

# Generational Change and Participation

Colin James\*

## *Lifecycle*

The question has been asked if there is a natural life cycle of governments: they come into office on the wax and then wane over time until they can no longer hold office.

The history of our two countries suggests: not necessarily. From mid-twentieth century to the mid-1980s conservative parties held office, with only minor interruptions from Labor/Labour: once in Australia's case (1972–75) and twice in New Zealand's (1957–60, 1972–75).

There were then deregulatory Labor/Labour governments in both countries but they went out of synch in 1990 when Labour lost office in New Zealand.

Curiously, there were parallel small-c conservative governments from 1999: John Howard's Liberal-National in Australia (until Work Choices), Helen Clark's Labour in New Zealand (except for its social-moral liberalisations — prostitution, civil unions, removal of the reasonable force defence in disciplining children). The accent of Clark's Labour was principally to smooth some of the rough ideological edges off the preceding economic and government management reforms; it has failed to develop 'sustainability' into a convincing future-focused theme.

This is essentially managerial politics and government attuned to 'values' rather than serving ideology or political philosophy (though in both cases, as noted above, there were nods to ideology/philosophy). The aim is to command the centre. Both in time ceased to do so.

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\* PO Box 9494, Wellington 6141; 04-3847030, fax 05-3849175, mobile 021-438434,  
ColinJames@synapsis.co.nz, www.ColinJames.co.nz

Howard's/Clark's tenure of office were assisted by (1) debt-fuelled asset booms and (2) indifferent leadership in the opposition party which gave them easy targets (Howard v latte Labor, Clark v rational economic and pro-nuclear National).

Clark and Howard got on well personally. Clark studied Howard's 'values-based' electoral methods. Her study ended when Howard proved unable to handle Kevin Rudd just as she was trying to work out how to handle National leader John Key.

Note in passing that Key has studied Rudd's pre-election strategy: remove the easy targets; focus on a few strong differentiating points that have an aura of freshness (some pointers for the first 100 days) and a pathway to the future (broadband, science) plus tax restructuring and implied improvement in handling crime, health care and education.

### ***Generational Change***

Half the NZ electorate is 47 or under. A 47-year-old first was able to vote in the 1981 election at age 18. So this generation (as Australia last year with the shift to younger Rudd?) is potentially a pivotal election in political generational change. [Please note: the references that follow are to *political* generational change and not necessarily the same as the generational reference points marketers use.]

The last generational shift was late 1970s-late 1980s. The pivotal election was 1984 with the top tier of the incoming Labour government aged in the low-to-mid-40s; revolution followed (New Zealand's 'independence revolution'; deep and jarring policy reform in all areas, making Labor here look like pussies and Margaret Thatcher a gentle auntie).

By new generation, I mean a generation which inherits traditions of thinking from its elders (left/right/independent/populist, etc) but develops its specific responses in a particular frame of reference.

The frame of reference for the generation which took power in 1984 was arguments about Vietnam war, the rise of environmentalism, feminism and gay rights, anti-nuclearism, apartheid/Springbok rugby tours, indigenous rights, economic and social-moral over-regulation. So 'left' and 'right' positions were formed with reference to that frame and so were different from 'left' and 'right' in previous generation.

The frame for the under-47s (this is not a precise dividing line, just an indicator) is the impacts of globalisation, the internet, rise of China, mass migration, Asian immigration (Asians are now 11% of the New Zealand population), how far indigenous rights (background: the Treaty of Waitangi) should go, inequality (which is much more pronounced since the economic reforms) and its fellow-traveller, socio-economic immobility.

The rising generation is more flexible in its attitudes, wants more 'customised', 'personalised' goods/services/lifestyle/work practices. As before, the rising generation's 'left' and 'right' are heirs to 'left' and 'right' traditions but reach different policy conclusions from the previous generation (cf Australian Small Business Minister Craig Emerson's 8 June 2008 Sydney Institute speech, 'Prosperity and Fairness in a Market Democracy' (<http://www.craigemersonmp.com>); New Zealand Labour Minister for Building and Construction Shane Jones's frustration with regulation).

Parallels might be drawn with the Clinton/Obama changeover, the Brown-Cameron fight in the United Kingdom (and in Canada — Stephen Harper v ageing Liberals?).

In New Zealand generational shift is starkly evident between Clark (58) and Key (46) (as it was between Howard and Rudd). But actually within the two parties generational change is more evident within the Labour party at conference delegate and candidate selection level than the National party, though evident in both. Clark has also promoted a raft of new-generation ministers, some of who have the makings of future top-tier ministers.

Generational change may have implications for the small parties: populist New Zealand First is a party of over-60s, ACT is arguing an ideology that has lost steam in New Zealand politics, United Future is not much more than a one-man band, the Maori party is essentially arguing rights issues at the very time younger Maori have been, over the past half-decade, shifting the emphasis to development. The Greens also are beginning to sound traditional rather than cutting edge and their conference is overall older than Labour's: but the Greens do draw some strength informally from young activists.

