

# Contradictions and compatibility

## *Electoral system change and the New Zealand political culture*

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### HOW MUCH CHANGE?

It has become a commonplace observation intended to reassure the sceptical and apprehensive, that New Zealand's shift from a First-Past-the-Post (FPP) to a proportional system of representation is *only* a change to the electoral system; that the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) system of representation merely changes the way in which we elect our MPs. There is a good deal of truth in this generalisation, for most of the fundamentals of the constitution will remain intact.<sup>1</sup>

The major characteristics of the New Zealand constitution from 1935-1993 can be summarised as follows:

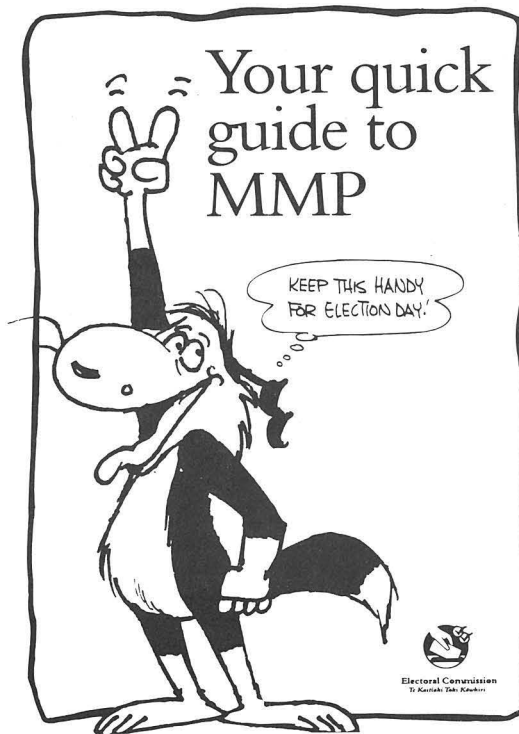
- Centralised, unitary state with weak local and regional government;
- Uncodified constitution (with an unentrenched Bill of Rights Act 1990);
- Parliamentary sovereignty;
- Independence of the judiciary;
- Very weak separation between the executive and legislative powers: one election decides Parliament and government;
- Cabinet reliance upon the confidence of Parliament for

its continuation in office;

- Plurality electoral system (FPP); and
- Parliamentary system with executive (unconstrained) control of budgeting and the legislative process.

Under MMP from 1996, only the last two will change: the electoral system and, consequentially, the balance of power between the political executive (the cabinet) and

Parliament. The extent to which the latter relationship will alter will depend on the party configuration of the House of Representatives, however, and whether we tend towards having majority (coalition) or minority (single-party or coalition) governments. The latter would mean Parliament accrues a measure of power over the political executive. Electoral system change will therefore signal a marked shift in our political culture, from a dominantly two-party system to multi-party parliamentary politics, and from a Westminster-style political system to one more akin to the Scandinavian states and European polities such as the Netherlands and



Austria.

Hence MMP will contribute to changes in the political culture. Indeed, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System advocated MMP, and New Zealanders voted for it, precisely because they wanted aspects of the political culture to be altered.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1993 election and the referendum to switch to MMP, New Zealanders have been observing the behavioural changes of the members of the political elite, from Government and MPs through to public servants and party leaders. The future of MMP will certainly depend upon how they continue to adapt to

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what has become a cliché of our times: 'the new MMP environment'. But the political culture of citizens is also important in understanding the nature and legitimacy of constitutional innovation and durability, as the movement for electoral reform change itself demonstrated. The purpose of the rest of this article is to set the new electoral system within the broader context of the New Zealand political culture.

