

The greening of New Zealand

by Gary Taylor

The election results have seen support for the Greens surge past the 10% barrier for the first time. The remarkable number of seats they now hold reflects a shift in public sentiment: environment is now a mainstream concern.

Their success is due in part to a smart campaign from the Greens themselves. It can also be attributed to two big events during the past term of Parliament – the proposal to mine National Parks and the *Rena* disaster. Both revealed the depth of the strong public attachment to our wonderful environment and the need to take better care of it.

This surge in environmental awareness goes beyond the Greens. Environmental issues resonated with many candidates from other parties throughout the election campaign. This has left many environmental groups feeling encouraged.

What is needed now is for National and the Greens to develop a comprehensive Memorandum of Understanding for action on the environment, one that goes beyond tokenism and greenwash into substantive issues.

It's time to recalibrate environmental policy. We need to shift from ripping into our natural resources as if we were still 19th century pioneers to a clear recognition that there are environmental limits. Risks need to be managed with much more care.

Fortunately New Zealand is still blessed with incredible natural values, from our South Island High Country, to the flora and fauna of our native forests, to our 19,000 km of outstanding coastline. But some of those values are under threat and National and the Greens should explore new initiatives, including strengthening the Resource Management Act, to protect them from harm.

An important policy area for co-operation between National and the Greens is Freshwater management. It is a defining issue for our nation's brand integrity. Both parties endorsed the Land and Water Forum's formula for improved water quality but there is much still to be done. We need to make our polluted lakes, streams and rivers swimmable and fishable again.

On oceans management, National and the Greens both supported a wide-ranging inquiry into the response to the *Rena* disaster. We can therefore expect a revamp of our preparedness for future oil spills whether from coastal shipping, tankers, offshore oil wells or sunken wrecks along with a thorough assessment of avoidance strategies.

The Bill setting up an environmental management regime for oil, gas and offshore mining in our Exclusive Economic Zone will come under increased political and community scrutiny post *Rena*. It will at least need strengthening whilst some will argue that we should not be doing those activities at all.

More importantly, both National and the Greens are open to some really big and far-sighted reforms on overall oceans management to ensure we have state-of-the-art legislation covering fishing, marine mammal and seabird conservation, protected areas and marine spatial planning. Our oceans are large and vital to our economic welfare. Reform in this area is long overdue.

On climate change, we saw the ACT Party that denied climate change and eschewed the emissions trading scheme firmly rebuffed by the wider electorate. We know that the Greens would prefer a carbon tax to an ETS but the differences between them and National on the overall framework aren't that significant. There is room for negotiation around the phase-in of the agricultural sector and the rate of uptake of full obligations for others.

As the ETS enters its 3rd term of Parliament still intact, it seems likely it will survive as the pricing mechanism for carbon into the future.

There is also scope for additional complementary policies, reinforcing the ETS, to improve energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions. The Greens will champion the green economy - the development of low carbon businesses based on investment in science and innovation. National is already moving in this direction and it would be good to see the transition to a low carbon economy pick up speed.

Overall, the election results can be seen as potentially positive for the environment. The National Party will have an expanded Bluegreens caucus while the number of Green MPs has increased to 13. So National and the Green Party should work together and make real progress on New Zealand's environmental agenda.

Gary Taylor is chairman of the Environmental Defence Society www.eds.org.nz