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IS THE GRASS REALLY GREENER?

The Rationale and Reality of Support Party Status: A New Zealand Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The motives, behaviour, treatment and fate of parties which, rather than joining governments provide them with a working legislative majority, are not well studied. In the light of coalition theory, we explore these issues by way of observation research on New Zealand's Green Party – since 1999 a support party to a minority centre–left government. We isolate three factors important in coming to this type of arrangement – ideology, calculation and the institutional environment – all mediated by party system variation. The relative importance of each factor, however, is less significant than the links and trade-offs between and within them. We go on to show how non-institutionalized support arrangements are unlikely to be 'win-win' situations, leading to frustrations which themselves may become a factor in the decision to support or join after the next election.

KEY WORDS ▪ coalition ▪ Green ▪ minority government ▪ New Zealand ▪ support party

Voyaging into the (Relatively) Unknown: Support Parties and Aotearoa/New Zealand

Despite their being vital to the setting-up and survival of minority governments all over the world, we neither know nor understand very much about the motives, behaviour, treatment and fate of support parties. Though 'the real world of coalition politics requires that they should be', such parties 'have not been built into the body of coalition theory' (Pridham, 1986: 17). Even explanations of minority rule that point to the role of support arrangements in facilitating such administrations make only suppositional, if significant, forays into the territory (e.g. Strøm, 1990; though see Bergman, 1995).

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The same seems true for moves to meld formal, deductive coalition theory and the more inductive 'comparative (European) politics' concerns with party systems and competition (Laver and Schofield, 1990: 8–11; Pridham, 1986). It also applies to the otherwise encouraging attempt to shift from a near exclusive focus on coalition formation to coalition maintenance – 'the black box of coalition life' (Timmermans, 1998: 429; see also Mitchell, 1999; Thomson, 1999; and Pridham, 1986). This is a pity, both in terms of theory and practice. Support parties are one of 'the many lacunae that still remain in our knowledge of cabinet coalitions in parliamentary democracies' (Müller and Strøm, 2000: 591). Forgetting them will diminish both our understanding and the relevance of our work for people actually involved in politics – many of whom may be active in parties for whom formal participation in government is not necessarily either likely or in their best interests.

Formal participation in government, of course, has many benefits. With ministerial office comes control over budgets and programmes and the right to initiate and modify legislation. But it also carries limitations and risks. The opportunities are accompanied by the constraints of collective cabinet responsibility and the distinct possibility that, whatever a party's achievements, it will endure more in-fighting and garner fewer votes at the next election. Acting as a support party, rather than a formal government member, can seem to offer a way to minimize the limitations and risks without forgoing all the benefits or paying all the opportunity costs: policy and spending can be influenced but identity and electoral (and membership) support maintained.

In essence, support parties are those parties for whom the costs of office outweigh the benefits – at least at the time they make the choice about whether or not to join a government, and only inasmuch as the choice is theirs in the first place. Put another way, supporting rather than joining a government is likely to occur when other parties see a party as a problematic partner and/or when – at a certain stage in its life-cycle (Pedersen, 1982; Rihoux, 2001) anyway – it is itself nervous or sceptical about the internal and/or external consequences of formally assuming office. What lies behind this nervousness or scepticism can usefully be broken down into three factors affecting the decision to support rather than join a government.

The first factor is ideological. The party's sense of itself and its mission may make it ambivalent about or even antagonistic to the very idea of office: the more anti-system or anti-authoritarian a party, the less likely it is to share or take power. The second factor is a rather more immediate calculation of probabilities, interests and risks.

Such a calculation may be based on a reading of history – either its own or that of other parties or even its interaction with other parties: the more incumbency is seen to have damaged it or other parties, electorally and organizationally, the less attractive it will be – especially if it involves co-operating with previously uncongenial partners and particularly if the party

itself feels insufficiently experienced politically to punch its weight amongst its more professional counterparts. Or the calculation may owe more to predictions about the future: the less successful an administration seems likely to be, the greater the policy challenges it faces, and the more those policy challenges are likely to divide the party from its potential partners, the more staying out will seem to make sense. All these things, we suggest, are likely to weigh especially heavily with relatively new, relatively radical parties, which are nonetheless capable of rational assessment of risks and opportunities. Green parties, one of which is used for our case study, are a good example, having in most cases overcome their initial, ideological reluctance to participate in government (see O'Neill, 1997: 482).

