

members to consider the formation of smaller parties. In any case some National MPs needed to search for new political homes for themselves if they were to remain in Parliament, given the jostling for seats among incumbents arising out of the reduction in the number of electorates from 99 to 65 as a consequence of MMP.¹⁷ In presiding over the transition to the new electoral system, preparing for it, and then winning its first election, in 1996 Bolger proved to be a leader who was perhaps dangerously underestimated both by his political adversaries and the New Zealand news media.¹⁸

The Bolger years: the 1994–1997 period

1996

At the 1996 election, New Zealand's first under MMP, Jim Bolger was again the incumbent Prime Minister; it was the fourth consecutive time that the National Party was contesting a general election with him as its leader. How was he perceived? Perceptions of political leaders are not made in a vacuum. The political context inevitably involves comparisons, explicit or otherwise, with other potential leaders. In this instance, notwithstanding the looming introduction of effective multiparty politics and a significantly diversified parliamentary membership, the principal point of comparison, for most New Zealanders, was again between Bolger and a Labour Member of Parliament, this time one who was leading the party at a general election for the first time – Helen Clark.

Perhaps surprisingly, given their political destinies – Bolger would be deposed as Prime Minister and National Party leader in a year; Clark went on to lead Labour to three successive election victories (at the time of writing) – it was Bolger who was the more popular. At last, after Lange and Moore, he was up against a Labour leader less popular than himself. This was, in some ways, surprising even then. Bolger did not campaign well in 1996 and his performance in televised election debates (including the first to use 'the worm'¹⁹) was not to his advantage. As we noted at the time:

... contrary to popular misconceptions of Jim Bolger's standing among electors (arising out of his poor campaign performance), at the time of the 1996 election he was clearly the politician most preferred as Prime Minister.²⁰

The Victoria University nationwide survey, conducted in the final week of the 1996 campaign, had 25 per cent of the sample declaring Bolger their preferred prime minister, as against 19 per cent for Helen Clark (with 11 per cent preferring Winston Peters and a further 11 per cent opting for Jim Anderton – peaks of popularity that neither leader would ever again scale).

This survey also asked participants to name who they would 'least prefer' to be Prime Minister and, again unfortunately for Bolger, almost

three times as many people named him than Clark, with 23 per cent of participants awarding him this doubtful honour. Placing Bolger's 'preferred' and 'least preferred' totals side by side gave him a mere two per cent positive rating. By contrast, in 1996 Helen Clark elicited a much lower total of assessments, either positive or negative, leaving her 'differential' – the difference between her ratings as 'preferred' and 'least preferred' Prime Minister – much higher (at +11 per cent) than any other party leader.²¹

As previously, however, a separate question in the 1996 survey offered a hypothetical scenario in which New Zealanders had the opportunity 'to cast a separate vote for Prime Minister'. There were three successive questions in this exercise, with each steadily narrowing the choice: the first allowed a vote for anyone; the second restricted the choice to any of the party leaders; and the third limited options to the leaders of what were then the four main parties – Labour, National, New Zealand First and the Alliance.

What was striking about this set of questions in 1996 was the clear and consistent preference for Bolger over any of his rivals – Clark, Peters or Anderton. At each step – the first, second and third questions – Bolger was the more frequently named choice. By the end of the three questions, Bolger received the 'vote' of 34 per cent of survey participants, as against 26 per cent for Clark, 17 per cent for Anderton, and 15 per cent for Peters. The 1996 election was thus the first and only time that Bolger – leading National at four general elections, winning three of them – was actually the person more frequently named than any other as New Zealand voters' preferred Prime Minister. It is ironic that in a sense not far from the moment of his greatest popularity *vis-à-vis* his opponents, Bolger was soon to fall from grace.

There thus seems little doubt that in 1996, despite misgivings among some about his leadership – reflecting, in large part, partisan preferences for other parties and antagonisms towards National – Jim Bolger, already National Party leader for ten years and New Zealand's Prime Minister for six, was the country's preferred prime-ministerial choice. He did not enjoy majority support – this was already the beginnings of the era of MMP politics, when majorities were hard to come by – but there was no one, either within National or in parties opposed to it, receiving a greater measure of public confidence. It was, if not perfect, at least a good basis on which Bolger was able to begin his direct experience of MMP.

