

POLITICAL COMMENTARY

Reflection on the 2014 election: Implications for women

SUE BRADFORD

This has not been a good election for women, unless perhaps you're white, wealthy and sufficiently lacking in empathy to believe that John Key and his mates are going to do a good job for us all over the next three years.

Whether considering the gender makeup of Parliament and Cabinet, the likely consequences of a National government for women and children over the next few years, or the melancholy fate of the parties of the left, the aspiration of pre-election initiatives like the Women's Election Agenda appear somewhat dimmed by reality.

Parliament

A noticeable feature of the 51st Parliament is the reduced number of women elected, down to 37 out of 84, meaning that women make up slightly under 32% of MPs. The 2011 Parliament had 39 women MPs. High hopes that the maturation of MMP and the legacy of the Helen Clark era would mean a steady increase in the numbers of women entering Parliament have clearly not been met.

Apart from the Greens, it is hard to identify much success among the major political parties in achieving greater gender balance among their elected representatives. Just 34% of Labour's MPs are women (11 out of 32), meaning that their goal of reaching 45% women MPs by this election has fallen sadly short.

Turning to the makeup of the power holders in National's third term Cabinet, a pitiful six out of 20 full Ministers are women, with the highest ranked being Paula Bennett at number five. If she continues to operate in the same way she has during the previous two National administrations she will proudly take a role as the smiling face of further hatchet jobs in the areas of social housing, local government and state services.

The other women Ministers are Amy Adams (8), Hekia Parata (11), Anne Tolley (12), Nikki Kaye (16) and Maggie Barry (20). The real decision making power within Cabinet is likely to remain with John Key, Bill English, Gerry Brownlee, Stephen Joyce and Chris Finlayson, with a helping hand from up and coming chaps like Michael Woodhouse and Simon Bridges.

The Ministry of Social Development is traditionally the biggest budget holder of all government departments, with huge responsibilities in areas of traditional significance for women and families. It seems odd that the Minister responsible is placed at only number 12 on the list of cabinet rankings. Installing Anne Tolley in this spot may be an indication of the status of MSD in National's scheme of things over the next three years.

Some likely consequences of another three years of National

There is not space to examine the probable impact of National's victory on all aspects of policy of particular interest to women, so I am focusing here on a few key issues related to the area in which I currently work.

Welfare

Early indications are that there will be no turning back from the welfare reform path determined by the Paula Rebstock led Welfare Working Group in 2010-2011. In an interview on TV3's *The Nation* on 11 October, John Key referred to beneficiaries as 'those people'¹. He also made it clear that increasing benefit levels was not an option, as 'we haven't wanted to narrow the gap between welfare and work.'

The work-first mantra of recent Labour and National governments now looks set to continue, alongside increased privatisation of welfare and employment services and an ever deepening culture of fear, harassment and disempowerment at the local Work and Income office. National's goal is to remove as many working age beneficiaries from the welfare system as possible, regardless of the impacts on those affected, and their children and wider whānau.

It is difficult to discern whether Anne Tolley will bring anything new to National's welfare agenda. From the point of view of most parents and teachers she failed dismally as Education Minister. She then went on to lead Corrections in the last administration. My fear is that on the back of the Ashburton Work and Income tragedy she will bring aspects of her Corrections experience into the administration of a government department which already has a deeply embedded culture of treating unemployed people and beneficiaries as something akin to criminal.

So far Ms Tolley has been a silent and invisible Minister. She will be leading the full rewrite of the Social Security Act proposed by Paula Bennett prior to the election, now due to be introduced into Parliament in December 2015. Although the Act certainly belongs in the dustbin of history, a new piece of legislation encapsulating National's philosophy and practice will be a disaster for the unemployed, sole parents, sick, injured and disabled who will be affected.

With women making up over half (58%) of main benefit recipients as of September 2014, it will be women, and their children, who will be disproportionately affected by the ongoing erosion of Aotearoa's welfare system.²

Housing

Post-election National decided that housing should be a priority over the coming three years, appointing three Ministers – Bill English (HNZC), Nick Smith (Building and Housing) and Paula Bennett (Social Housing) – to the job.

Without any fanfare English announced that up to a third of the state housing stock was to be sold for 'social housing', now the code phrase used for housing owned and operated by community and private sector providers. Apart from any ideological objections some of us might have to a programme which is likely to gift large money making capacity out of taxpayer funds to the banks (as lenders) and to private companies, there is not one mention of the building or acquisition of more homes for those in need.

The housing crisis grows daily. With no statutory obligation to house the many people who are living in a range of overcrowded, insanitary and downright dangerous situations, more and more individuals and families have no safety net on which to rely. Work and Income now administers Housing NZ tenancies. Camping grounds, cars, garages and boarding houses now house individuals and families for indeterminate periods. Many desperate people are expected to find housing in the private sector at a time when even those on middle incomes struggle to afford bonds and rent in places like Auckland and Christchurch.

Bill English has taken the art of spin to new depths in placing the blame for poverty and inequality on local councils and the Resource Management Act.

Poverty and inequality

Back in 2005 Susan St John said, ‘Women and their children have been disproportionately affected by the relentless beat of the free market drum dictating self-reliance and independence from the state as the primary virtues and persistently down playing women’s care-giving role and failing to prioritise the needs of children.’³

This statement is as true in 2014 as it was nine years ago. The combination of employment law aimed at weakening the power of unions to bargain collectively alongside the welfare and housing strategies already outlined means the situation will continue to deteriorate.

