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My previous column identified a strategy that could possibly win Labour a fourth term. But is it likely to work?

The key to a successful strategy is maximising the impact of the elements you can control and minimising the impact of those outside your control. Unfortunately for Labour the elements beyond its control are likely to be decisive in 2008.

They face a situation similar to the All Blacks' current prospects in the Tri-Nations: They could still win but are not in control of their own destiny.

### **1) The perfect storm**

The "perfect storm" is brewing to defeat a sitting government.

Regardless of any other factor, Labour faces an electorate hungry for change. Since the Second World War New Zealanders have only once elected a governing party to a fourth term, and that was under very abnormal circumstances. It could be that familiarity breeds contempt. More likely, governments simply have a natural life cycle, and the public wants to maintain a healthy turnover to keep governments accountable and in touch with voters.

But the main looming low pressure system driving the storm is now the economy. After the longest post-war period of sustained economic growth New Zealanders are feeling the pain of a recession, even though it was mainly brewed offshore and is being felt by most countries. This recession also has features such as high energy and food prices, and major problems in part of the financial sector where people have invested their retirement savings. This makes the current recession different from previous ones, and perhaps more worrying to many New Zealanders as a result.

Economic conditions always have an important impact on voters' evaluations of sitting governments. Voters are fair weather friends, and irrespective of the cause, they usually punish governments in times of economic downturn. Not surprisingly, National aims to make the economy the main focus of the election campaign.

Whether even the perfect storm brings about an actual change of government ultimately also depends on the public's comfort with the alternative.

Labour's repeated comments on whether a National government can be trusted are part of its own strategy to create unease among voters about National's true policy intentions. This tactic was effective in 2005. Labour's message of "don't put it all at risk" resonated well with infrequent and swing voters in particular, and provided both groups with an incentive to vote - and vote Labour.

In 2008 there is not yet a similar "fear factor" surrounding National and its leader. If Labour could recreate the 2005 unease it could be significant, or even decisive. But in 2008 they are much more dependent on National providing them with ammunition - something National has done in this past week, no matter how it feels about the way it occurred.

### **2) National's election strategy**

Labour's recent election successes have been due in some measure to National's slowness to understand properly the new political strategies demanded under MMP. In 2002 National campaigned primarily for the electorate vote, which is almost irrelevant to winning an MMP election.

In 2005 National's election strategy centred on clearly and decisively differentiating the party from Labour by moving further to the right. In so doing National's party vote did grow - but

primarily at the expense of its potential or confirmed allies ACT, United Future and New Zealand First. This consolidated the right of centre vote inside National, but did not significantly grow the centre-right bloc of votes. It merely reconfigured existing seats within the opposition.

National has finally adopted an election strategy suited to winning an MMP election. It has softened its rhetoric, moved towards the centre on several key policy issues and challenged Labour for the crucial centrist swing vote. In 2008 National's strategy is intended to grow its vote primarily at Labour's expense.

### **3) The Maori vote and the Maori Party**

In 2005 National won the plurality of party votes in the general electorates (41% to Labour's 40%), but lost hugely in the Maori electorates (National 4%; Labour 55%). In total the Maori electorates contributed 8% to Labour's total party vote, but only 0.6% to National's. This differential won Labour a third term.

Furthermore the Labour party vote was buttressed in Maori electorates by Maori Party split voters. The Maori Party received 49% of the electorate votes but just 28% of the party votes; Labour received only 43% of the electorate votes but 55% of the party votes. Many Maori gave their electorate vote to the Maori Party but their party vote to Labour. And, adding to the effect of this, the presence of the Maori Party led to increased turnout among Maori, and Labour then benefited from that in the party vote.

An important factor in the 2008 election, then, is whether the Maori Party can significantly lift its party vote. This could have serious repercussions for Labour. First, the Maori Party, which has not guaranteed Labour post-election support, would siphon party votes from Labour. Second, the size of the overhang would be reduced. With National within reach of the 50% mark, an overhang could increase the number of seats National needs for a majority government from the usual 61 to 62 or even 63. A higher Maori party vote decreases the likelihood of this occurring.

Labour's scenario for success then is very specific with respect to the Maori vote: the Maori Party must be popular enough to entice Maori to the polls to vote for it in electorate seats, but not so popular as to retain most of the party vote - and then it must support Labour post-election.

### **4) The Greens**

Similarly Labour needs the Greens' post-election support. Conventional wisdom is that, because they are positioned on Labour's left flank, the Greens have no other choice with their support. If this wisdom held, any votes that flowed from Labour to the Greens this election would be irrelevant overall - they would not hurt Labour, just rearrange the seats in the centre-left bloc.

The problem for Labour is the Greens' support may not be automatic this time. First, there is likely to be a lingering sense of betrayal from the 2005 post-election negotiations which provided ministerial posts for Peter Dunne and Winston Peters but denied the Greens a much wanted place in cabinet. Second, their support might depend on the size of the gap between National and Labour and the public's perception of the election outcome.

If Labour is a close second then the Greens' decision could be relatively straight forward.

But what if National fell short of governing alone, and were struggling to form a governing coalition, yet Labour had finished a distant second? Constitutionally and theoretically the outcome is clear; if National could not form a new Government then the current Labour-led Government would continue to govern as long as it maintained the confidence of the House. This scenario looks possible.

The crucial question is whether the Greens - or the Maori Party - would think it appropriate to prop up Labour in these circumstances. It could depend on public opinion. Would such an arrangement be judged as a legitimate outcome or the hijack of the election from the rightful winner?

If it is the latter then the Greens and Maori Party would have a tough decision to make. Would they agree to support or abstain on confidence and supply to allow National to govern? Or would they decide that National's policies on the RMA, the abolition of the Maori seats and the referendum on MMP warranted propping up a distant second-placed Labour?

How each party played out this scenario to its end would be critical. And Labour's hopes for a fourth term would hang in the balance.

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