A party's decision to join or to support a government, however, is also affected by the third factor, namely the institutional (and related cultural) environment in which it operates. Particularly important here is the extent to which, in terms of policy influence, being out of office also means being out of power (as in 'Westminster' systems), or whether (as in more 'consensual' democracies) the distinction is less hard and fast. In a more majoritarian, adversarial, environment, formal coalition membership is likely, all other things being equal, to make more sense. In a polity with a long, institutionally supported tradition of inter-party cooperation that renders the difference between government and opposition rather less clear-cut, the decision to go in or stay out may be less clear-cut, too.

Of course, these 'majoritarian' and 'consensual' environments are ideal types, employed to best effect in the cross-national comparisons of their best known and most skilful user, Arend Lijphart (1999). When exploring the motives and conduct of support parties, however, we need to make a further point and a finer distinction.[1] Firstly, majoritarian democracies tend to throw up support parties only occasionally and only as a last (and often brief) resort, obvious examples being Canada and (to an even lesser extent) the UK. They also make up a very small proportion of the advanced democracies. Secondly, their consensual counterparts can usefully be subdivided. On the one hand, there are systems where bipolar, albeit multiparty, politics encourages small parties that are unwilling to leapfrog across blocs to support minority governments of their larger 'allies', as is the case in Sweden and Denmark, for instance. On the other hand, there are systems in which a more open structure of competition (see Mair, 1996) allows the formation of coalitions that are sufficiently broad as to reduce both the demand for and supply of support parties, with Finland and Belgium (where the Greens are part of rainbow coalitions) and The Netherlands as obvious current examples.

This finer distinction, and indeed the larger distinction between majoritarian and consensual democracies, provides not so much permanent labels as analytical categories (and not the only useful ones) between whose permeable borders movement is more than possible. Most often, these movements will be small and not necessarily permanent. Sometimes, however,

they will be more obvious and more lasting. Italy, for instance, may well be moving toward two-bloc, multipartism, possibly facilitated by electoral system change but no doubt mediated by its culture of consensual complicity amidst apparently adversarial diversity. New Zealand, our case study, is also detectably in transit, moving – albeit in the opposite direction to Italy and equally hesitatingly – towards the kind of two-bloc multipartism which by limiting feasible permutations facilitates supported minority governments (Särlvik, 1983; see also Strøm, 1990: 238). In its case, though, a majoritarian legacy (see Barker and McLeay, 2000) may prove a constraint to the consensual culture, which is also a key factor in encouraging parties to support rather than necessarily join governments.

In fact, New Zealand's political landscape would already strike many continental Europeans as familiar. It now has a moderately plural, largely bipolar and essentially unidimensional multiparty system based historically on the conflict between labour and capital and left–right, state-market, alternatives. Change after the 1993 election from a first-past-the-post system dominated by two parties (National and Labour) mobilizing – 'Westminster' style – on either side of the predominant class cleavage to a PR system (Mixed Member Proportional or MMP) facilitated the presence of several relative newcomers. Two of these (ACT, a neo-liberal conservative party, and the Alliance, dominated by a splinter party founded by former Labour left-wingers but also including for a while the Greens) took up positions on either end of the traditional left–right, state-market dimension. One, the United Party, made for the centre in a deliberate, but unsuccessful, attempt to provide a (German FDP-style) partner for either of the major parties. The balance of power was also the aim of New Zealand First. Its centrist position was less important to its supporters than its espousal of populist policies on immigration and its appeal to the indigenous Mäori, whose traditional allegiance to Labour had hitherto ensured that the class and ethnic cleavages were reinforcing rather than cross-cutting.

