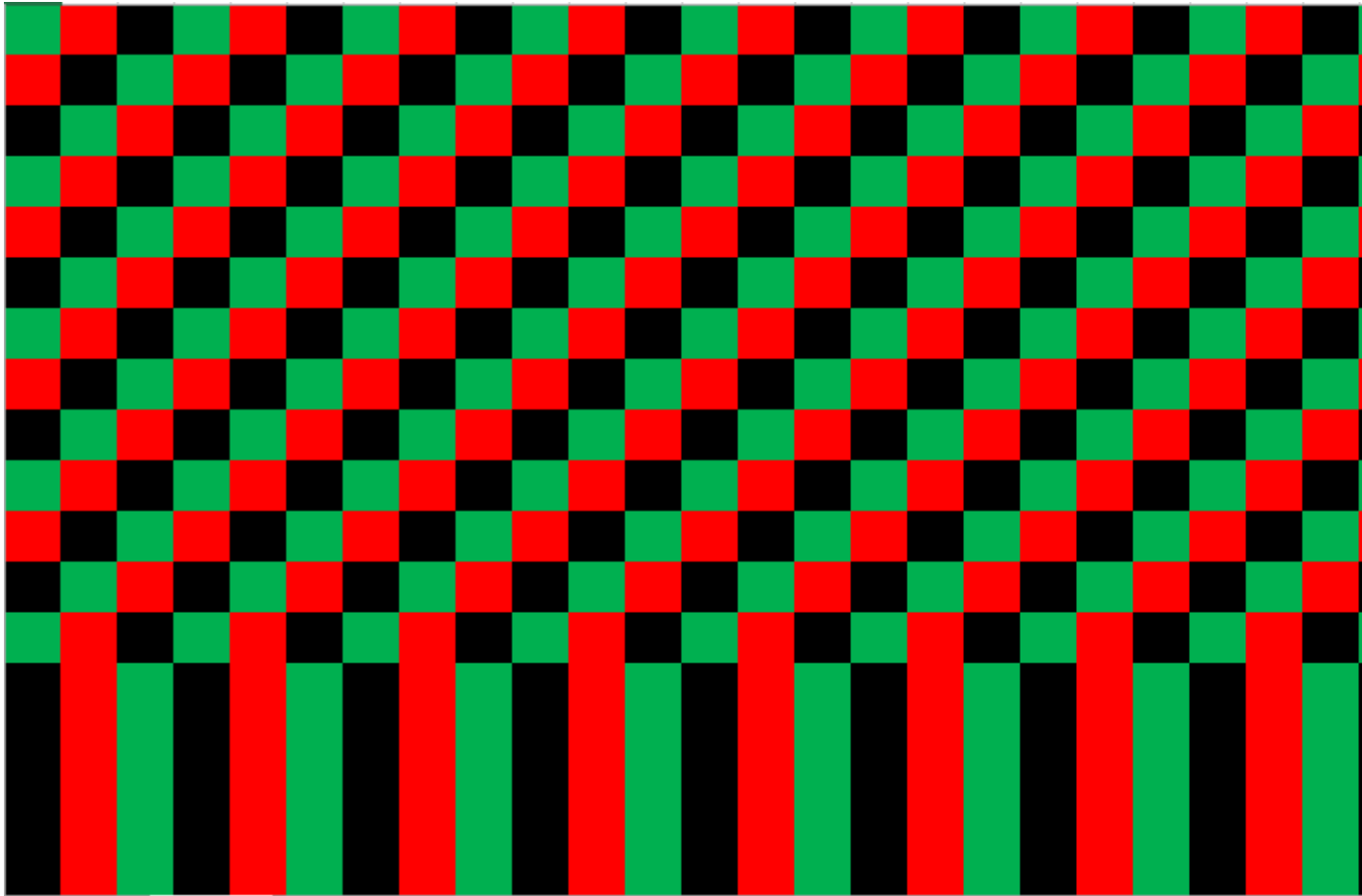


PollyAnna politics? The positive possibilities of the Red, Green and Black



Update 28/2/17 to include policy synergy on Trade Agreements and Employment relations.

All bets are off for the formation of a new government. But everyone seems to want a say. Me too! The Sunday Star Times [reiteration](#) at the weekend of National's "Moral Authority" (sic) that had been part Bill English's speech on election night and the supposed "lack of credible alternatives" set the tone. On Monday Gordon Campbell also [cited a moral mandate](#) that the largest party has (ignoring the fact that National has governed with minor parties kept alive only by gaming the system) and paid little attention to the a chasm in ideology between National and New Zealand First. Notwithstanding NZ First being nominally a centre-right party it has definitely disavowed the politics of Neo-Liberalism in vivid contrast to the National Party. Campbell did however hint at the National Party's unannounced policies that NZ First might unwittingly sign up to.

Far more confrontationally Chris Trotter seems to imply that [the rich and powerful should not be crossed](#) and promised that should Winston choose to support a Labour Green government all hell will break loose.

