

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand's geographical features, economy, early lead in the emergence of green politics, and recent history of environmental reform, are contributing factors to its 'clean and green' image. But underneath this image lies a reality of environmental degradation, a dominance of economic interests, weak environmental policy performance, and a long up-hill struggle of the environmental movement. In the late 1990s, however, New Zealand entered a new phase of environmental politics as a change in the electoral system offered scope for stronger expression and influence of environmental interests in the political arena.

Given its relative isolation in the South Pacific, scenic beauty, and sparse population, New Zealand is often depicted as one of earth's remaining natural wonders. This impression is buttressed by a predominantly pastoral landscape, a relatively low level of industrialisation, and the existence of an extensive network of national parks. Given its considerable economic significance (for tourism and exports), the 'clean and green' image is carefully cultivated. The radical reform of environmental institutions, initiated by the Fourth Labour Government since 1984, is also often referred to, to portray New Zealand as an environmental leader.

The reality, however, is not as nice as depicted. Since Polynesian (Māori) and European settlement, forest cover was reduced from 85 percent of the land area to 23 percent (MfE, 1997: 8.27), largely by burning, for hunting and the establishment of farms. Many indigenous species of plants and animals have become extinct or are in decline. Many resources, including land, fisheries, and timber, have been exploited without consideration being given to environmental consequences, sometimes to the point their collapse. Although the scale of environmental pollution may be small compared to highly industrialised nations, it is serious in places. In many instances, the extent of environmental problems is not known, as a system of environmental monitoring and reporting was not established until the 1990s (OECD, 1996).

From the 1960s, concern about the decline of indigenous forests, wildlife, and the despoliation of scenic values gave rise to a strong conservation movement that was able to wrest concessions from the Government with regard to the protection of lakes, rivers, and indigenous forests. In 1972, rising concerns about the social, cultural, and environmental effects of unmitigated economic growth led to the establishment of the world's first national-level green party, under the name 'values'. In 1985, the bombing in Auckland's harbour of Greenpeace's flagship, the 'Rainbow warrior' by the French secret

service, further boosted support for the environmental movement. In 1987, the strength of the anti-nuclear feeling resulted in the adoption of legislation to declare New Zealand a nuclear free nation.

Growing support for environmental issues also contributed to the reform of environmental institutions during, leading to the establishment of a Ministry for the Environment (as the main environmental policy agency), of an independent environmental 'watchdog' agency, the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (both in 1986), and of a Department of Conservation (1987), together considerably strengthening the environmental 'voice' within bureaucratic and government circles. In 1991, the Resource Management Act was adopted, integrating an array of fragmented environmental legislation, devolving much responsibility for environmental decision making to local and regional councils, and declaring the sustainable management of natural and physical resources as its purpose. In 1995, the Government introduced the 'Environment 2010 Strategy', formulating the general principles and objectives to underlie its longer-term environmental policy.

Although these developments suggest that environmental interests gained considerable power during the 1980s and 1990s, they need to be placed in a wider context to assess their significance. The process of environmental reform was just one element of a far broader programme of fundamental change inspired by neo-liberal ('New Right') ideology that left no area of the public sector, bureaucracy, and policy untouched. Although the reforms were publicly justified on the basis of the need to enhance efficiency, transparency, and accountability, they involved the 'rolling back of the state' in most areas of life, the devolution of power to the 'private sector', and the commercialisation of remaining state activities. During this period, the first priority of governments was creation of an open and minimally regulated economy to encourage investments and economic growth.

Consequently, the environmental reforms have meant little to nothing in terms of addressing or reducing the main sources of environmental pressure. Government policies with regard to energy, transport, and agriculture, sectors responsible for many environmental problems in New Zealand, remain dominated by the 'hands off' principle. The main environmental government agencies were hamstrung by underfunding and a low level of political commitment. Under the Resource Management Act, development is impeded or mitigated only when opponents can prove that 'environmental bottom-lines' are likely to be transgressed, a very difficult task given the inevitable uncertainty associated with environmental issues, and the inequality in resources between proponents of development on the one hand, and public and environmental groups on the other.

In 1996, a system of proportional representation was introduced that, for the first time, led to the election of three greens into Parliament, be it as members of a coalition of smaller parties ('The Alliance'). Until then, the 'first-past-the-post' system had prevented the election of green party representatives, despite the fact that, at times, electoral support for the greens had been considerable (for instance, 7 percent in 1990). Split off from the 'Alliance' in 1997, the Green Party contested the 1999 elections on its own, gaining more than 5 percent of the vote and 7 seats (of the 120) in Parliament. This gave it a crucial position in propping up a centre-left government, and considerably enhanced the chance of environmental concerns gaining greater weight in the business of government

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