Support for New Zealand First was sufficient to propel it into coalition government with – to the surprise of most of its voters – National at the first MMP election in November 1996, but soon collapsed, as, in August 1998, did the coalition. A minority National administration, made up in part by independent defectors from New Zealand First and supported (though very much at arm's length) by ACT, limped on until the general election 15 months later.[2] By this time, Mäori (who currently make up around 15 percent of the population, and rising) returned to Labour, boosting the ongoing, more general, recovery in its support as memories of its out-of-character leading role in the neo-liberal 'revolution' of the 1980s faded. This recovery had the effect of squeezing support for the Alliance on the left. Combined with the failure of ACT to make more significant inroads into National's vote on the right and the collapse (though not as yet complete disappearance) of the centre, means that, though two-party rule has gone, New Zealand is currently a two-bloc system in which centre–left and

centre–right mobilize along the class cleavage by offering more or less state involvement to a moderate electorate (see Aimer, 2001). As in many European democracies, other cleavages and other potential issue dimensions do exist, but, for the moment at least, are relatively insignificant. And as in those polities, one possible challenge to 'politics as usual', the rise of post-materialism, seems to have been absorbed into its traditional structure of competition. At the November 1999 general election, the Greens stood on their own rather than, as they had done in 1993 and 1996, as part of the left-wing Alliance. But neither they nor the public are under any illusion about which of the two big blocs they belong to: while some of them question the continuing relevance of the traditional categories, the Greens are situated to the left of Labour and only very, very slightly to the right of the Alliance.[3]

That election – the second under the new system – saw a two-party centre–left minority coalition take power from the centre–right, with the Green Party winning some 5.2 percent of the party vote and seven seats (see Vowles et al., 2002). Although a national opinion poll taken almost a year after that 1999 general election revealed that nearly 40 percent of voters thought that the Green Party was a part of the country's coalition government, the minority administration that assumed office in 1999 is actually composed of Labour (49 seats out of 120) and the Alliance (10 seats).[4] The Green Party keeps that administration in office by promising to vote with it in Parliament on matters of confidence and supply. Unlike their sister parties in Germany, France and Finland, which have overcome both their own misgivings and the suspicion of others, the New Zealand Greens are not in power. But, like their sister party in Sweden, which is similarly torn and which also supports a minority centre–left government, they are not exactly out of it either.

This study – based on extensive ethnographic observation of the Green Party parliamentary group (called 'caucus') by one author and long-term participation in the extra-parliamentary party by the other – examines how this came to be the case and how it continues to be the case.[5] In so doing, it hopes to contribute to two underdeveloped aspects of the coalition literature. First, it adds to our understanding of the motives, conduct and electoral performance of so-called support parties – the members of legislative but not executive coalitions. Second, it deepens our understanding of how parliamentary party groups perform the ongoing, day-to-day management of legislative coalitions once such coalitions have formed.

On (Not) Forming the Government: The Rationale for Support and the Reality of Non-Participation

Our exploration of the Greens' decision to support or join a government focuses for the most part on the discussions under way on what to do after

the next election. But it clearly has to begin with the last. The Green Party in New Zealand is not formally part of the current government primarily because it was never asked to be after that election in November 1999. Although the decision of Labour and the Alliance to form a minority administration seems to run counter to a range of formal coalition theories (Kaiser and Brechtel, 1999), it actually made perfect sense (see Boston, 2000: 252). Labour and the Alliance had a long-standing pre-electoral agreement to govern together. They were also sure of essentially unconditional Green support on confidence and supply, which, given the fact that an administration requires the legislature only to tolerate rather than positively endorse its existence, guaranteed long-term survival.[6]

Green non-participation, then, seems to bear out Bergman's assertion that 'minority governments are a result of support parties being excluded from government rather than a result of parties avoiding taking part in the government' (Bergman, 1995: 169).

But Bergman (ibid.) also points out that, 'avoiding or being kept out of a government can be different sides of the same coin'. Even if the Greens had been asked, they may well have settled on non-participation. First of all, the Green parliamentary team was very small and inexperienced. Out of a total of seven MPs, only two, the co-leaders had any parliamentary (let alone governmental) experience. The performance, implosion and near-disappearance of another small party, New Zealand First, which in 1996 had tried to bring similarly inexperienced MPs into government, served as an object lesson of the risks involved. Not going into government in 1999 provided space for Green MPs to become 'ministrables' rather than 'munchkins' (Laver and Shepsle, 2000: 115), so that after the next election the party might better capitalize on its strategic position in Parliament.

