

MMP and Chinese New Zealanders

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It will be necessary for the Chinese to get off their comfortable chairs and participate in policy formulation if they are not to be totally ignored in the new politics of MMP.

The upcoming election under MMP has special significance for members of minorities in New Zealand because, for the first time, it gives them real leverage on policy - if they can motivate themselves and coordinate their efforts.

Readers of the daily newspapers cannot fail to notice that small political parties have been formed over the last year or so and have been courted by the larger parties as potential coalition partners in a future government after the next election. Parties with one or two members in the House are being wooed with an ardour which is almost embarrassing. The United Party, with seven sitting MPs, may get to appoint a Minister in the Cabinet before the election, such is the importance of their cooperation to the present National Party, keen to form the next government.

Just as identifiable small political parties are becoming very important, so are identifiable minorities such as the Chinese -because they have the potential to alter the balance of MPs in the House and influence which party or parties will become the Government, but also the policies of any government.

THE MECHANICS OF VOTING UNDER MMP

You will be given two votes in the next election. The first vote is to be used to elect a local electorate MP. The second vote is for the political party you favour. The first vote will be added up within the electorate and used to decide who will be the local MP. The second vote will be added up over the whole country and will decide how many MPs in total each party will get. After the electorate MPs have been decided, the extra MPs from each party (if any) will be drawn from a ranked list provided by each party themselves. (More about that later)

It is unlikely that any party will get a majority (more than half) of the MPs in the House. Therefore the party with the largest number of MPs will still need to form a coalition with a smaller party or parties so that the combined number of MPs in the coalition will exceed 50% of the number in the House.

Do not treat the second vote as a free Lotto ticket to be filled in carelessly and casually. It is far more important in determining the next government than the first (electorate) vote.

THE PARTY LISTS

The people near the top of each party's list are quite likely to get into Parliament. In theory the use of this list allows a party to provide a balanced parliamentary team. Good people perhaps somewhat lacking in appeal to the general public can be offered a place high on the list and have a good chance of getting in as an MP.

For example, the XYZ party may have policies which appeal the Chinese, both the established groups and the new arrivals. It might have enlightened policies on immigration, investment by off-shore entities, citizenship, education, Treaty issues, bi-culturalism/multiculturalism, race relations, language training, trade development etc. The XYZ party publicly states that on the basis of its own polls it might get six or eight list candidates into Parliament.

It may be a good strategy for the party to place a suitable Chinese candidate about seventh or eighth on the party

list. The implied attraction to the Chinese is that if enough of "you" vote for "us" in the party vote, "your" candidate might get into Parliament and be a help to your community. The real attraction to the party is that they might get a greater total vote and therefore more list MPs. Perhaps five or six list MPs instead of two or three. (Oh, what a pity your ethnic candidate missed out!)

The same XYZ party might also want to attract the party vote from women, Maoris, farmers, unionists, superannuitants and other special interest groups and must juggle their party lists accordingly. In addition the party must still accommodate their "favourite sons/daughters" who have served the party faithfully for 10 or more years and now aspire to a seat in the House.

Not only that, the RST Party and the EFG Party want to do something similar.

WHAT SHOULD THE CHINESE DO UNDER MMP?

In theory if all the eligible Chinese voted for the XYZ party using their party vote, because a Ms Hwa has been given a high place on the party list, then for sure we would have the numbers to make a difference. (There is now an estimated 110,000 Chinese in NZ). In practice, the Chinese will probably not take concerted action to vote as a bloc - because of mutual suspicion and internecine fighting. The idea that all Chinese might to support a single party or a single candidate is a simplistic and naive dream.

Nevertheless, the Chinese can influence policy in any future government by:

1. Making a serious effort to get their concerns addressed by each of the parties well before the elections. This means participating (Eek! participating?! Yes!) in public debate in the next 6 months while policy is being formulated by each of the parties. This will ensure that certain ethnic "planks" of each party's "platform" will be publicly nailed into place.
2. Holding the parties to their promises afterwards and screaming if they renege.

If this sounds like work and commitment to the political process, it is.

WHY SHOULD THE CHINESE BOTHER?

Because, my friends, every other special interest group will be doing it, and if we sit down, shut up and keep quiet, as usual, we will be ignored. And the policies will be slanted and government money (that's your tax dollar) will be spent somewhere else to support things you couldn't care less about.

Get moving or see the whole thing move in someone else's direction. That the challenge of MMP!