Conventional definitions of 'political culture' are usually couched in the following sorts of terms: political culture is to do with citizens' and leaders' orientations towards politics, their beliefs, attitudes and ideas. The actions and attitudes of leaders are of course important, especially in terms of fostering or stimulating perceptions of legitimacy of a political system. But despite the interdependence of leadership/citizenry attitudes, voters' views will be concentrated on here. We focus on the attitudes of citizens using evidence from public opinion surveys and political behaviour. Two aspects are discussed: (a) attitudes towards government and political parties; and (b) citizen participation and levels of interest in politics.<sup>3</sup>

#### PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARDS GOVERNMENT AND PARTIES

In the late 1960s Austin Mitchell (then a political scientist and now a British MP) wrote in language similar to that of earlier visitors to New Zealand:

[T]he people seem to see the State and government primarily as an economic machinery, a framework for guaranteeing welfare. Its purposes are benevolent, its face personal and friendly. New Zealand may be controlled by a bureaucracy, but it is a friendly neighbourhood bureaucracy. Such a view bypasses generations of theorising about the State and individual, liberty, and systems of checks and balances. Possibly, too, it helps to account for the much criticised New Zealand approach to problems of 'civil liberties'. Since the State is a personalised machinery of universal benevolence it can be trusted with substantial powers, particularly at times of war or when the community is threatened. Governments and Public Service are composed of people, and if the people who pass the laws and administer the laws can be trusted, as they are in New Zealand, and can be said to be well intentioned, then all is well, even Draconian legislation.<sup>4</sup>

These observations had been stimulated by a 1966 survey of 607 voters in two Christchurch electorates. Mitchell found that 66 per cent 'felt that they could trust New Zealand governments in most things rather than having to watch them pretty closely'.<sup>5</sup> He examined voters' attitudes towards public servants and MPs, asking respondents to say whether they thought these groups were very good, good, satisfactory, or poor. Eight per cent rated public servants poorly, as did the same percentage for MPs. On the other end of the scale, 17 per cent believed public servants were very good, while 12 per

cent concurred with this judgement insofar as MPs were concerned. All the other responses fell into the categories of either good (34 per cent for each group) or satisfactory (41 per cent for public servants, and 46 per cent for MPs).<sup>6</sup> Mitchell went on to assess the perceived impact of the state on the lives of the people, finding that 'Only 32 per cent felt that the actions of the New Zealand government did not make much difference to how well off they were as individuals, while 32 per cent felt that it made a great deal of difference and a further 28 per cent that it made a "certain amount"'.<sup>7</sup> Both the poll results and the verdicts derived from them have to be interpreted cautiously since the survey was not a national sample. Nonetheless, they offer glimpses of a world that has gone.

In 1990, James Lamare, again surveying Christchurch voters (619 respondents), reported that 71 per cent believed 'that government officials in Wellington are out of touch with their compatriots.' And 52 per cent felt that they could not influence the politics of their country.<sup>8</sup> Lamare wrote: 'Today, New Zealand—assuming that Christchurch is not an aberrant locale—is awash in feelings of political powerlessness. Most people have at least some doubt about their ability to impact upon government; a substantial minority has lost almost any confidence in holding public officials to account for their actions.'<sup>9</sup> This finding accorded with a nationwide survey the previous year which had discovered that two-thirds agreed with the statement that, 'Public officials don't care much about what people like me think'.<sup>10</sup> In 1992, Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts found that 50 per cent agreed (42 per cent disagreed) that 'people like me cannot influence New Zealand's politics'; and in 1993 they found that 60 per cent agreed that, 'Apart from voting, the average person cannot influence New Zealand's politics'.<sup>11</sup> These findings were replicated in another national survey in 1993. Sixty per cent of voters agreed with the statement that 'Most MPs are out of touch with the rest of the country', 56 per cent agreed that 'People like me don't have any say about what government does', 65 per cent agreed that 'I don't think politicians and public servants care much about what people like me think', and 30 per cent agreed that 'You can trust the government to do what is right most of the time'.<sup>12</sup> Again, Alan McRobie, commenting on the 1993 election, contrasted a poll taken by the Heylen Research Centre in 1975—which had found 32 per cent of New Zealanders trusted politicians and had confidence in Parliament—with a 1992 finding of 4 per cent who put themselves in this category. Politicians were the least trusted of all groups, and they came 19th out of 21 groups in another survey by the *National Business Review*.<sup>13</sup> MPs scored very poorly in the Electoral Commission's survey of 812 citizens in 1994.<sup>14</sup> New Zealand's political culture had evolved from one char-



