

MMP (THE MIXED MEMBER PROPORTIONAL ELECTORAL SYSTEM)

The following article appeared in the Otago Daily Times and NZ Herald in August 2012, following the announcement of the Electoral Commission's recommendations for reforming New Zealand's electoral system. Following this is Philip Temple's submission to the Commission's 2012 review.

MMP REVIEW: POLLIES SHOULD BUTT OUT

We need to send a message to politicians of all hues: MMP belongs to the voters, not professional power brokers with self-interest top of their list. We don't need Peter Dunne's sanctimony or Winston Peters's flaky logic. Or the latest monologue from John Banks in a one-man farce which is likely to end with a pie in his face at the 2014 election.

Most politicians don't like change. Most of them opposed MMP in the first place because they had learned how to manipulate and rort the old system to their advantage. Since 1996 they have learned how to rort MMP and most don't want any change again, especially changes that might make rorting more difficult.

Last year, a clear majority of New Zealanders voted to keep MMP. Earlier this year, 4600 individuals and groups made submissions to the Electoral Commission with their views of how MMP could be improved. An expert and politically independent panel considered and analysed all those submissions and has come up with a relatively conservative set of recommended changes. The most prominent of these are that the one-electorate, coat-tailing provision, the Epsom factor, should be abandoned, after 77% of submitters called for that. And that the party vote threshold should be dropped to 4% in compensation, also supported by a clear majority of submitters.

A bit of background here: the Royal Commission that recommended MMP in the first place suggested both a 4% threshold and the one-electorate rule. The threshold was pushed up to 5% by a parliamentary select committee not long before the 1993 referendum when the two major parties feared the arrival of too many minor parties in Parliament. The one-electorate rule caused that anyway because old First Past the Post campaigners, such as Winston Peters and Jim Anderton, held their old seats and brought in other MPs off the list. Later, members of the Royal Commission realised their mistake, and removal or modification of the one-electorate rule has been called for since 2001. But the pollies had learned its gerrymander value and ignored the calls.

Now the Electoral Commission has listened to the people and come up with well-reasoned and supported recommendations for changes to MMP. Not everyone will be happy with details but the main thrust is clear: get rid of the one-electorate rule and lower the threshold. There are a few weeks available for anyone to make comments on these recommendations before they are fine-tuned and passed on to the government at the end of October. Early next year, a parliamentary select committee will look at the recommendations and decide which changes to make. There is plenty of leeway for changes to be made in time for the 2014 election.

As the politicians consider the Electoral Commission's MMP recommendations, they should bear in mind the one golden rule about the electoral system. It is not theirs. It belongs to the voting public of New Zealand. It is the mechanism by which they are voted into Parliament, given a job. If the government ignores the independent and expert recommendations of the Electoral Commission, based on the desires of the voting public, then they will create a 2014 election issue they will come to regret. Those who value our democratic processes and a neutral electoral system will make sure of that.