Secondly, the Green Party was new – after a fashion. The Greens had long been a party but had been associated with the Alliance for a significant, albeit short, part of their history.[7] In effect, the party had to re-establish itself for the 1999 election and, like any newcomer, not only needed to find its feet but also forge an independent identity. It was also a new kid on the block in marketing terms. The compromises involved in entering a coalition would constrain the party from building its own brand identity, let alone maintaining it. Even if this had not proved a problem, the leadership's attention was drawn by political scientists to evidence that parties often lose support after a period in government: given that the only thing separating the Greens from slipping out of Parliament was 0.2 percent and/or one electorate seat, this was not an encouraging prospect (Boston, 2000: 250).

Thirdly, the Greens foresaw problems working alongside the Alliance, and particularly its leader (now Deputy Prime Minister), whose supposedly democratic centralist style had been one of the reasons given by the Greens for leaving the Alliance in 1997 after six sometimes strained years. '[T]he great significance of prior party relationships' (Groennings, 1970: 453) for

decisions about coalition formation may still be under-researched, but it is nonetheless as important as ever.

Keeping In With, Up With, and Out of the Coalition? The Impact of 'Adhocratic' Management of the Government-Support Party Relationship

Work on coalitions has traditionally concentrated on formation and/or termination. Recently, however, scholars have begun taking more interest in what goes on in between – at coalition maintenance, the process by which the relationship between the partners is managed and made to work. Sometimes management is supported by more or less regularized institutional arrangements which may be referred to in a coalition agreement. Where this is not the case – and even where it is – partners both create and operate within norms and expectations that can begin to take on the force of rule. The same is true of relationships between governments and support parties.

Support relationships (or, from the point of view of the government, 'majority building strategies') vary considerably within and between polities, though interestingly it is not common for them to be expressed in formal, written agreements (Strøm, 1990: 94–98). Despite the drawing up of a protocol in draft, this also holds true for New Zealand. The Greens were keen on such a document. But for Labour, with good reason to have confidence in its viability, its stability, and its control of the legislative agenda, the use of *ad hoc* legislative majorities proved more attractive: if there is more than one potential source of votes, they can often be 'bought' at less cost in terms of policy and procedural concessions compared to the more broad-based deal a formal agreement would entail (Strøm, 1990: 109, 238).[8] For the Alliance, anything which might appear to boost the relative profile of the Greens – in its view at least, a party free from the constraints of government membership but trying to enjoy some of the perks – quickly became anathema. Moreover, both government parties came under pressure from their backbenchers, who objected to another party's MPs having potentially better access to ministers and information than they themselves enjoyed.

But any protocol the Greens may have got out of the government might still have proved insufficient to narrow New Zealand's undoubtedly large 'policy influence differential' – the extent to which parties in the executive coalition can exert more influence on policy than those outside it (see Kaiser and Brechtel, 1999: 185; and Boston, 2000: 250–1). Possibly, having a regularized means through which the Greens could see and suggest policy initiatives at a stage early (and private) enough to make a serious impact would have been helpful. But, as it is, with the state publicity machine behind them, proposals, legislative and otherwise, coming from the executive build up considerable inertial force, allowing the government to argue,

first, that any backsliding on its own part would seem like political weakness, second, that any complaint on the part of the Greens goes against their commitment to constructive support, and, third, that undermining the hard-fought-for compromise on the issue between coalition partners, especially their backbenchers, is impossible.

Instead of a written protocol, the government informally agreed to keep the Greens informed of its plans – and listen to Green suggestions – on an *ad hoc* basis. This *adhocratic* style makes the timing, extent and the quality of Green-government engagement reliant on personal relationships. Sometimes this can be an advantage. Few doubt, for instance, that the Greens' influence on highly contentious electricity regulation was made considerably easier by the generally good working relationship between one of the Greens' co-leaders and Labour's Minister of Energy. But in many issue areas – the most obvious example being trade policy – no such personal relationships exist. This can make for a non-committal or even frosty stance on the part of ministers, and by implication the government, when it comes to both listening and talking to the Greens.