But this pre-election picture of at least relative satisfaction with Bolger was changed, dramatically and angrily, by the bargain with Winston Peters that preserved Bolger's leadership and his position as Prime Minister.²² He thus sat perched atop a coalition deprived of its popularity and credibility

right from the start. As in 1990, at the start of his tenure as Prime Minister, so too in 1996: circumstances constrained the options open to Bolger, and the result – difficult decisions, ‘least bad’ choices – cost him (and his government) badly. Each set of decisions undermined the electoral system that allowed them to be made. The post-1990 decisions cost Bolger the FPP system he preferred, while the post-1996 choices in due course cost him his leadership and the post of Prime Minister. By late 1997 the ‘Great Helmsman’, the master of MMP – the builder of coalitions – was no longer at the helm.

Bolger and MMP

The Bolger years are replete with ironies. Bolger’s adroit manoeuvring during the 1994–96 period, maintaining office and reconfiguring his government through a succession of coalition arrangements, and his subsequent success in forming the first MMP government through a coalition with New Zealand First, came despite his deep reservations about the entire MMP electoral system. Speaking on television in 1988, in a discussion about the merits of proportional representation (PR)²³ – in which, ironically, the most critical comments came from Bolger (who was to become New Zealand’s first PR Prime Minister) and Jim Anderton (then a Labour MP, but subsequently an Alliance and then Progressive MP in Parliament, whose presence in Clark-led cabinets was solely a result of PR) – Bolger was strongly opposed:

The question of accountability is very important. Under the present system, if you dislike a government you can sack it, you can vote it out of office, very positively vote it out of office. With PR you don’t have that luxury, or that option, in front of you because almost inevitably large portions of the party you don’t like will reform and form the new government and often the same prime minister will continue with a different group of supporters ...

And therefore one of the real powers of the democratic system, or the individual voter, saying, ‘look, I don’t like party A, I’m going to vote that prime minister out of office’, you can’t do it under MMP, and another point with MMP, which I think totally throws it out, and that is the electors will vote for 60 of the 120 members, and they’ll directly elect those, [while] the other 60 – half of the parliament – will be appointed by the hierarchy of the political party, and they will clearly have their first allegiance to the political party – to no electorate, to no constituency. Their only constituency is the party that was kind enough to have put them on a senior portion of the list ... so they come through with no responsibilities to the electorate at large.

In the discussion that followed, Bolger raised the possibility of a party coming first in the election – winning more seats than any other, but not a

majority – and being beaten by a party coming second combining with a party coming third to form a government, a possible result he deplored.

He was also very critical of post-election deals engineered to allow a party to remain in office:

That’s precisely what’s happened in Belgium recently. One of the minor parties, which was necessary to form the coalition to sustain the existing prime minister in office, got five out of its ten members in Cabinet posts, which is an incredible percentage, but obviously that was the payoff in crude political terms.

The implications, as he saw them then, were profoundly disquieting, both in terms of policy coherence and the individual voter’s capacity to effect change:

It does make political manifestos a nonsense, because you do not know whether you’re going to have the authority to implement your policies or not. It does mean that the power is taken – this is my real objection – the power is taken from the individual voter to make a decision, and particularly to sack a government if it wants to, and it’s transferred across to the party bosses (to use a slogan) and the party bosses – or the leaders of the political structures – will finally make the deal, and present it to the public, and the public have had very little say in the outcome.