New Zealanders have voiced their scepticism about the two-party system in other ways also. Doubts about the utility and value of the two-party model of politics go back far earlier than the campaign for MMP. Mitchell found that just 44 per cent of his Christchurch voters believed that there should be only two parties in Parliament.<sup>20</sup> Of course in practice New Zealand has always had a multi-party system at the level of electoral politics, as opposed to the two-party parliamentary party system encouraged by FPP. In 1966, 14.5 per cent of the valid vote went to Social Credit, and 0.4 per cent to other minor parties and independents. Together the two major parties enjoyed a decreasing share of the total valid vote, a trend that accelerated in the period between 1972 and 1981.<sup>21</sup> In 1993 'Labour and National together won less than 70 percent of the valid votes cast, the support of less than 60 percent of the registered electorate, and the votes of only 55 percent of the country's age-eligible population'.<sup>22</sup>

The evidence so far depicts a public culture that has exhibited some fundamental discontents about the nature and practices of New Zealand political institutions. Indeed, the findings show a political landscape of distrust and suspicion. When we look at this landscape through a different lens and in a different light, that of participation and interest in politics, the scenery looks somewhat different.

#### ACTION AND INTEREST

When citizens vote in general elections they are acting politically in a minimal manner compared with the commitment necessary for becoming involved in parties and interest groups, lobbying for change, protesting, and so forth.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, voting is an important indicator of citizen involvement and integration with the state, and rates of voting differ greatly amongst states. For cultural and systemic reasons, some polities have higher rates of voting participation than others. Historically New Zealand has had a respectably high participation rate for a system in which voting is a voluntary act.<sup>24</sup> The numbers voting have dwindled, however, in recent years. In 1993 there was an 85.2 per cent turnout of registered voters. Further, 'Taking into account the 7-8 per cent of eligible New Zealanders not on the electoral rolls, effective turnout in New Zealand in 1993 was 77 per cent of the eligible population'.<sup>25</sup> The record of the past, even the lower rates of recent years, indicates, however, that New Zealand has a political culture in which voting participation is regarded as an accepted aspect of citizens' duties. Research has shown a correlation between high turnout and proportional electoral systems, and on 12 October 1996 New Zealanders did vote in higher numbers under MMP.

The comparatively high level of voting turnout has been backed by a relatively high level of expressed inter-

est in politics. Mitchell found in the 1960s that 12 per cent said they were very interested in New Zealand politics, 46 per cent responded that they were moderately interested, 32 per cent were slightly interested, and the rest were either not interested or positively uninterested. These figures were as high, or higher, than findings from other countries. In 1990, Levine and Roberts reported of their Miramar respondents that interest 'appeared to have declined somewhat from earlier studies. Only 10.6 per cent of the sample considered that they had "a great deal" of interest in politics, while 24.1 per cent felt that "quite a lot" was a more accurate phrase for themselves'.<sup>26</sup> A 1990 post-election survey reported that 15 per cent were 'very interested in politics' whilst 54 per cent said they were 'fairly interested'.<sup>27</sup> In 1994 the Electoral Commission found that 5.9 per cent were extremely interested in politics, 14.3 per cent stated they were very interested, and 42.2 per cent said they were quite interested.<sup>28</sup> The Commission's survey the following year found that the proportion who were quite interested had increased, as against those who were not interested.<sup>29</sup> Thus figures on the extent of interest in politics, like those on party differences, vary from one election to another, depending on the public issues of the time. Moreover, according to longitudinal data between 1972 and 1990, 'the level of interest tends to grow as the level of discontent with incumbent governments increases'.<sup>30</sup> But in general New Zealand electors would seem to have retained a healthy democratic interest in politics that has not decreased substantially through time, despite their scepticism of parties and their deeds, and despite three decades of growing suspicion and distrust of politicians and government.

On the basis of the evidence presented so far, therefore, New Zealanders seem to hold rather mixed attitudes towards the political process and the state. But is there really a contradiction between expressed suspicion towards government on the one hand and, on the other, high voting numbers and levels of interest in the political process? To solve this apparent conundrum we need to return to the experiences and events of the past three decades.

#### POLITICAL CULTURE AND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

A raft of surveys from scholars cited here has indicated that there have been many reasons for the changed attitudes towards government. These include disappointment with the performance of political leaders from Robert Muldoon through to David Lange and James Bolger, the failure of governing parties to keep their promises, the rapidity of state and economic restructuring, and poor economic performance. Despite the validity of these explanations for attitudinal change, it can be argued that they are insufficient in themselves and that the transformation of political attitudes should be understood as more

than a somewhat passive response to the perceived failings of leaders. Rather, the deep-rooted attitudinal changes should also be interpreted as an active response to events and ideas.