It is therefore rare for a Green caucus meeting to go by without at least one MP bringing colleagues' attention to some slight or other on the part of a minister. The litany of complaints includes the following: learning through the media of cabinet decisions which run contrary to understandings arrived at previously; not being kept in the loop about policy initiatives or changes; not being given relevant papers until after they are in the public domain anyway; failure to respond to requests for information or meetings; procedural or policy agreements at such meetings not being honoured; and, in spite of everything, being told, as if they were government backbenchers, not to make trouble. Normally, complainants are eventually calmed by their research and communications staff, who sit in caucus and remind them that government is often overloaded rather than necessarily uncaring, and that cock-ups are more common than conspiracies. But the situation is made worse on those occasions when the media are (deliberately) involved.[9]

Such incidents have led to periodic debates in the Green caucus as to the working and even the wisdom of the support arrangement. It is difficult to see, however, how such debates can be anything more than an opportunity to let off steam. The public promise to support the centre–left on confidence and supply and to work in the interests of stable and effective government makes it unlikely, even unthinkable, that the Greens would vote against the Labour–Alliance administration when it came to the crunch. In effect, the party's supposed veto power over legislation, especially when made a matter of confidence, is akin to a nuclear weapon – the consequences of its use would be so devastating to the relationship with the government as to make its use unthinkable. If, as Bergman (1995: 168) argues, '[t]o strengthen its bargaining position, a support party must make it credible that it is willing to actively vote against the median legislator party' that controls the

minority government, then the Greens' promise not to do so is truly a self-denying ordinance.

But that promise has to be seen in its institutional context – and in particular in light of the fact that MMP, the country's relatively new electoral system, is still the subject of considerable public debate. The smaller parties are acutely aware that the electoral system to which they owe their presence in Parliament is still very much on trial, or at least on approval.[10] In effect, they (and the junior coalition partner, the Alliance) are the guarantors of the electoral system to which they owe their legislative living. The Green caucus, then, is well aware that they are in no position to blackmail the government by threatening to bring it down, since the largest component of that government – in the worst case scenario – could go to the country calling for a return to 'First Past the Post' on the grounds that 'the government must be allowed to govern'. In any potential political missile crisis, then, the answer to the question 'who will blink first' is all too clear.

There are, of course, lower-level sanctions open to the Greens – most obviously the kind of explicit issue-by-issue horse-trading and disruption of the parliamentary timetable that are familiar (and sometimes effective) tactics for most support or even opposition parties. Amongst the Greens, however, even these things are seen as a last resort. In part, this is because of a feeling that such haggling might backfire given that the Greens have an interest in appearing to the public to be beyond the sort of wheeling and dealing that supposedly characterize 'politics as usual'. But it is also because, to the Greens, at least at this stage in their life-cycle, such backroom bargaining is still ethical anathema. Although keen to achieve policy goals and aware of the need to preserve and assert their brand identity, the Greens clearly try to do both within the context of a relationship built on 'no surprises' and on constructive engagement rather than overt (or even covert) confrontation that might get out of hand.

Caucus, therefore, rarely gives its authority to actions, be they individual or collective, that may result in a public falling out with the government and/or siding with its opponents. Rarely of course, does not mean never. The Greens' decision late in 2000 to cooperate with opposition parties to amend the government's public health legislation, for example, attracted huge media interest – but only because it was so unusual! For the MPs it was justified on the merits of the case, but also as a signal of their frustration with the failure of the government to ensure reasonable two (or even one) way communication. It was not, however, something they would indulge in again soon. Even abstention, which would not mean the defeat of the government even if all the opposition parties did unite, is considered by some MPs as beyond the pale, dangerous even to discuss or threaten, let alone actually do – particularly in view of anticipated media reaction.