When it was pointed out that under MMP winning individual electorates is ‘irrelevant’ to the composition of Parliament – since it is the distribution of *party* votes that determines the overall outcome – Bolger, clearly provoked, responded:

Isn’t that crucial? So the people who are actually elected by the voters, the whole electorate, as you say are ‘irrelevant’ to the composition of Parliament! The people who are ‘relevant’ to Parliament and its composition of the government are those who come off a list that the average New Zealander never has a single input into. [I am] the leader of a political party. I certainly would have a big input into the list. David Lange would have a big input into the list, on his side. But the average voter doesn’t get near them. And to suggest ... that they are going to be the ‘relevant’ people, and those who are elected by the constituencies the ‘irrelevant’, I think sums up the problem in a nutshell.

Reflecting on what might have happened had PR existed in the past – another speculative ‘counterfactual’ – Bolger claimed, as an argument *against* PR, that it might have kept National in power after the 1984 and 1987 elections:

I mean, the simple fact is, we may have put a better proposition in front of the Social Credit party, who would have been the dominant minor party presumably as we see it at the moment, and we could have persuaded them

to join us, and Labour would still be languishing in opposition – now that's the crucial problem ... whether or not you want *democracy* or not.

Bolger's integrity, in arguing against a change that he considered might have kept his own party in office for a longer period – thus frustrating 'democracy' – suggests the depth of his opposition to the electoral system change proposal. At the same time, he proved already to be a good student of MMP, aware of its possibilities and the uses to which PR systems could be put, and indeed had been put elsewhere. What he was able to do in 1996 – preserve National in office by making a more attractive offer to New Zealand First leader Winston Peters than Labour was willing or able to do – is entirely anticipated in his 1988 admonitions. It would have been appropriate, though admittedly extraordinary, for Bolger to have turned on his critics in 1996 in the media, and in Parliament, and among an unforgiving public, to have reminded them that he had warned that this was precisely the kind of thing that could happen. They hadn't listened; they'd approved the system anyway; and he had acted almost precisely in the manner he had warned them against.

Bolger and political leadership

Reflecting on Jim Bolger's long career in politics – one that continued with post-prime-ministerial distinction and honours, including appointment as Ambassador to the United States (he was kept on in the position even when Labour took office in 1999) and as chair of Anderton's 'Kiwibank' – does suggest an apt if unexpected comparison to US-style 'presidential' politics. It is sometimes observed that US Presidents 'grow into' the job – that they become, somehow, different, in some ways deepened, in others elevated, the responsibilities and opportunities of office working to transform the incumbent from the more pedestrian figure he had been in the past.²⁴ It is not true of all presidents, of course, but there is a sense in which some, brought face-to-face with what the position involves – what it means to make historic decisions whose consequences can affect the lives of so many – leave behind some of the limitations of their past, separate themselves from friends and colleagues, as they gain a unique perspective of the office and what it entails.

New Zealand's role in world affairs admittedly does not often lend itself to the weighty demands of office, captured in the famous photograph of President Kennedy looking out a window of the Oval Office, his back to the photographer. Nevertheless, even in New Zealand, in this remote and lightly populated country, important steps are taken by leaders with consequences that affect the lives and well-being of individuals and families, neighbours and communities. A Prime Minister who never manages to rise

above the role of party leader fails to see the possibilities in the office they have been privileged, through effort and circumstance, to occupy. A Prime Minister who never goes beyond partisanship, who never articulates a vision of 'the national interest' – the common good – and strives to act upon it, irrespective of adversity or the potential loss of support for themselves or their party, flinches at a crucial test of leadership. Having the office, yet proving unable or unwilling fully to use it, means that in some ways the experience of office has left the politician no wiser, and no better, than he or she was when going into it.

It is a measure of Jim Bolger, reflected in the convening of a conference considering his career, culminating now in this book, that his performance as Prime Minister did invite questions about his leadership and character. New Zealand, under Bolger, did not face the kinds of predicaments, and problems, confronted by some of the US Presidents considered to have 'grown' into the job – to have, in every sense, truly *become* a president, rather than remaining merely a person occupying the office for a period of time – but even so, within the confines and context of New Zealand, new and in some ways dramatic challenges needed to be confronted during the years of Bolger's pre-eminence. Working with his colleagues, providing leadership, his government worked to move forward with settlements of long-standing Maori tribal grievances. Consulting astutely with colleagues and adversaries, Bolger developed, or acquired, a style of governing that allowed him to overcome political differences and partisanship, to devise new types of government for New Zealand.²⁵