The ideological world of Austin Mitchell and his survey respondents had forever changed by the time New Zealand voted to change its electoral system in the 1992 and 1993 referendums. No longer was it true to say that New Zealand bypassed 'generations of theorising about the State and individual, liberty, and systems of checks and balances'. Concern about these institutional issues had become fully part of the political culture by the mid-1980s, as the writings of political scientists and lawyers show.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, despite New Zealand's attachment to the constitutional fundamentals outlined above, the constitution itself had been undergoing incremental changes which cumulatively affected New Zealanders' perception of the nature of the state, the exercise of political power, and the rights of individual citizens and groups against the state. These attitudinal changes were accompanied (and reinforced) by the social and political movements of the 1960s and 1970s that together challenged the predominance of the 'old state' form of government. These were given added publicity and legitimacy by international trends on such issues as feminism, indigenous people's rights, environmentalism, nuclear disarmament and peace issues, and so forth.

Hence there was a constitutional drift, first to the idea of limited government, and second, to the protection of citizens' rights.<sup>32</sup> Individual and group rights were codified in the years between 1960 and 1993, including legislating on individual claims against the state: the Parliamentary Commissioner (Ombudsman) Act 1962; the Race Relations Act 1971; the Human Rights Commission Act 1971; the Official Information Act 1982; the Police Complaints Authority Act 1988; the Bill of Rights Act 1990; the Privacy Commissioner Act 1991; and the Human Rights Act 1993. The Electoral Act was tidied up in successive amendments. There was legislation on Maori claims against the state (the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975 and the subsequent 1985 extension of its jurisdiction), while the Maori Language Act was passed in 1987. There was also substantial codification of the relationships between the various parts of the state, clarifying powers and accountabilities (the Constitution Act 1986, the State Sector Act 1988, the Public Finance Act 1989, the Reserve Bank Act 1989, and the Fiscal Responsibility Act 1994). Increasingly the stress was on legal rather than voluntary constraints (the Employment Contracts Act 1991 fits tidily but controversially here).

One other feature might have reinforced the trend to distrust the state: the verbal and policy behaviour of the political elite since 1990, which has sought to make individuals and families more responsible for their actions, rather than relying on the state.

That citizens over the past few decades became more suspicious of government and, indeed, less deferential towards their leaders can be seen as part of a modern trend, a sophisticated response to contemporary realities rather than simply a reaction to the deeds of government. Anti-government sentiment can therefore be understood as a rational response to a changing world. It is not inherently contradictory with high participation and interest in the political process.<sup>33</sup> MMP, because it will tend to disperse rather than concentrate power, can be seen as compatible with the constitutional and structural changes summarised above. MMP fits with the tendency to limit and regulate political power. But the public desire for electoral system change has contained its own contradictory traits, for alongside the urge to limit power there has been the desire to spread it more widely amongst previously excluded (or mostly excluded) groups and parties.

And the prognosis for MMP? Scepticism and distrust, combined with involvement and interest, might bode well for the new electoral system. If public expectations are not too high, then performance is less likely to disappoint; and if performance improves, then MMP is likely to accrue public respect and legitimacy, essential if new political arrangements are to thrive and survive. Significantly, over a third of electors believe that under MMP 'ordinary people won't really have any influence on New Zealand politics'.<sup>34</sup> If legitimacy does not develop, then public participation will continue to decline in the electoral process, and this will have a particularly detrimental impact upon the political socialisation of those citizens who have felt increasingly alienated from the political process, especially the poor, the young and Maori.

A system such as MMP, which places a high premium on negotiation and a measured pace of change, is in keeping with the direction of constitutional change outlined above. From 1935 until 1993 we had a party system that produced single party majority governments, capable of innovative, decisive, rapid political action. Under MMP it will be very unusual for parties to govern on their own, unencumbered by a coalition partner. Without stable majority coalitions, majoritarian domination of Parliament will not be possible, and New Zealand may well have mostly minority governments. Whether governments are constituted by coalitions or single parties, they will have to learn to negotiate to achieve their goals.