Generally, however, Green frustrations continue to be dealt with in ways which are *ad hoc* and, in the long term anyway, less than satisfactory. For instance, the leadership will demand a meeting (in addition to the hardly

overgenerous one-per-session normally scheduled) with the Prime Minister. Because the government (or at least the dominant coalition partner, Labour) is itself keen to avoid any public impression of conflict and instability, the Greens come away from that meeting with an assurance that ministers will be reminded of the need to maintain reasonable communication – a reminder whose effect is often immediate but, equally often, very temporary. For instance, in early 2001, Green MPs got word from the media that the (Alliance) Conservation Minister was planning unilaterally to announce (and take credit for) an *Eco-2001* package of public policies without acknowledging that it included budget initiatives that clearly originated from Green proposals. They made straight for the (Labour) Prime Minister's office, successfully demanding that together they redraft the press release and then issue it under the name of the minister concerned![11] Less than a week later, with no consultation on the issue, the (Labour) Environment Minister announced that she would not be exercising her power to call for a national-level investigation into the construction of a number of new power stations, in spite of clearly-signalled Green concerns that these 'CO_2 factories' will compromise New Zealand's ability to honour the Kyoto Protocol. All this where the policy involved was clearly a core preoccupation of the support party.

Pastures New: Preparing for Government?

These specific episodes, and the course of the government–support party relationship in general, are symptomatic of the distance still to be bridged in New Zealand between the parliamentary arithmetic associated with proportionality (specifically, the distinct possibility of minority government) and the institutional infrastructure (specifically, routinized, institutionally-backed, relationships between government and support parties) required to make it work regardless of personality or historical party conflicts. In other polities, this infrastructure – even if it is always a work in progress – appears to be there, Sweden appearing to be the best current example (see Boston, 1998). But their examples seem likely to be lost in the rush to the much more obvious so-called solution to the ambiguity and ambivalence of the current situation, namely the pursuit of formal coalition membership after the next election. It is easy to see why.

Leaving aside for the moment the day-to-day difficulties, the overarching attraction of government in New Zealand lies in the persistence of the 'policy influence differential' (Strøm, 1990: 71) between those in office and opposition. The Greens are understandably keen to impress actual and potential supporters with their list of achievements.[12] But they also make no secret of their view that, had they been inside rather than outside the coalition, the list would have been longer – and some of Labour's policies (especially on trade liberalization) would look rather different.

From the point of view of an under-consulted, under-resourced, undervalued, primarily policy-driven support party, coalition membership can quickly take on a very rosy hue. At a stroke, supposedly, information flows would improve, policy outputs would take account of the party's preferences, and it would even control some ministries. The latter, by giving the support party access to the research capacity of civil servants, would also exponentially increase the party's policy-making resources, which – as in most countries – are nowhere near matching those of the government. Getting two or three pairs of feet under the cabinet table could give a party a better guarantee than any written agreement that the government would stick to its commitments (see Mitchell, 1999: 271). And it would also give them the chance to prove that their ideas were workable, their politics practical, meaning any loss in support from 'the fringe' could be compensated for by the party demonstrating its capacity and responsibility to 'the mainstream'.

On the other hand, there is an awareness of the disadvantages of going into government, not least the risk of capture and compromise, and the consequent loss of identity – or at least popularity – experienced by the existing junior coalition partner.[13] A big influence on parties' decisions to join coalitions is the implication of such decisions on their chances at least at the next election – particularly where (their) voters are volatile and where incumbency, rightly or wrongly, is seen to be detrimental to those chances (Budge and Keman, 1990: 60, 182–5; Laver and Schofield, 1990: 60; Strøm, 1990: 47, 51–2, 123). Given the poor opinion poll performance of the Alliance, and given the Greens' own ambivalent treatment by Labour, few are naive enough to think there are no pitfalls in going into government. Yet there is sympathy for the idea – not least because sister parties in Europe seem to be doing the very same thing and doing it reasonably well (Müller-Rommel and Poguntke, 2002).[14] This sympathy, however, is stronger within caucus than among ordinary party members. Given the fact that organizational health or integrity is theoretically part of the calculations of support parties, we would expect this to be of some concern.

Even if they are hard to build into formal models (see Laver and Schofield, 1990: 16–35), intra-party relationships are thought to be important in the decision to go in or stay out and support a government. And, indeed, as government membership next time around becomes a distinct possibility, the Greens' leadership is beginning to recognize this issue, not least because any imaginable coalition they might enter is likely to pursue policies which will test the patience and faith of their supporters, meaning that any benefits could be 'outweighed by the costs their own activists would impose in irate retaliation' (Strøm et al., 1994: 318; see also Mitchell, 1999: 279). Perhaps there are ways of managing such dissent and escaping such punishment even in government (see Mershon, 1999: 233), and caucus is clearly interested in overseas experience in this respect. But it also knows that the potential for maintaining internal harmony – and therefore the potential for coalition

itself – will in part depend upon the cultural values and norms of the party's core constituency.

