

Points of difference: Experiencing politics from outside the 'mainstream'

ANJUM RAHMAN

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly acknowledged that diversity leads to better decision-making. For instance, companies that have a greater representation of women on their board of directors are known to be more financially successful. Arguably, this would be the case in Parliament as well; the more political representation from minority communities there is, the more likely that law and policymaking would be sensitive to the diversity of the people it is working among. However, the representation of people from minority groups in New Zealand politics is still relatively new and a potential minority political candidate encounters a range of challenges within the existing institutional structures of electoral and party politics. In this piece, I will reflect on my own experiences in the world of politics, and how my difference impacted on that experience. In doing so, I hope to raise awareness of the difficulties faced by minority candidates in a system that is not designed for their demographic and does not accommodate their differences.

Personal background

When it comes to points of difference, I tick most boxes which are grounds for discrimination under the Human Rights Act. In terms of my family status, I'm a sole parent. In terms of gender, I'm female. I was not born in New Zealand, so am a migrant. I'm a minority by ethnicity and race, being of Indian ethnicity. I'm also a minority by religion, and a very visible minority in that regard because I choose to wear hijab (head-covering). Finally, my brown skin makes me a minority by colour. I think the only boxes I don't tick are sexuality, disability and age – though I'm fast approaching the age where the latter will also apply!

I have been involved in community and formal party politics for over a decade. I joined the New Zealand Labour Party in 2003, and stood as a list candidate in the 2005 and 2008 elections. During both of those elections, Helen Clark was the Prime Minister of a Labour-led government that was dependent on the support of various smaller parties. I've held a number of positions in the Party, including the regional chair for the Waikato-Bay of Plenty region, a member of the Policy Council and the regional representative on the Party's governing body. Most of the positions I have held in the Party were as a general candidate, and not as a representative of the ethnic sector. I'm incredibly appreciative of the support I've had from local Party members, who were able to put aside my differences and judge me solely on my abilities. Despite a supportive political environment, I found that being 'different' plays out in complex ways and does influence the kind of political impact you can have.

Politics of identity

It is no longer policies that are sold, but people. The media now rarely provides in-depth analysis of policy, and there is little indication that much of the public is aware of the various

policy options on offer. Political battles are now fought on the basis of the personal popularity of the candidates, and this is detrimental for the country. Minority status can be a selling point, but there are several provisos attached to it. You must be the ‘right kind’ of minority – one that doesn’t look too different, and one that adheres to prevailing cultural norms. And using your minority identity, you must also be able to appeal to a range of interests. Let me elaborate.

First, in order to be successful in politics, it is important to have numbers on your side. This means not only support from a wide section of the public, but also wide support within the party. With an ethnic candidate, winning the numbers game – both from the minority community they represent and from within the political party – can be a balancing act. In my case, from a party perspective, I was seen as an ideal candidate because I could appeal to ethnic minority communities (i.e. New Zealanders of other than European, Maori or Pacific Island heritage). Unfortunately, there are a few problems with this. First, ethnic minority communities make up about ten per cent of the population, so even getting all their votes (which you can’t get) doesn’t mean that you will get elected. Second, this group is not homogeneous – it includes Indians, Chinese, Koreans, Malaysians, Somalis, among many others – so they won’t all necessarily relate to any person from a minority ethnicity. A classic example was Melissa Lee. The National Party chose Melissa Lee as their candidate for the Mt Albert electorate in 2010, on the assumption that this community would respond positively to an ethnic minority candidate. They failed to appreciate that Ms. Lee was Korean, while the electorate had a strong number of voters of Indian heritage. They were not going to relate to her simply because she was ‘Asian’.

Second, a primary consideration political parties have when choosing candidates is how the electorate will perceive the candidate. The party needs to be willing to sell the candidate, and be sure that he or she will be well received by the electorate – this could be a geographical electorate or it could be a specific demographic sector of society. Not only must the candidate appeal to that sector (be it geographic or demographic), he or she must not repel other sectors. So, to take an example, while a candidate may appeal to the Māori sector, they must also not antagonise the non-Māori sector. There is a similar issue with a woman wearing a headscarf: while she may be able to appeal to part of the ethnic minority sector, will she antagonise or alienate other sectors?