We cannot yet tell what sort of democracy New Zealand will become. Elite expectations and behaviour will do much to influence how MMP works, and political leaders, as well as voters, will have to undergo 'experiential' institutional learning.<sup>35</sup> New Zealand's constitutional and political trends, however, suggest that the new electoral system is compatible with, and a reflection of, the changing political culture of its citizens.



## NOTES

- 1 Changes may occur in the future, however, as consequences of MMP. See Jonathan Boston, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel S. Roberts, 'Implications for the Political Executive', Paper presented at the conference on the Constitutional Implications of MMP, Parliament Buildings, Wellington, 24-25 May 1996.
- 2 Royal Commission on the Electoral System, *Report of the Royal Commission on the Electoral System: Towards a Better Democracy?* Wellington, Government Printer, 1986. For a study of the relationship between structural and cultural characteristics, see Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1984.
- 3 Evidence on contemporary opinion leaders' attitudes to MMP can be found in: Jonathan Boston, Stephen Levine, Elizabeth McLeay and Nigel S. Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP: A New Politics?*, Auckland, Auckland University Press with Bridget Williams Books, 1996, Chapter 3. See also (by the same authors): 'The Political Culture of Senior Public Servants: Expectations and Beliefs', *Public Sector*, 19:2 (June, 1996), pp. 12-16; and 'Elite Expectations about the Effects of Proportional Representation: Survey Data about the Consequences of Electoral Change in a Small Democracy', Paper presented to the Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, 29 August-1 September, 1996. *New Zealand Under MMP* (especially Chapters 1 and 10) contains a broader analysis of the New Zealand political culture than this essay develops. For another analysis, see Richard Mulgan, 'Political Culture', in G. R. Hawke (ed.), *Changing Politics? The Electoral Referendum 1993*, Wellington, Institute of Policy Studies, 1993, pp. 43-67.
- 4 There are other interesting aspects of political culture that could also be considered, including in particular the knowledge of voters of the political system—a salient issue for New Zealanders learning about a new electoral system.
- 5 Austin Mitchell, *Politics and People in New Zealand*, Christchurch, Whitcombe and Tombs, 1969, pp. 181-2.
- 6 Mitchell, *People and Politics in New Zealand*, p. 180.
- 7 Mitchell, *Politics and People in New Zealand*, p. 180.
- 8 Mitchell, *Politics and People in New Zealand*, p. 181.
- 9 James W. Lamare, 'Crisis in Confidence: Political Powerlessness in New Zealand', in E. M. McLeay (ed.), *The 1990 General Election: Perspectives on Political Change in New Zealand*, Occasional Publication No. 3, Department of Politics, Victoria University of Wellington, 1991, p. 164. Lamare correlated these findings with perceptions of political efficacy and socio-economic indicators such as education and occupation. There is, of course, some ambiguity about the expression 'government officials'. Before Lamare reported his results, a 1980 survey of 45 people in Karori, Wellington, which replicated the Mitchell research, had found that levels of confidence in government were beginning to decline. See: Jeffrey Sheerin, 'The People and the System', *Political Science*, 33:3 (December, 1981), p. 206.
- 10 Lamare, 'Crisis in Confidence', p. 170.
- 11 Hyam Gold and Alan Webster, *New Zealand Values Today*, Palmerston North, Alpha Publications, 1990, p. 8.
- 12 Paul Harris, "'Intimacy" in New Zealand Politics: A Sceptical Analysis', *Political Science*, 47:1 (July, 1995), p. 22, citing previously unpublished data from surveys by Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts.
- 13 Jack Vowles, Peter Aimer, Helena Catt, Jim Lamare, and Raymond Miller, *Towards Consensus? The 1993 Election in New Zealand and the Transition to Proportional Representation*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1995, p. 133.