"Look at who you would be denying if you went with Labour and the Greens assuming you are Winston. Because these just aren't any 46 per cent these are the most powerful people in the country.

"These are the people who owns things, the people who run things, the people who say things and expect people to do things and pretty damn quickly. To take 46 per cent and say sorry were going to ignore you - that's a pretty big thing to do."

This is a rather ugly realpolitick but given that the National Party was able to overturn a resurgent Labour Party with negative campaigning and the repetition of outright lies we can be sure that a Labour-NZ First-Green government – if indeed that is the outcome – would be heavily and effectively attacked by disappointed National Party aligned interests. The media would be hard pressed to counter these just as media commentator Gavin Ellis [explained recently](#) was the case during the election. Hopefully a resurgent civil society, free to speak without the risk of losing contracts, together with academics and the progressive thinktanks would have a redoubled and counter-balancing impact. However while the risks to democracy from the interests of capital has been a constant problem the last decade's inequality and surveillance has exacerbated it.

However the risk may be worth the reward. The truth is that a Black – Blue Parliament and a Red-Green-Black option are both possible outcomes. If we do allow ourselves to put aside the idea that the biggest party should call the shots and instead the biggest grouping with common ground should become the government then a NZ First-Labour-Greens government has some clear benefits for ordinary people but also for good process and the reinstatement of an effective and well run public services and a re-invigorated public domain. Of course the results of negotiations are not amenable to logic or to forecasting but the purpose of this article is to point out some of the non-obvious policy parallels between the three parties. It also downplays the potential differences which much of the media have been so keen to focus on.

Firstly the common ground on which the Black, Red and Green parties could build a platform relate mostly to the most pressing and prescient issues of our time. These are the policies to address climate change, housing, water quality and poverty and in the main the three parties already have strategies, reviews, goals and objectives which have already been devised to achieve this. In contrast National has been dragged to the starting line on these issues, in

many cases only under duress, in the lead-up to the election. In these areas National's policies are literally on the wrong side of history. On climate change consider National's purchase of illegal carbon credits and a budget allocation larger than the \$10.5bn on new proposed roads to buy new overseas credits. NZ has lately become an international outlier on action for carbon reduction. On poverty and inequality the smart money across all major international institutions – IMF, OECD, World Bank – is that greater inequality is a brake on economic development as well as human well-being but this has not become part of National's thinking. The National Party has also been loath to develop goals for issues as important as lowering child poverty and levels of suicide believing them, apparently, to be outside the control of government.

Secondly all three parties actually believe in the power of public policy to make change whereas the National Party's approach is to seek solutions from the market. In the terms of [Ralph Waldo Emerson's 1841 essay](#) the difference is between the parties that aim, perhaps hubristically to "sit on the world and steer it" compared with those who regards the public they govern as a patient "with bib, pap spoon and slippers" to be tended while the big money is free to do what it will. If you doubt this have a look at the Productivity Commission envisages the entire systems of [health, education and social welfare provision](#) (In the draft paper and final reports) as '*markets with special characteristics*'.

Thirdly all three parties have met at numerous public platforms and are well aware of the common ground and have a commitment to describing their policies in public forums. This has included in recent months a number of occasions when no National Party candidate or spokesperson has been present either to defend the government's record or to talk about its plans. One of the first was the high-profile debate on public housing at the [Community Housing Aotearoa](#) conference where the National Party failed to send a spokesperson. There have been frequent non-appearances at later hustings on topics and in electorates continued until the election. See also [1](#) but many other instances have been recorded

Of course there are tricky issues of policy that Labour, NZ First and the Greens would find hard to square and which may be unsurpassable (like the already ruled out referendum on the future of the Māori seats) but Winston Peters will presumably be considering his personal legacy and presumably NZ First's longer term prospects if he decides to stand down at the next election. Intuitively this seems more likely if the party help fight today's battles rather acting as a brake on a privatising, austerity government

Here are some of the areas of common ground where all three parties are addressing some of the most pressing and complex problems in New Zealand followed by something of a wish list of major issues that have not been on the table for a decade. (I've used the [SpinOff's policy tool](#) to check the policies.)

Housing and speculation

Each of Labour, Greens and NZ First have policies calling a halt on foreign speculators buying New Zealand Homes. Further than that Greens and Labour have similar views on housing and held a homelessness enquiry together with the Māori Party in 2016 from which a [20 proposals](#) were outlined.

Employment

The three parties have a number of common policies on employment issues including [wages and incomes](#) as well as [redistributive social rebates](#) to families and less well off New Zealanders. Housing and employment have long been regarded as two principal areas where the additional power of capital (employers and landlords) mean that contractual relationships are inadequate to ensure just outcomes. Actions to address this kind of “market failure” are sorely needed and for both areas a good start would be made by the policies of a Green/Black/Red government.