According to one theorist, factors which might reduce internal problems and make coalition more feasible include 'norms of rationality, willingness to experiment, and senses of trust, tolerance and pragmatism'; factors tending the opposite way include 'senses of suspicion, parochialism, superiority, and self-righteousness, craving for contradiction, the tendency to underscore nuances of abstract principle, and the outlook that compromise is a sign of weakness' (Groennings, 1970: 453). Greens arguably operate within both sets of norms, and supporting rather than joining a government allows them to without too many problems. Becoming a coalition member may well force more of a choice. It is not, however, clear that, beyond a move to start persuading members that coalition should be considered a serious possibility, the party has begun to grapple seriously with how one set of norms can be made to prevail against the other if coalition becomes a reality.

The difficulty of moving from concern to action on the issue of intra-party impacts of coalition membership does not necessarily mean that it is not as important a decision factor in practice as it is in theory. Indeed, there are two obvious things militating against this sort of preparation. The first is the fear that it may not so much tempt fate as – at least to the media – smack of arrogance. The second is the awareness, never far away even if occasionally forgotten after a run of very positive opinion polling, that in order to enter a formal coalition one has to be asked. If the dominant partner in the current coalition, Labour, remains the biggest party and retains its control of the median legislator, and if bargaining power really is 'based on the ability to threaten rivals with alternative coalitions' (Strøm et al., 1994: 323), the Green caucus knows they will be just as much a 'captive party' after the next election as they were after the last. They may not be beggars, but they may not be choosers either.

Elements of Decision and Dissatisfaction

Our case study confirms our initial theoretical discussion of the factors (ideology, calculus and institutional environment) involved in any choice – where available – between joining or supporting a government. But it also suggests that, almost as soon as we begin to rank them in importance, it becomes very difficult to isolate one factor from another. For example, it seems clear that the decision to participate or support depends most on an ongoing calculation of costs and benefits – particularly as regards the parliamentary wing which is likely to be less worried about co-option into the traditional hierarchy of state politics than some ordinary members, for whom participation risks compromising the very nature and purpose of the movement. But in this calculation, history and prediction are equally important,

indeed intertwined. Not only that, but they almost always provide mixed messages for a party trying to read the runes. And even how those messages are read will depend on the institutional environment in which the party operates, especially if it is currently experiencing life as a support party.

For instance, the electoral record (or opinion poll showing) and organizational health of another small party that has joined the government may be distinctly unimpressive, while, on the other hand, the experience of sister parties overseas shows that formal participation need not mean suicide. Both 'lessons' can be used in the battle to convince ordinary members of either the merit or the misery of government participation. Which of them seems most pertinent, however, will depend on an assessment not just of the risks of joining but also of the realities of staying out. An institutional environment (a majoritarian-style 'policy influence differential') and/or the party system (being a 'captive party' in a two-bloc system with a relatively closed structure of competition and a very strong 'ally') may mean a support party gets little out of the government. Frustration at the present state of affairs might lead it to discount as yet only potential difficulties associated with coalition membership, even when those difficulties are acknowledged as important in theory. The devil you don't know can be an attractive proposition when the devil you know isn't delivering the goods.

Our research also explored how, why and what happens when those goods are not delivered. It found that unless the idea of a support party has become a familiar, even institutionalized, one, a relationship not based on some kind of formal agreement is managed in an *ad hoc* fashion, whose flexibility largely favours the government – an actor with considerably more resources but which also has to look to its internal harmony. To put it bluntly, but in terms often used by those involved, coalitions are marriages. Whether polygamous or monogamous, they may be happy or unhappy, faithful or unfaithful. Yet the participants are almost always more important to each other than those with whom they have extra-marital relationships – especially when they can often get what they want on a more casual basis as well. Whatever a support party gets out of such a relationship (at least when it is non-institutionalized) depends, perhaps too much, on how things are going personally and in private – particularly if, out of conviction or calculation, it forswears blackmail.

