

LUCKY JIM



PHOTOGRAPH: BROADSIDE

When Jim Anderton, leader of the New Zealand Alliance, visited Australia late last year, hosted by the Rainbow Alliance, the non-ALP Left had some cause to celebrate. The new party's meteoric rise had surprised everyone, not least itself.

The Alliance was leading both government and opposition in the opinion polls, Anderton had topped the National Business Review's annual economic credibility poll and a referendum had overwhelmingly endorsed electoral reform. The Alliance had not only campaigned strongly for proportional representation but is likely to be its chief beneficiary.

Anderton attributes his own credibility to the fact that he and others "stood out against the Labour government and its New Right policies". A former Labour MP and President of the NZ Labour Party from 1979 to 1984, Anderton resigned from the party in 1989 over the "sale of strategic public assets" and "user pays" approach. He became foundation leader of the NewLabour Party and in the 1990 election made NZ political his-

tory by being the first MP to resign from a major political party and successfully hold his seat at the next election. His South Island seat of Sydenham had been a Labour stronghold for 70 years.

Anderton was a prime mover in the formation of the Alliance in July 1992 (comprising NewLabour, the Greens, the Democrats, the Maori Manu Motuhake, and the Liberals), and was subsequently elected Alliance leader—despite some Green reservations about "hierarchical structures".

Claiming 12,000 members in its constituent parties, the Alliance is based on the 'rainbow' formula of the old Left plus social movements, though it has recently acquired some stranger bedfellows in the form of two disaffected National Party MPs. While the Alliance member parties embrace diverse philosophical and political values, Anderton insists that diversity is a strength, being testimony of a broad community base, and that in any case "more unites us than divides us".

Key planks of the common electoral platform include public ownership of strategic assets, restoring universal entitlements, progressive income tax (including phasing out the GST), a substitution of "fair trade" for free trade, restoration of trade union rights and pay equity legislation, and environmental sustainability. The Alliance promises to create 45,000 jobs in the first year with expansionary fiscal policy, spending \$2.7 billion on social and economic infrastructure and environmental projects.

Anderton is clearly a believer in the capacity of government to determine national welfare and the culpability of the major parties in creating New Zealand's current economic plight. There is no doubt that the Alliance's promise to put "people before economics" and "human values before commercial goals" has struck a chord with an electorate which no longer has faith in market driven restructuring:

"The electorate is very disillusioned with the traditional parties. Labour supporters feel betrayed by Labour, National supporters by National. Many Labour supporters voted

National to get rid of Labour because they were a terrible government, now they find themselves having achieved the election of an appalling government. The thought of going back to the terrible government to escape the appalling government doesn't grab them much. Because of the formation of NewLabour and the development of the Alliance, people in New Zealand now have a positive alternative."

While critics attribute Alliance support to a temporary bout of nostalgia—a yearning for a return to a prosperous, gentler and less troubled past—Anderton retorts that it is the major parties who are the creatures of the past. "Politically and spiritually bankrupt," he claims they have only survived because of the "antiquated" (single member, first past the post) electoral system which sustains them, and which will be abolished in 1996.

The Alliance is an electoral pact in which member parties will select a single candidate for each seat. They have no plans for a pact with Labour either before or after the election. This raises an obvious question of electoral strategy: given that the 1993 election will still be fought on the first past the post system, might not the split in the Labour movement save an unpopular National government just as the Labour split in the UK saved Thatcher in the 80s? Anderton steadfastly rejects any electoral pact with the Labour Party and maintains that the Alliance draws its support mainly from Labour voters in National areas and National voters in Labour seats. If pushed, he asserts that Labour is little better than National: "a plague on both their houses!"

And what if there is a hung parliament? The Alliance will not go into coalition with another party—that would be a "gross betrayal of the people who relied on us"—but it will allow the party with the most seats to govern as a minority government. The Alliance will not trade off its policies for the sake of participating in government, but will "stand and fight for what we believe in".

But on the face of it, Jim Anderton could still well be the next New Zealand Prime Minister. So should Australian advocates of 'rainbow' politics

take heart?

Parallels with Australia are of course not all that strong. Our preferential electoral system and proportional representation in the Senate is somewhat fairer to third parties. No figure of Anderton's standing has quit the Labor Party. And the Australian Labor government has not succeeded in alienating the union movement to anything like the extent that the New Zealand Labour government did.

More fundamentally, it seems clear that the 'rainbow' strategy has problems when defined in opposition to social democracy and the labour movement. It frequently involves a curious marriage of those who see themselves as the true heirs to the labour tradition and those who regard that tradition as being part of an "Old Order". Activists in the mainstream labour movement are thus characterised as either misguided (but destined to come round eventually) or as "part of the problem".

Either way it necessitates the resurrection of the tired rhetoric of tweedledum/tweedledee and a vested interest in denying policy differences. On the face of it, it would seem hard for the NZ Nationals to outdo Rogemomics as a paradigm of free market rectitude. Yet even in New Zealand there are important differences between the major parties on industrial relations, welfare and nuclear free policy. While Labour's free-market spree carefully quarantined the welfare state, for instance, National has gutted it.

The second problem is a continuing faith in the Party as a vehicle for social movements. While the rise of the new social movements has been accompanied by an increase in the numbers of independents and third parties, it has also witnessed a decline in the centrality of the Party in several senses.

Parties nowadays are less the focal point of political life. Social movements are generally more concerned with creating their own space and influencing public culture than with seizing power for political purposes. And the maturity of the new social movements has brought a recognition that avoiding contamination or co-

option does not require quarantine from the major parties and the everyday processes of government.

The seemingly direct line into government enjoyed by organisations such as the ACF miffs many Labor activists who see their branch resolutions ceremoniously ignored by their government. Labor activists are thus frequently the mirror of their counterparts outside the party, believing in sovereignty of the party and that well-meaning people should join the party and push for their ideas in the 'legitimate political battleground'. Their mirror image calls for good people to leave the Labor Party and join with others of like mind in a new party which is untainted by the sins of the past. Neither approach is likely to build effective networks between social movements (of which the labour movement is one of the oldest).

The third problem is the tendency to see a new party as necessarily representing a clear break from the past and the prevailing economic orthodoxy. While it is true that economic rationalism—insofar as it represents an approach which subordinates the social to the economic—has thankfully been losing the contest of ideas on both sides of the Tasman, it is unlikely that the policies of the 80s, which were one response (albeit deeply flawed) to changed national and global circumstances, will be superseded by their exact polar opposites. It is also unlikely that simply electing a party untainted by the sins of the past and committed in principle to a strong role for government will easily restore the living standards of the past.

It would be hard to argue with the sentiments which inform the Alliance's policy platform and one can only wish them well. But politically defining oneself and others according to whether they are inside or outside is, in reality, a rather old-fashioned and one-dimensional approach and hardly the basis for the creation of a new politics. ■

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