

## First impressions on the Labour/Greens MoU

The Labour and Green parties have today formally signed an MoU agreeing to “work collaboratively to change the govt at the 2017 election”.

Among areas of collaboration: Parliamentary tactics, including Question Time and select committees; “investigation” of joint policy announcements and campaigns; “no surprises” and “agree to disagree” protocols; and, although not stated in the agreement, potential for general electorate candidate accommodations.

**In other words, the two parties have agreed in a signed statement to do what they do already.** This is pure symbolism that raises some difficult questions about post-election arrangements.

Both Labour and the Greens are also judging it’s worth the risk of diluting their own platforms by being seen to be two sides of the same coin – a fear expressed by right-leaning members of the Labour caucus who remain convinced the Greens gain more than Labour when they share the stage. The Power NZ policy, unmentioned at today’s joint announcement, is a prime example of that phenomenon.

**It seems Labour also calculates it has been gaining traction over National in recent weeks,** partly thanks to the focus on housing, and that announcing this ‘non-monogamous’ relationship with the Greens will add to that.

### What the agreement is NOT:

- **a coalition agreement.** Both Andrew Little and Metiria Turei were on-song with a “one step at a time”, “wait till the electorate has spoken” line today;
- **An answer to NZ First’s “king-maker” position in the polls.** While the Greens are consistently outpolling NZ First, Winston Peters’s party has held the balance of power in all polls taken this year. **The MoU may force Peters to declare whether he is committed to ‘changing the govt’.** Peters dodged that question today, saying NZ First would have a “devastating impact” on the result in 2017;
- **An answer to Labour’s and Little’s personal poll ratings.** The political thinking behind today’s announcement represents the outcome of finely balanced considerations in which both parties – but Labour in particular – would have struggled with the potential for sharing a platform to diminish their voter appeal. While Labour is occasionally polling above 30% in the various publicly released opinion polls, **scores in the late 20s are more frequent, when it needs to be closing on 35% to have a credible shot at leading a govt next year;**
- **A sign of Labour caucus unity.** Rather, it is the latest indication of the influence being achieved by Little’s chief of staff, Matt McCarten, in a campaign to make Little the centre of attention for Labour and an apparent PM-in-waiting. **One reason for announcing the MoU today is that it allows Little to make a speech to the Greens’ national conference, in Lincoln, this Saturday.**

In summary, while the logic of being seen to work together collegially seems unassailable, the political calculus is more difficult. Many Labour voters are turned off by the Greens and may head to NZ First, if not to National. Likewise, **Labour and the Greens now face 18 months of answering the same unanswerable question: if Labour needed NZ First to form a govt, would Winston Peters allow the Greens into Cabinet?** At this stage, the only certain answer in that mix is Little’s insistence that Grant Robertson, and not a Green MP, would be Minister of Finance.

– Patrick Smellie for The Hugo Group 