Since the election John Key has started talking about the need to take child poverty seriously. He has asked the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and MSD to do some research for him on the subject. Meanwhile, government has rejected the findings of the *Solutions to child poverty in New Zealand: Evidence for action report* sponsored by the Office of the Childrens Commissioner⁴ and has ignored the many reports and solutions offered by the Child Poverty Action Group and others.

A new Unicef report issued in late October, *Children of the Recession*, ranks New Zealand at 16 out of 41 developed countries for the way we deal with children living in poverty⁵.

In rejecting the idea of lifting incomes or dealing in any meaningful way with the housing crisis, the current government is blithely and consciously facilitating this downward trajectory.

Parties of the left – and boys’ games

For Labour and Mana, the election night results were catastrophic. There was a sense of hysteria and desperation during their respective campaigns which was reflected in the results. At a certain level I put what happened to both parties down to small groups of men playing desperate games in a bid to find some magic short cut to success.

With Labour, the recent leadership contest was the most visible manifestation of much deeper ills. They haven’t allowed themselves time to carry out the supposedly soul-searching review about just what went wrong this year. I’ll offer one input to that review for free: if you had listened more to some of the highly ranked and capable women within your campaign and Parliamentary core and rather less to some of the men, you may well have done somewhat better.

However, Labour’s problems are more fundamental than that. Unless the party can clearly decide why it exists and in whose interests it acts, it will continue to drift pointlessly from one side of the centre of the political spectrum to the other, its core support withering with each election.

I would love to see Labour become an innovative, forward-thinking 2015 version of its 1930s incarnation as an organisation fighting for the rights and well-being of employed and unemployed workers, beneficiaries, the homeless and their families. It would be great to see Labour reborn with detailed, effective policies, explained clearly, leaving reactionary notions like raising the age of super and discriminating against the children of beneficiaries far behind.

My views on Mana’s fatal choice to enter an alliance with a neoliberal multi-millionaire, with a dubious history on gender (and other) issues, are well known. Apart from anything else, the Dotcom Mana affair is an object lesson in why money alone will never in itself be the answer to building sustainable parties and movements on the left.

A small group of men played a very big role in persuading Mana’s faithful members to go along with what they thought would be a clever game, born of desperation and the belief that dollars would solve all. Instead, it was they who were played, and I still feel incredibly sad that the hopes and dreams of some of the most dispossessed and vulnerable people in Aotearoa

were dashed in the process.

As with Labour, if the views of some of the highly ranked and capable women within Mana had been listened to, the result may well have been completely different.

The Greens did better than Labour or Mana, but were still understandably disappointed with their final result after much higher polling. I don't think their campaign was helped by the very visible mixed messaging in the last few weeks, in which they wooed both the blue-green vote and the left-social conscience vote simultaneously. The one person on the left whom I think came out of the election campaign with real dignity and a growing level of respect from around the country was Metiria Turei. She talked about the important things for Maori, women, children and low income people generally. It was unfortunate that this was undermined by the equally strong push by her party to play the big boys' games in the neoliberal sandpit of finance and economics.

Women's Election Agenda

The Women's Election Agenda was a powerful pre-election lobbying document, promoting the kind of detailed policies all parties of the left – and any party supporting the rights of women and children – should have been proud to pick up and promote.

Sadly, it suffered the fate of all similar campaigning documents. Unless the policies align with those already held and promoted by the parties themselves, they are unlikely to affect policy formation during the final six month campaign period. However, this manifesto will continue to provide a useful foundation for any women involved in internal party policy making processes over the next few years, and for other community and union based efforts.

Conclusion

This is not a time to be melancholic even though some may be feeling that way. There is a huge amount of work to be done if we are to build, in our different spheres of interest and influence, a stronger and more effective voice for women and children in Aotearoa.

From my own radical left perspective, and building on the results of my recent PhD research, my priority at the moment is to work with others to develop organisations that are prepared to resist and go beyond the confines of neoliberal capitalism. We need our own think tank or think tank-like institution which will help us build our intellectual armoury, and which may well be linked to the development of a movement which ideologically and organisationally works for a kaupapa of social, economic and ecological justice grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. No simple task, but if you're interested, feel free to make contact.

SUE BRADFORD is a former Green MP who has recently completed her doctorate, entitled A major left wing think tank in Aotearoa: An impossible dream or a call to action? with Professor Marilyn Waring at AUT's Institute of Public Policy. She has been lecturing in social practice at Unitec most of this year, but is now a part-time co-ordinator for Auckland Action Against Poverty as well as working on the first stages of a project to set up a radical left wing think tank. Email: suebr73@gmail.com

Notes

1 See <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PO1410/S00127/lisa-owen-interviews-prime-minister-john-key.htm>.

2 See <https://www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/statistics/benefit/post-sep-2013/all-main-benefits/september-2014-quarter.html>

3 See <http://www.cpag.org.nz/assets/Presentations/International%20Womens%20DaySSJ.pdf>.

4 See <http://www.occ.org.nz/assets/Uploads/EAG/Final-report/Final-report-Solutions-to-child-poverty-evidence-for-action.pdf>

5 See <http://www.unicef-irc.org/>.

Reference

St John, S. (2005). *Women and child poverty*. Presentation. International Women's Day Forum, Auckland, March 8.