A commonly occurring tactic is that, instead of attacking a particular candidate, the candidate’s demographic group is attacked. So, there will be many more letters to the editor that are negative about Māori around election time, which will benefit those parties who don’t run candidates in Māori electorates and are not interested in winning the Māori vote. I personally noticed that there was a lot more negative rhetoric about Muslims, particularly in letters to the editor and comments to blogs and newspaper sites, at the time I was a candidate. This kind of thing is really difficult to counter, because a personal attack can be countered directly, but a demographic attack based on misinformation takes considerably more effort. For a start, there are greater numbers from the majority demographic who are making such attacks, and fewer members of the minority group who can counter them. Also, a piece of misinformation can be given in a sentence, but adequate correction of that misinformation will often take a paragraph or more. Given the limited time available to each individual, and in the case of letters to the editor, a limited number of words, minority groups remain vulnerable to a demographic attack.

Thus, minority status on its own is certainly not enough for political success, as many parties not only have minority demographic candidates lower down on the list but also choose not to promote them. They may be seen as advantageous for lower level positions in a party’s caucus, rather than as frontline leaders. For me personally, getting support within the party, especially locally, was not so difficult. Once people knew me and had seen the skills I had to offer, they were generous with their support and didn’t consider any of my differences to be a barrier. One thing that was most important to me was gaining any positions I had in the party

through general support, rather than as a representative of the ethnic sector. The reason for this is because it is symbolic – it shows that ethnic minority New Zealanders are becoming part of the fabric of New Zealand society. However, prejudices did sometimes come into play for those in other parts of the country who didn't know me and weren't able to assess my performance through their own experience of interacting with me.

It really helps if a candidate has a high profile before entering into politics, but she certainly is required to develop one in order to be successful. The party is looking for achievements which can be used to sell the candidate to the electorate. In the current political climate, it is no longer enough to be 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. Being a suburban housewife not focused on her professional career but passionate about social justice issues, as I am, is not enough. This is largely as a result of the way society values different types of work. The skills gained from child-rearing and managing a household are rarely seen as relevant to leadership, yet such skills and experience can make a valuable contribution to many areas of policy, including areas such as childcare policy, maternal and general health, and economic management. A similar situation exists with the types of voluntary work women contribute to the economy, which is also seen as of lesser value than, for example, business experience, even though the skills and experience acquired from both activities may lead to a significant contribution in the political sphere.

Competing forces

Being a team player is particularly important in politics – being outspoken is not always a positive thing. Having a consistent message and a unified team are crucial to success. Parties where conflict is visible don't do well with the public. Examples of this are many, but the most recent would be the leadership issues and conflict within the ACT party, which has resulted in a loss of public support. However, being a team player, no matter how much you would like to be, is not simple when you are minority candidate. Being a minority representative means contending with the competing values of your own community and those of the party – which may not necessarily be sympathetic to those community values.

There are often tensions for those who represent particular sectors of society, especially when issues in the sector clash with the over-riding party position. We saw this clash when Tariana Turia¹ left the Labour Party in 2004 because she believed she wasn't able to achieve the policy results she wanted for her core constituency by staying with the party. Such decisions are often poorly understood by other party members and the wider electorate. Again, there are many examples of this, and political commentator Chris Trotter is one who writes frequently about the need to put 'identity politics' secondary to class issues. This is not always easy or desirable, especially when injustices relating to identity can have significant negative impacts on a person's life, and, at times, may have more impact than those relating to class.

I also experienced tensions between being a political activist and being a political candidate. For example, candidates in the Pacific sector had a dilemma in relation to the amendment of section 59 of the Crimes Act (1961). A large section of their community was strongly against any changes to the Act, so it was difficult to advocate for change while at the same time increasing the level of support for the party. It was almost impossible for candidates to do both at the same time.

Policies that may be important to a particular demographic may antagonise another demographic. So, for example, migrants, refugees, and their descendants will want policies around immigration that are clear, transparent, fair, and non-discriminatory. However, many workers feel threatened by immigration, particularly at a time of high employment, so prefer immigration policies that are restrictive and not perceived to drive down wages and conditions or to threaten job availability. Numbers count, so a demographic that is smaller in numbers tends to

lose out to those with bigger numbers, as parties seek a policy mix that will appeal to the greatest majority.

Navigating political processes

The next factor crucial to political success is an ability to understand and navigate the processes and institutions in the political world. I'm lucky enough to have been brought up in New Zealand, which means I have a good grasp of the language and some knowledge of how the processes work. It is so much more difficult for those who are new to the country, especially if their country of origin is not a democratic one.

One of the most important parts of the political process is being able to raise significant amounts of money, which is needed to fund party organisation and political campaigns. Some ethnic minority communities do have a lot of money, but they aren't always left-leaning. In fact, this is the one area about our immigration policy that is never discussed. Our policy, by its very nature, is designed to bring conservative voters into the country. The focus on high-skilled and relatively wealthy migrants means many migrants tend not to have a strong focus on social justice issues. Their main focus is on individual achievement. This can make it difficult to raise funds from within migrant communities, particularly for left-leaning candidates.