### ***Participation by the New Generation***

The young greens' focus on activism rather than party involvement poses a raft of questions, some of which are dealt with in a speech on 30 June by UK Labour MP David Lammy to the Fabian Society (<http://www.davidlammy.co.uk/da/82443>).

Obama's involvement techniques, using websites to draw/entice/excite those who hit on it into neighbourhood or other activity, including fund-raising, have given new life to politics (documented in the Atlantic Monthly June issue). It remains to be seen whether he can carry that new enthusiasm/involvement through a pitch to the wider American electorate.

They have been noted by the Labour party in New Zealand but too late to exploit them for this coming election.

In any case, political turnoff appears to have diminished, judging by the following table from the New Zealand Election Study.

**Political Efficacy over Time (1993–2005)**

	1993	1996	1998	1999	2001	2002	2005
MPs out of touch	61	53	76	52	56	49	44
People like me have no say	63	57	-	55	-	46	48
Politicians don't care what people think	66	57	-	55	-	50	44
Government run by a few big interests	60	54	-	50	-	42	39
Satisfaction with democracy	-	69	45	57	60	67	65
Trust government to do what is right	31	30	26	36	47	44	45
My vote really counts in elections*	75	85	66	77	-	69	72
Trust in a political party**	44	54	-	59	-	65	78
Trust in the Labour Party	13	23	-	36	-	42	44
N	2205	4086	535	5601	729	4500	2806

Notes: All data are based on NZES post election surveys except for the mid-term surveys conducted in July 1998 and July 2001.

\* In 1996, the question was asked slightly differently: 'My party vote really counts in elections.'

\*\* 'Would you describe [party] as trustworthy or untrustworthy?' In 1993 and 1996, National, Labour, Alliance, NZ First; in 1999 National, Labour NZ First, and ACT; in 2002 National, Labour, NZ First, ACT and Green; in 2005 National, Labour.

In 1999 and 2002 all-New Zealand comparisons were checked within the panel containing persons who responded to both questions after both elections. Differences were similar, with the cross-sectional comparisons providing somewhat more conservative estimates.

A reasonable guess is that this improvement in attitude is due (1) to the introduction of proportional representation and (2) to the return to centrist politics post-1999.

[The proportionality of the 2005 result was:

Labour	41.65% of effective vote	41.67% of 121 seats
National	39.62%	40.00% — over-represented?
NZ First	5.79%	5.83%
Greens	5.37%	5.00% — under-represented
Maori	2.15%	3.33% — over-represented
United	2.71%	2.50%
ACT	1.53%	1.67%
Progressive	1.18%	0.83% — under-represented
Maori	15% of population	17.4% of seats
Pacific	7%	2.5%
Asian	9%	2.5%
Women	51%	31.4%]

### ***The Platform for the 2008 Election***

The 2005 New Zealand Election Study (NZES) has not been written up. The figures are available largely in an unprocessed state. Following are some indicators from a hasty look.

The two big parties have a disproportionately higher party identification; small parties vice-versa (as you would expect); of those saying they identify with a party, three-quarters said they identified strongly or very strongly.

Only 60% had understood that the party vote was the most important.

One-third said they decided their vote before election year; one-fifth in 2005 but before the campaign; one-fifth during the campaign but before the last week, one-eighth in election week and one-tenth on election day.

In fact, even the rolling average of polls bounced around a lot in the months leading up to election day (though the trendlines came out spot on).

But I suspect The NZES figures overstate the lateness of the actual time of deciding; that there is an underlying lean than sharpens up.

Only four-fifths knew Labour was in government.

***Lessons*** for party strategists in the 2008 election: Labour might be able to claw back votes during the campaign with a strong campaign; if the Labour vote frays, small parties could get pickings (notably Greens, NZ First).

Non-voters would have split more strongly to Labour v National than voters did (indicating either opportunity to get more out to vote or discomfort with party of choice or both).

***Lessons*** for main party strategists in 2008: National must win its next tranche of votes of Labour; Labour has to shore up support and get out more of the non-vote.

Clark was disliked by 35%, liked by 54%; National leader Don Brash was disliked by 42%, liked by 43%. Clark was seen as strong (90%) and trustworthy (62%), Brash 51%, 48% respectively. On the other hand Clark was seen as arrogant by 59%, Brash by 43%.

***Lessons*** for main-party strategists for the 2008 election: if National has a less-dislikeable leader, that could be enough on its own and even more so if a more likeable leader — which is what it has; and any increase in perception of Clark as arrogant would be damaging to Labour.

To the extent that 'left' and 'right' still count, the NZES study found 25% thought themselves 'left' and 45% 'right' but 59% saw Labour as 'left' (Greens seen as left by 58%; ACT as right by 67%).

**Lessons** for Labour in the 2008 election: be careful about doing things seen as 'extreme' (for example, in the social-moral sphere and in its reform of electoral finance laws, which have been painted as attacking free speech).

In addition, the economic backdrop for the 2008 election is starkly different from boom-time 2005: UMR's measure of whether the country is on the right or wrong track has dropped from net +17% four months from the 2005 election to net -13% four months from the 2008 election and the comparable consumer confidence figures (Westpac-McDermott Miller) are 122 and 82 (100 is neutral). ▲