

# The Language of MMP

by Stephen Mills, Executive Director UMR Research

An unfortunate by-product of the MMP electoral system has been massive obfuscation.

Even by the standards of politics a huge amount of words have been uttered with the intention of saying nothing at all or being as vague as possible or giving coded messages or just avoiding an obvious outright lie.

Questions on who is going with who are expected and party leaders have well-honed lines. But the same questions keep coming.

Major party leaders have to avoid too close an association with other parties that could turn their own voters or potential voters but still may be needed to make them Prime Minister.

Minor party leaders have to keep open as many options as possible both to increase the pool of potential voters that could vote for them and to maintain their negotiating power with major parties. Even the Greens tried a convoluted pretence that they could just possibly go with National in 2011.

There are a few variations on these two main themes.

There is a special place for Paul Goldsmith, National's Epsom candidate in recent elections who has had to provide non-answers to sustained mocking questions on whether he is asking the electors of Epsom for their electorate vote. Oddly, the National candidates in Ohariu have escaped this fate.

Another recent variation has been Colin Craig's statements that he is not looking for a deal in East Coast Bays from National while his intense eyes desperately plead for one. His wallet says otherwise too as the Conservatives have spent up large early in the electoral cycle to try (unsuccessfully) to drive up the party vote and force National's hand.

The absolute master of MMP wordsmithing is Winston Peters. He is about to enter his seventh MMP campaign as a party leader and has evaded answering probably thousands of questions on who he would support in government. Scores of journalists have sallied forth to pin him down and all have failed.

John Key has certainly broken with tradition this week by encouraging National voters in Epsom, Ohariu and the Maori seats to vote for minor party candidates. No equivocation apart from his odd refusal to vote for the ACT candidate himself. Future historians will puzzle over what was going on with the cups of tea.

This is welcome but John Key is still exposed to ritual interrogation on his exact position on New Zealand First. In 2008 he climbed high onto a pedestal and declared that he would not go into coalition with New Zealand First on principle even if it cost him government. He has certainly climbed off that pedestal. It would only take a small drop in the National vote and a small rise in the centre-left combined party vote to render the small National Party Coalition partners irrelevant and Winston Peters would once again be in that delicious position (for him) of being able to decide who is Prime Minister. John Key has a few weeks ahead of dodging clarification of his willingness to secure the support of New Zealand First. Treasurer again?

John Key may not also be off the hook on the Conservatives either. He could certainly be pursued on whether he will do a late deal with the Conservatives if the polls close during the campaign, especially if the Conservative vote was up around 3% to 4%. The political media in New Zealand has passively accepted his

claim that the only way a deal would work in East Coast Bays is if National MP, Murray McCully is withdrawn as a candidate. There seems little basis for this contention. Jim Bolger withdrew support from his candidate Mark Thomas in Wellington Central in the 1996 election at a late stage.

It seems reasonable to assume that East Coast Bays National voters would seriously consider a late call by the Prime Minister that it was now necessary for them to ensure his re-election by giving Colin Craig in East Coast Bays their electorate vote. John Key could even avoid getting his hands dirty on this by just becoming coy and delegating the message to Campaign Manager, Steven Joyce or Murray McCully (making a noble sacrifice) or fire up a coordinated message from the legion of National party bloggers and commentators.

Labour Leader, David Cunliffe's position is that he can work with the Greens and New Zealand First and is not at all keen on Internet Mana. He has ruled them out of Cabinet but is not entirely ruling out accepting their support if needed to get to 50%.

This seems clear enough but not under Coalition question protocols. It is certain that he will be asked over and over again to further clarify that position on Internet Mana.

The reason for cautious and vague statements for Coalition options is underlined by the lack of enthusiasm most New Zealand voters have for any of the parties except arguably for the Greens. They are easily the top rated Coalition partner and Internet Mana are just as decisively the worst.

National voters are decidedly negative about all the party's Coalition options. Only 10% think the Conservatives would do a good job and 51% a bad job. This may explain National's apparent rejection of the Conservatives but the numbers for ACT at 9% good job; 51% bad job and for United Future 9% good job; 52% bad job are hardly better. The Greens with an 11% good job; 59% bad job rating from National party voters score higher than New Zealand First at 5% good job; 59% bad job.

But John Key may need New Zealand First. The language games will continue.

- > Polling results in this article are based upon questions asked in the UMR Research omnibus survey. This is a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 750 New Zealanders 18 years of age and over.
  - > Fieldwork for the survey was 26<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2014.
  - > Full results are on UMR's website , [umr.co.nz](http://umr.co.nz)