The need for activists and candidates to focus efforts on raising funds limits the time they have to spend on policy analysis and development. It reduces the time they have to debate and promote policies. The lack of state funding for political parties puts our democratic system at risk, as political parties become dependant on large funders simply in order to function. Those who don't have large funders find it much more difficult to carry out the basic activities necessary to be successful.

The second issue around processes is that the democratic system in our country does not automatically deliver diversity. This is certainly the criticism that has been raised about the First Past the Post system (FPP). But the shift away from FPP alone does not resolve the diversity issue. Representations from minority communities need to be actively forced at every level. Even within progressive parties where people are generally less likely to discriminate, positions based on a general vote of party members do not deliver diverse candidates. As an example, the Green Party has not been able to put an Asian MP into parliament. They do make allowances in their system to force gender balance and fair representation for Māori. Yet a party that believes in diverse representation, and in a parliament that claims to reflect the population it represents, has not been able to deliver thorough diversity. There are similar examples in other parties, and it is interesting to note that the top ten list candidates for the Mana Party in the 2011 election did not include any candidates from ethnic minority communities.

Finally, the political processes in this country aren't designed to accommodate diverse home lives, such as that of single parents. Although things have improved through measures such as Parliament not sitting during school holidays, political processes are still difficult for those who don't have family support. There are some mothers who have managed to have successful political careers; Nanaia Mahuta (Labour MP for Hauraki-Waikato and former cabinet minister) being a recent example of a senior MP having a child while serving as an MP. However, the women who are able to do this tend to have extremely supportive partners and a strong network of family support. This is not the case for everyone, and can be a considerable barrier for some. The practical difficulties are around managing the workload, and simple things can present a challenge – like needing teleconferences to be held at 9 pm when child-rearing duties are finished for the night.

Politics and personality

Those who get involved in politics need to have very strong personalities that can handle rejection and negativity. Our adversarial political system favours personalities that are combative and tough, which means that only a person with a particular set of character traits tends to get through to Parliament – traits that allow one to cope with direct personal attacks on appearance, personality and personal history. Having a lack of diversity in terms of the types of people who offer themselves for election doesn't lead to good decision-making. This was one of my greatest weaknesses, in that I find it very difficult to deal with negativity. Most people do, but the most successful candidates have a strong team of people around them, usually friends and family, who will support them through the negativity and bolster their self-esteem.

The political life is quite grueling in terms of working hours and sheer effort. A political candidate is expected to raise funds for the party, be well-connected in the electorate, be publicly visible, be active in the party, and on top of all that, to continue with their day-job (until they are successfully elected) and still fulfill family commitments. It takes a considerable amount of personal resilience, and burn-out is common amongst candidates.

Conclusion

In summing up, one of the questions I often find myself asking is, to what extent is success in electoral and party politics due to individual factors and how much is due to external and structural factors? The conservative position is to look at all problems at an individual level. But we know that some issues are structural, and I have tried to outline some of these issues above – the tendencies to choose political candidates from the dominant groups in terms of gender and ethnicity, for example. The fact is that unless structural changes are made and unless institutional issues are recognised and corrected, then it is unlikely that there will be any higher representation of minority groups in politics. We already see that the number of women at electable positions on the 2011 National Party list is lower than in the previous election. None of the main parties have Asian candidates in their top ten; the smaller parties don't have them in their top five. Similarly, there are no Pacific Island candidates and very few Māori candidates in the most powerful positions – the numbers of the latter are only improved because of the existence of the Māori and Mana parties.

The lessons I've learned being a minority candidate in an established electoral structure have made me rethink where I should direct my political interests and energy. Are minority candidates better off focusing on community activism rather than party politics at the national level? How can we change institutional structures and values at a deep level so as to accommodate women, particularly ethnic women, in this system? My experiences suggest that there is an urgent need to return to policy-based, rather than personality-based politics; we need to work harder to find ways to incorporate diverse values into both our society and our electoral system; we need to overhaul the funding of election campaigns, so that political success is no longer inextricably linked to wealth; and individual political parties need to ensure processes that deliver diversity in terms of the selection of candidates. I believe that these are issues that we need to debate publicly in our society.

ANJUM RAHMAN is a chartered accountant, member of the Labour Party, community activist, and blogger. She lives in Hamilton, New Zealand.

Note

- 1 Co-leader of the Māori Party and MP for the Te Tai Hauāuru electorate at the time of writing.