Trade Agreements

All three parties have been very wary of the kinds of trade agreements like the TPPA that are really about constraining sovereign power and making it vulnerable to overseas corporations. Apparently the weaker of the three Labour has focussed publicly on overseas speculative purchases of New Zealand domestic property and the TPPA but [the actual policy](#) is stronger than this and incorporates a much greater level of public debate and greater protections for NZ

Fresh Water

On fresh water all three parties want to see charges for bottling water – a project which has taken on extra urgency as without legislation taking action would be outlawed by the TPPA. They all have other objectives related to work on water quality and usage although NZ First differs in wanting to remove the right for iwi involvement in water decision making through the Resource Management Act.

Climate change

On climate change all parties agree on setting legally binding emissions regimes and on work towards mitigation including support to NZ’s infrastructure. The Greens and NZ First are aligned in wanting a Carbon Tax and Labour has wanted this in the past but has accepted an emissions trading scheme after attempts to implement a Carbon Tax have failed. They each have smart ideas – a percentage of electric cars, an infrastructure fund, rules on power purchasing that could see a richly textured move towards carbon neutrality.

In contrast, and as described above, it seems that National are not yet serious on climate change. Their targets are unambitious and there has been over nine years no realistic plan to achieve them.

Education

On education all three parties want to see an end to Charter Schools and to replace National Standards. All three have a future focus with NZ First advocating a 30 year education plan and all three want to see early childhood education centres with trained staff with NZ First wanting to increase funding for play centres and review funding models for Kohanga Reo.

Tertiary Education

On tertiary education the nexus of support to students involves for all three parties ideas around reducing loans, increasing student allowances and various measures to reduce the impact of student debt. In contrast National merely says it will continue to fund the tertiary sector but is proposing to fund private colleges on an equal footing to public delivery, a measure to which all three parties are opposed.

Immigration

Even on tricky issues like migration where NZ First suggests a limit to 10,000 new migrants a year it is nonetheless more generous than the National-led government on refugee resettlement and has policy on the mistreatment of vulnerable immigrants. Labour wants to reduce overseas students being granted visas to study for poor quality courses that give a route to permanent residence and citizenship and the Green Party correspondingly wasn't to see immigration made to work to support sustainability and to be able to prioritise New Zealand companies in investment decisions. The differences are obviously challenging but I would argue not insurmountable.

Other stuff

There are a few areas that I would like to see a three party government address that where there is space for movement.

The Constitution

I think revisiting the constitution as a topic with a view to a two term process leading to change is overdue. The work of the Independent [Iwi Working Group on Constitutional Transformation Matike Mai Aotearoa](#) and [Sir Geoffrey Palmer's work – the constitutional conversation](#) have been doing formal work outside parliamentary mandate and it is time this is brought in from the cold. Abuses of power like the suspension of Environment Canterbury to push through commercial irrigation would be preventable with a constitution. This work would also embed the role and continuing importance of the Treaty in New Zealand Law and update and entrench the Human Rights Act preventing some of the egregious legislation that has passed in recent years that specifically bypassed the Act. It could also include provisions that protect people from the injurious effects of new technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and the Internet of Things.

Controlling social investment and big data approaches.

Both human rights and the use of our information are hugely important in the delivery of public services. The social investment approach involves using the public's data against us to determine who is eligible to receive public services and how they should be treated. This should be anathema. The ability of government agencies, private interests and the new social investment agency to share datasets for the flimsiest of reasons and the flimsiest of protections should be very carefully controlled.

Similarly using algorithms to make predictive decisions about people without careful controls should be a national scandal. The criteria are not transparent and research elsewhere has shown the algorithms being used variously embed racism, political rather than research based assumptions and normative cultural worldviews and yet it is already rolling out in agencies as diverse as Justice and the Accident Compensation Corporation as well as the more publicised uses in the Ministry of Social Development and Organga Tamariki

Security arrangements.

The government's security legislation took on far too few of the recommendations of the report "[Intelligence and Security in a Free Society](#)". The resulting law makes NZ an exception in our lack of oversight of spying and the apparatus is overbearing and morally repugnant allowing, for example, legalising the ability to create an entire layer of privatised spying using subcontracted organisations that can operate in secret and a host of other incursions on rights which the law simply says would 'otherwise be illegal'.

Tax review

Carrying out a good tax review should be part of a nationwide conversation and be broadly based looking at tax options such as a "Robin Hood" Tax, Carbon Tax, a speculative Land Tax and not just those already mentioned like a capital gains tax.. The Opportunities Party has done some great breaking of new ground on this that is attractive and evidence based and breaks the sad status quo. Hopefully Gareth Morgan and Geoff Simmons and their ideas will be part of the working party.

Summing up

Mine is an ever-hopeful PollyAnna view and yet it does seem to me that despite all the challenges there is a better future for New Zealand, based on an effective public sector and a better quality of democracy could eventuate from the kind of politics that could be delivered by combining the policies of a tri-partite group of parties.

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