's message was quickly derided as risible (even faintly eugenic in tone), but it provided a clear insight into the party's zero-sum strategy.

Deep within the molecular structure of the National brain, one has to assume, there is an evolutionarily hard-wired propensity for binary thinking. Before resigning during his third term, then-Prime Minister John Key (the wildly popular National leader who led the party to three victories) operated a subtler coalition regime, keeping small parties close and building buffers against his slim parliamentary majority being upset by any one factor.

In hindsight, it seems Key was attempting to modernize a party not yet ready for deep change. There's no other explanation for National's resumption of its tendency to view MMP through a first-past-the-post (FPTP) lens. Not only does it betray a fundamental failure to grasp the essence of consensus politics, it's also a timely reminder, on the twenty-first birthday of MMP, of why so many New Zealanders voted to change the electoral system in the first place.

Jacinda Ardern is too young ever to have voted under FPTP (in fact, she was too young even to vote in the first MMP election in 1996, so this is second-hand for her). But, as previously mentioned, the road to electoral reform in New Zealand was rancorous and at times deeply divisive. The anti-MMP camp, disingenuously named the Campaign for Better Government, fought bitterly to retain the old system that had allowed successive governments to ram through policies without any genuine popular mandate.

Good government, it was argued, depended on certainty, decisiveness, an ability to act unfettered by the constraints of compromise. It was essentially a business vision, in keeping with its funding base and deep pockets. The ultimately successful campaign for change was less about idealistic notions of fairness and diversity than the straightforward desire to end a system of "elective dictatorship" that handed too much power to the largest party in parliament.

One senses a yearning for those easy certainties in the bad-tempered reaction of the National party to its eviction from government. Conveniently, its claim that an illegitimate "coalition of losers"

somehow hijacked the country also allows the real losers—that is, the ones who failed to secure a majority—to avoid meaningful reflection or reckoning.

But reckon they must. Unless they truly believe, against all logic and experience, that they will one day secure an outright majority, National will have to start playing the MMP game properly. Like it or not, they will have to find common ground with other parties and actively cultivate the potential to work with them in future. They may even need to encourage the growth of new parties of the right, or bifurcate themselves into a socially conservative “country party” and a more liberal, urban centre-right party.

The calculus of consensus under MMP does not call for petulant and obstructive opposition. It requires subtle and strategic alliances, an ability to adapt to the mood of the whole electorate, not just one’s own tribe, and an acceptance that the greater good sometimes outweighs special interests. That’s what a majority of New Zealanders voted for when they opted for MMP, a system that generally protects against the worst excesses of the old winner-takes-all model, which had led to bitter social divisions and even serious civil unrest.

There is a counterfactual argument that, had things been reversed at this year’s election and Labour been the largest single party but not in government, the Left would have howled as loudly as the Right. There’s probably truth in this, but exactly the same arguments would and should apply.

MMP isn’t perfect. As *Borgen* so entertainingly shows, proportional systems are still hotbeds of intrigue, instability, inefficiency, and personality cults. But as a mechanism for reconciling our disparate perspectives and agendas, it is vastly preferable to the FPTP that came before. New Zealand’s parliament is now genuinely representative, filled with women, people from ethnic minorities, young and old, and now our first MP from a refugee community.

The system is still young, and we are still adapting. There will be bumps and blind spots on the road ahead. At the very least, though, the 2017 general election will be looked back on as the point at which most New Zealanders (note to the National party: that’s more than 50 per cent) learned to operate MMP in interesting new ways, and began consigning old ways of thinking and voting to the dustbin of history.

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