

Scrutineers keep Kiwi election process honest

by Nicole Stanley

Given the strict ban on election day campaigning by political parties, voters might have been confused by the party rosettes worn by people sitting quietly around polling booths.

These observers are the party scrutineers who watch over the 16,000 election day workers and make sure everything goes to plan.

Scrutineers are allowed to watch over almost every aspect of voting on election day from the issuing of ballot papers to the preliminary count of votes in the polling booths.

Each party is allowed one scrutineer per polling booth though only the bigger parties have the numbers to attempt a presence at the 2700 booths nationwide.

Jane Dowton, a ballot issuing officer in Auckland Central, says two scrutineers sat behind her at all times as she crossed out names and handed over voting papers.

She says being watched so closely by scrutineers with identifiable party affiliation didn't bother her at all.

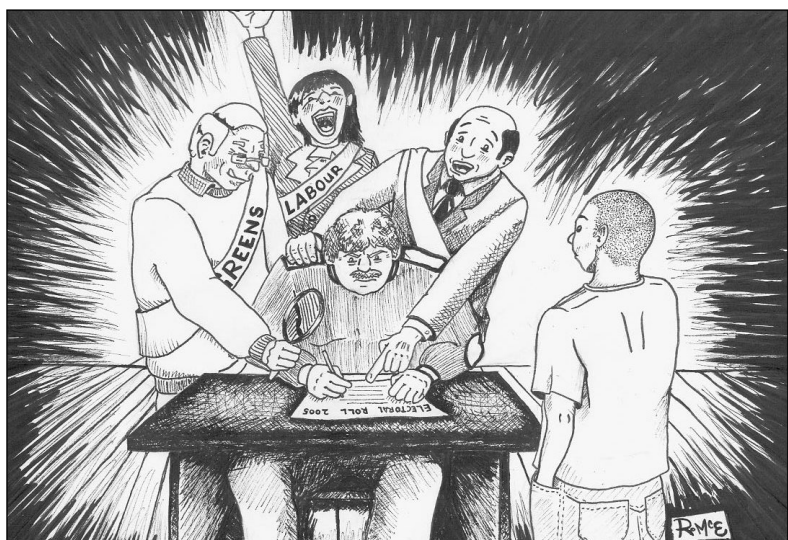


ILLUSTRATION: RUFUS MCEWAN

"The rosettes were a good thing. You could tell what party they were from and what they were doing there. They aren't allowed to interfere in any way so you don't even notice they are there," she says.

Dowton says as she issued voting papers she called out the page number and line number of the person she was crossing off the election roll so the scrutineers could hear.

Scrutineers could then work out which of their supporters in the area had voted.

"If they notice by say 2pm that a certain person who said they would vote for them hasn't voted yet, they would ring and see if he or she needed a lift to the voting station or had voted somewhere else."

Maxine Viggers, the regional chairwoman for the National Party, says this isn't unusual.

"Scrutineers can organise to get supporters who haven't voted to polling booths. It's active democracy."

She says scrutineers play an important role by ensuring that

polling is conducted in an appropriate way.

"By wearing a party rosette to do this, it actually shows that the parties are alive and well in their electorates in an indirect way," she says.

Michael Pringle, national administrator for the Green party says the presence of scrutineers to monitor election day conduct can actually benefit the minor parties.

"They help boost our vote by being present with a rosette on and remind people that our party exists," he says.

Viggers says it is important for party scrutineers to be there, whether the election is close or not.

Communications manager for the Chief Electoral Office Anna Hughes says the same procedures happen at every election, no matter how close the results look like they are going to be.

"At each election, the same meticulous vote casting and result sorting process happens."

As for the insider's view on voting day, Dowton says as far as she can see, the system really works.

"It's as fair and as accurate as it can be."

Easier path to polling booths for disabled

by Fiona Peat

Democracy was boosted in last weekend's election with improved disabled access at the polls and voting information available for deaf and blind people.

Liz Soper, director of Creative Abilities, a private company providing social work and supported flatting for people with physical and other needs, says the lack of facilities for disabled voters in previous elections had created a barrier.

"It was a mainstream service and a person with a disability had to fit in," she says.

However, this election will see at least 50 per cent of polling places, and a minimum of 12 in each electorate, with disabled access and facilities.

The Chief Electoral Office has also produced information about voting in the form of a DVD in sign language, large print, Braille and audio.

The national disability strategy, which was put in place in 2002 to make New Zealand a more inclusive society, and has led to the improvements to the voting system.

Dropping Maori seats 'may cause racial rift'

by Lucy Grigg

New Zealand's race relations could reach a dangerous point if the seven Maori seats are abolished, says a senior University of Auckland professor.

Margaret Mutu, head of the Maori studies department, believes the situation could deteriorate more than most people realise.

"If they thought the foreshore and seabed situation was bad, that was really just a little warning."

The seats could be easily eliminated in the next three years with a National or Labour coalition government.

The seats are not protected by law and require only 75 per cent of MPs support to abolish them.

"We predicted years ago that the Maori seats could go. Right now the situation definitely poses a threat. They have the power to wipe them out."

Maori Party candidate Ngahiwi Tomoana says that eliminating the seats would simply provide the party with more "fire power".

"We would have no chance in the general seats if they were taken away, and that would mean there would be 20 per cent of the population without a voice in Parliament.

"If they weren't such a strong presence in parliament, either party could abolish them more easily, but now they're going to have to be more careful with their tampering."

AUT senior lecturer in Maori studies Paul Moon agrees that race relations would suffer severely but believes the

seats are not at risk.

"They probably won't be abolished. The seats have worked for the last 140 years.

"But the Maori Party could end up much stronger if they were. They could see a significant change in their party vote if they sat in the general seats because people might swing from Labour."

"Instead it should be the race relation policies that go. You can't just set up a race relations office to improve relations. It just ends up imposing its role."

Mutu is certain that the Maori Party's presence in parliament is just the beginning of a long-term presence.

"Ten years ago we decided we were going to take back control of our lives and back then Maori didn't know what their rights were, but they know now and we're ready," she says.

Moon disagrees that the party will be able to endure the next three years.

"It's extremely unlikely that they will make it through to the next election because they won't be able to deliver back to the people.

"They're just one of the flashes in the pan."

Mutu says that the Maori Party may form a coalition with Labour, but only if they adapt some of their policies.

"A Labour-Maori coalition could be formed if Labour stops being racist and stop beating us over the head. It will work if Maori can have a say and can participate as Maori, but definitely not under another party's control.

"We're not going to put up with being treated like dirt."

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