- 14 Alan McRobie, 'Final and Binding: The 1993 Referendum', in Jack Vowles and Peter Aimer (ed.), *Double Decision: The 1993 Election and Referendum in New Zealand*, Occasional Publication No. 6, Department of Politics, Victoria University of Wellington, 1994, p. 103.
- 15 Colmar Brunton Research, *Report of Quantitative Benchmark Research into The Electoral System Prepared for the Electoral Commission*, Wellington, 1994, p. 3.
- 16 Mitchell, *People and Politics in New Zealand*, p. 197.
- 17 Jack Vowles and Peter Aimer, *Voters' Vengeance: The 1990 Election in New Zealand and the Fate of the Fourth Labour Government*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1993, p. 45.
- 18 R. M. Chapman, W. K. Jackson and A. V. Mitchell, *New Zealand Politics in Action: The 1960 General Election*, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 180.
- 19 Mitchell, *People and Politics in New Zealand*, p. 198.
- 20 Stephen Levine and Alan Robinson, *The New Zealand Voter. A Study of Public Opinion and Electoral Behaviour*, Wellington, Price Milburn and Co., 1976, p. 142.
- 21 Stephen Levine and Nigel Roberts, 'A Mirror for Miramar? The 1990 Election in Perspective', in McLeay (ed.), *The 1990 General Election*, p. 136.
- 22 Mitchell, *People and Politics in New Zealand*, p. 197.
- 23 Boston, Levine, McLeay and Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP*, pp. 43-5.
- 24 Boston, Levine, McLeay and Roberts, *New Zealand Under MMP*, p. 45.
- 25 Figures on whether New Zealanders are or are not a 'nation of joiners', as argued by Austin Mitchell in the 1960s, are scattered and unreliable. See especially Harris, "'Intimacy" in New Zealand Politics', pp. 1-33.
- 26 See especially Jack H. Nagel, 'Voter Turnout in New Zealand General Elections, 1928-1988', *Political Science*, 40:2 (December, 1988), pp. 16-38.
- 27 Vowles, Aimer, Catt, Lamare, and Miller, *Towards Consensus?*, p. 139. See also Stephen Levine and Nigel S. Roberts, 'The New Zealand General Election and Electoral Referendum of 1993', *Political Science*, 46:1 (July, 1994), pp. 51-2.
- 28 Mitchell, *People and Politics in New Zealand*, p. 179.
- 29 Levine and Roberts, 'A Mirror for Miramar?', in McLeay (ed.), *The 1990 General Election*, p. 136. The comparison is with the authors' 1984 and 1987 Miramar surveys. See also: Stephen Levine and Nigel S. Roberts, 'Policies and Political Perspectives: The Importance of Issues and Problems in New Zealand Electoral Behaviour', in Martin Holland (ed.), *Electoral Behaviour in New Zealand*, Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 73-7.
- 30 Vowles and Aimer, *Voters' Vengeance*, p. 16.
- 31 Colmar Brunton Research, *Report of Quantitative Benchmark Research into The Electoral System*, p. vi.
- 32 Colmar Brunton Research, *Quantitative Monitor into The Electoral System. Prepared for the Electoral Commission*, Wellington, 1995, p. 8.
- 33 Levine and Roberts, 'Policies and Political Perspectives', p. 75.
- 34 See especially the essays in Steve Hoadley (ed.), *Improving New Zealand's Democracy*, Auckland, New Zealand Foundation for Peace Studies, 1979; Stephen Levine, *A Constitution and Bill of Rights for New Zealand: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?*, Wellington, New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, 1981; John Marshall (ed.), *The Reform of Parliament*, Wellington, New Zealand Institute of Public Administration, 1978; and Geoffrey Palmer, *Unbridled Power*, 2nd edn., Auckland, Oxford University Press, 1987 and *New Zealand's Constitution in Crisis: Reforming Our Political System*, Dunedin, John McIndoe, 1992.
- 35 For the primary sources see Paul Harris and Stephen Levine et al. (eds.), *The New Zealand Politics Source Book*, Palmerston North, Dunmore Press, 1st edn. 1992, and 2nd edn. 1994.
- 36 Lamare, 'Crisis in Confidence', noted that even the disaffected voted in 1990; see p. 170.
- 37 Colmar Brunton Research, *Quantitative Monitor into The Electoral System*, 1995, p. 21.
- 38 This 'experiential learning' has been a focus of the 1995 survey of opinion leaders, ongoing interviews with members of the political elite and interest groups, and a 1996 pre-election survey of voters.