It is worth looking again at what might have happened – what some had predicted *would* happen – under MMP, yet did not. In the run-up to MMP, Bolger managed to lead a minority government – once seen almost as a contradiction in terms for New Zealand's parliamentary system. In that period, and afterwards, there was no 'Italian-like' instability – no early elections, no successful motions of no-confidence, no visits to the Governor-General from opposition party leaders hopeful of power and office. For many things that did *not* occur, the skills developed and deployed by Bolger deserve at least some of the credit.

It is doubtful that the King Country farmer who came into Parliament in 1972 could have imagined that he would some day be working to resolve issues that had persisted in New Zealand for generations; that he would be developing strategies to make a new electoral system work; that he would, on his own, come to offer a vision of a new New Zealand, more genuinely independent, a republic, with its own head of state. Here is some of what Bolger had to say, in his valedictory address, as he departed the New Zealand Parliament for the last time:

We have had to overcome many, many obstacles ... I suggest that the real reason we have made progress is that along the way we made a historic change in our approach and in our attitudes. We no longer see ourselves as just the farm for Britain, as we once did ...

We built another country – a new New Zealand. It is more outward looking. It is more confident. It is a better country than what we had before. We should be proud of that. Each and every one of us as New Zealanders should be proud of it. ...

We are proud of our pioneering past. We are proud of their achievements. We go to centennial celebrations. We talk about what they did in the old days. I suggest that pioneering never stops. We are today's pioneers. We have a different challenge. ... the most important thing we must understand about pioneering ... is that pioneering requires change. ...

One of the things that has caused some discomfort is, of course, the move to MMP. Let me spend but a moment. I did not support it coming in. There are an awful lot of New Zealanders who would vote to throw it out tomorrow. They do not like the reality of coalition government. They do not like the fact that it gives minor or smaller parties in a coalition greater authority. That is true; that was always true. But we should not panic. ... We must give the system some time to settle down. So I do not support the reduction in the size of the House from 120 to 100.²⁶ Let me tell people what would happen. We would reduce the voice of those who have the hardest job being heard; the minority groups will be the ones that miss out. Representative democracy is not sound unless all voices can be heard, all points of view advanced. So I just urge this House that although it might be popular to go to 100 ... our responsibility is bigger than that ...

I caused some ructions after we voted in MMP, when I said we should go on, we should go further, we should have other constitutional changes. We should have our own New Zealand-based honours system; our final Court of Appeal here in New Zealand and not in London, and we should move to sever our constitutional ties with the monarchy. That caused some excitement. I am absolutely unrepentant. ...

Without question the biggest thing was the issue of severing our ties with the constitutional monarchy. To me it is a simple argument. The time has come to have a New Zealander as Head of State of New Zealand. ... I urge [those opposed] to be a little more expansive in seeing the future ...

My optimism, as we approach the new century, is undiminished. I repeat what I said in my maiden speech: we are limited only by our vision ...²⁷

Bolger grew into the role of a Member of Parliament and, when it became time for his colleagues to consider what was to be done about the irksome challenge from its former leader, Muldoon, there was something in Bolger, some qualities, that they discerned (and that the public did not) and that gave them confidence. It was many years, and several elections, before much of the electorate began to glimpse some of those qualities as well. It is high

praise of Bolger to say that he confounded expectations by growing into the positions that he held – Member of Parliament; National Party leader; and Prime Minister – no doubt discovering in himself qualities he perhaps never quite realised he had. It is in recognition of *this* Bolger – the one who left Parliament different from the man who had entered it – to whom this volume is rightfully devoted.

It seems appropriate to give Bolger the last word, these – the final words he spoke in Parliament, a blessing actually, to his colleagues:

I depart. In going, I extend to each and every one of you the old Irish blessing: May the road rise to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine soft upon your face and the rain fall gentle on your fields. Until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.