The jealousies that arise in such relationships can waste a great deal of nervous energy that might be better spent elsewhere, with only the dominant partner in the 'marriage' really benefiting in the end. During a discussion on the Greens and the government in New Zealand, the president of the junior coalition partner, the Alliance, told a reporter: 'it's a bit like we are in the bedroom and the mistress is in the next room'.[15] A few months before, at a Green caucus meeting, one member had likewise joked that while Labour may be married to the Alliance, the Greens got to be its mistress. This earned a swift but lamenting retort from a colleague that the relationship was neither so close nor nearly so much fun!

Notes

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1 We express our gratitude to the Editor and to two anonymous referees, whose suggestions proved invaluable especially at this point.
2 ACT's support role is not precisely analogous to the Greens' support of the current government. It occurred after a sudden mid-term termination and was practically and rhetorically more limited, not least because the government, although led by National, contained 'independents' who, before they defected from New Zealand First, had been the target of substantial criticism by ACT. It was also a government widely believed to have already lost the next election. On the other hand, of course, the three factors we emphasize here could be used to analyse ACT's decision.
3 The New Zealand Election Study (NZES) for 1999 (see Vowles et al., 2002) found voters put Labour at 3.5 on a left–right scale of 0–10 (and National on 7.5), with the Alliance at 2.5 and the Greens at 2.7. Of course, what is considered left-wing by New Zealanders may seem very tame indeed to European progressive radicals! More information on the history, aims, people and organization of the Green Party of Aotearoa can be found at http://www.greens.org.nz/about/default.htm. On the origins and development, and the policy and ideological location, of Green parties in New Zealand (and Australia) see Dann (1999).
4 The picture is completed by an opposition consisting, usually, of United (one seat), New Zealand First (5 seats), National Party (39 seats) and ACT (9 seats).
5 We thank the Green parliamentary team for open access to their meetings – and their thoughts – granted in 2000 and 2001.
6 New Zealand is thus characterized by 'negative parliamentarianism' – one of a number of institutional factors (Strøm et al., 1994) which facilitate minority government in other countries, notably Sweden (see Bergman, 1995).
7 The party originally founded as 'Values' in 1972 formally became the Green Party in 1989 and won some 7 percent of the vote under first-past-the-post in 1990, after which it joined the Alliance.
8 The most high profile example of the government's ability and willingness to broker deals when Green support for particular legislation is unforthcoming concerned superannuation (pensions) policy: see 'Super fund up to Peters after Greens say no', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 June and 'Govt woos Peters as option to Greens', *New Zealand Herald*, 12 June 2001. Note, though, that any protocol would not have ruled out such arrangements.
9 See 'Greens strange bedmates', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 December 2000.
10 See 'MMP: Should it stay or should it go?', *New Zealand Herald*, 5 January 2001.
11 See 'Policy bragging rights strain Government coalition', *New Zealand Herald*, 10 May 2001.
12 Largely as a consequence of supporting the Labour–Alliance coalition, the party has gained the following: the chair of a parliamentary select committee; select committee inquiries into organics, into climate change and local government,

into international human rights and into cannabis; membership of the official delegation to the climate conference in The Hague; a slice (at US$7.5 million out of $16 billion a very thin slice!) of the government's annual budget for Green initiatives; support (though only to committee stage) for Green members' bills on the wiping of minor criminal offences from individuals' records, the extension of the country's nuclear-free zone, traffic reduction, the parliamentary debate of international treaties, and industrial hemp – all issues which appeal to their core constituency. In addition, the Greens point to the government following through on its promises to set up a Royal Commission of Inquiry into genetic modification and to end the controversial logging of native forests.

13 On the importance of 'the desire for self-preservation or avoidance of identity loss' as a factor in coalition formation (and possibly duration), see Groennings (1970: 455).

14 See also the papers presented to the workshop on 'Greens in Power: Government Formation, Policy Impacts and the Future of Green Parties' at the ECPR joint sessions in Grenoble, 6–11 April 2001. We thank participants for comments on a much earlier version of this paper, and in particular the conveners, Benoît Rihoux and Wolfgang Rüdig.

15 See 'Greens ponder how to exert growing muscle', *Evening Post*, 26 May 2001.

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