

## *Palmer: the Parliamentary Years*

By Raymond Richards. Canterbury University Press, Christchurch, 2010.

ISBN: 9781877257926

## *Maori and Parliament: Diverse Strategies and Compromise*

Edited by Maria Bargh. Huia, Wellington, 2011.

ISBN: 9781869694050

Reviewed by Bryce Edwards

Should academia and politics mix? Two recent books published about very different topics in New Zealand politics provide some light on the relationship between academic intellectuals and parliamentary politics. Both books offer examples of academic intellectuals jumping into the political sphere, with varying results.

Typically, New Zealand has a rather flimsy relationship between the realms of central government and academia. Unfortunately, intellectuals tend not only to stay out of the 'issues of the day' but also parliamentary politics full stop.

Push and pull factors might be detected, with New Zealand society not being particularly receptive to intellectuals – hence academics don't often make it far in politics – but also the universities are relatively disengaged from current affairs and governance. Academics often appear to be somewhat scared of intervening in the grubby world of politics, whether that is standing for election, being politically active, or just taking sides in public political debates. The result is a dearth of public intellectuals in New Zealand.

Geoffrey Palmer was the ultimate example of an academic intellectual delving into New Zealand politics. His experience, which is vividly portrayed in a biography by historian Raymond Richards (*Palmer: The Parliamentary Years*; University of Canterbury Press, 2010), provides mixed lessons about academics entering the political sphere.

This well-constructed biography illustrates how Palmer was both a success and a failure as an academic politician. And although there have been other, recent instances of academic politicians – such as Michael Cullen, Helen Clark, and Wayne Mapp – Palmer is in many ways the purest example. He was a distinguished law professor before entering Parliament, and remained an academic intellectual afterwards.

So does Richards's book portray Palmer as the ideal intellectual getting his hands dirty in politics? Not exactly. Palmer is certainly shown as using his formidable intelligence in pursuit of rampant reform during the Fourth Labour Government, but this is not necessarily a convincing advertisement for academics as politicians.

Obviously Palmer played a crucial role in that government. He was, as is seen in the book, a key player in implementing not just his own constitutional reforms but also in the 'Rogernomics revolution'. Palmer was the chief technocrat, architect, and sales person for much that occurred. This was the case from everything from the establishment of State-owned enterprises through to the Resource Management Act.

Yet the reader will find little evidence that Palmer had a particularly rigorous and cerebral examination and analysis of the neoliberal programme and philosophy of his government. Quite the opposite. Unfortunately, when it came to some of the key economic reforms – but other ones too – Palmer was surprisingly anti-intellectual. That old political slogan of 'common sense' was used by Palmer frequently to explain

and justify the reforms. It was as if he was afraid to be seen as some sort of pointy-headed theoretician. But it's more than that. Palmer came to be more of a populist technocrat than any sort of philosopher. Although it is not the argument of the biographer, it becomes very clear in the book that by the time he was Prime Minister he was becoming every bit as pragmatic as the figure that he despised, and who drove Palmer into politics: Rob Muldoon.

As deputy and then Prime Minister, Palmer appears to have become the epitome of everything he once criticized. Previously, as an academic, he had been brilliant in critiquing what he called New Zealand's 'elected dictatorship'. As a law professor, his critique of the 'unbridled power' of governments has had a momentous impact, setting the scene for some significant political reforms. But it was a pity that once in government himself, he contributed to processes that ignored procedural democracy. Some call this Palmer's 'paradox', others label it 'hypocrisy'. It is telling that Palmer now says that he 'had long felt that he was a law professor in politics, and that the academic aspect was more important to him than the politics'. He is also quoted as rueing that he got caught up too much in day-to-day political management at the expense of his principles of law reform. But as a managerial politician in stormy times, Palmer was certainly brilliant and this is well portrayed in Richards's book.

Palmer failed to remain a public intellectual once he became a politician. Yet in many ways he retained all the worst aspects that the public fear academics might bring to public life. In particular, he was often arrogant, prim, self-righteous, and lacking charisma. For all his achievements as politician – and these are strongly documented in the book – he ultimately serves as a very poor example of Plato's 'Philosopher King'.

A different form of academic intellectual engagement with parliamentary politics is observed in *Maori and Parliament: Diverse Strategies and Compromise* (Huia, 2011), edited by Maria Bargh. This is essentially the output of a conference held in 2009 on the topic of the historical and contemporary relationship between Maori and Parliament. It therefore represents academics engaging with political forces in an intellectual forum, with all the limitations and advantages that such endeavours bring. Here we have some of the most thoughtful public intellectuals engaging with those who have – and are still – practicing 'Maori politics'.

It's a fruitful exercise. There are incredibly useful chapters that provide accessible, but sophisticated, accounts of different aspects of the Maori dimension of parliamentary politics. The stand-out chapter is 'Exit, Voice and Loyalty in Action: Maori Representation in the New Zealand Parliament' by Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts. This account utilizes Albert Hirschman's famous paradigm for explaining the choices of political participants in navigating their way through problematic institutions. This is an illuminating way of exploring the history of Maori involvement in parliamentary politics.

But the core of the debate of the book is around the issue of the retention or abolition of the Maori seats. John Wilson (of the Parliamentary Library) provides an excellent overview of 'The Origins of the Maori Seats'. Academics Anne Sullivan and Janine Hayward then put forward a defence of the seats, refuting a number of objections to their existence. But it's Colin James' chapter, 'Generalising Maori: Maori in General Seats in the Future', that is unique in providing an idea of where the nature of the debate might head. Similarly, Georgina Beyer gives an insight into the (until recently) unusual case of being a Maori MP in a general seat – a trend that seems to be increasing.

The contemporary politicians writing in the book provide useful but largely forgettable chapters. This is so often the case with politicians involved in such exercises. Instead, it's the former politicians that provide more reflective and revealing insights into their world. This is especially the case with Doug Kidd's 'Parliament is Moving On' and Georgina Beyer's 'Maori in General Seats'.

Two other chapters are highlights of the collection. Damian Edwards writes about the evolving dynamic between Maori voters and New Zealand First. This is a story that has never been adequately explained, and Edwards' account is impressive. Many academics have been troubled in explaining the popularity of the Winston Peters amongst Maori, and the fact that the party carried out the amazing sweep of all the Maori electorates in 1996 while Peters railed against the 'Treaty industry'. Similarly, Charlotte Williams takes on another neglected focus: the relationship between Maoridom and the National Party. Academics and political commentators have previously ignored this interesting history, no doubt, on the ignorant assumption that no such relationship has actually existed. Williams corrects this misjudgement, and her chapter is particularly useful as a foundation for helping understand the contemporary National Government relationship with both the Maori Party and other important actors in Maoridom. These chapters by Edwards and Williams give the most accessible and interesting illustration of the complexity of politics within Maoridom that are not often acknowledged.

Perhaps there are other examples of successful forays of academic intellectuals into politics. But these two books overseen by Richards and Bargh suggest that the relationship between academics and politics is still a very fraught one with only mixed achievements.

Both books illustrate that the day-to-day involvement of academics in politics are not automatically useful for intellectualism. Involvement in the cut and thrust of tribal politics appears to neuter most intellectuals – whether they are of the academic variety or otherwise. But this isn't a reason for intellectuals to give up. The need for parliamentary politics to be more intellectual has never been greater and *Maori and Parliament* shows the most obvious way forward – the need for symposiums and other forums that bridge the universities and the parliamentary world.