

Reviews

The New Zealand Liberals. The Years of Power, 1891–1912. By David Hamer. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1988. 418pp. NZ price: \$45.00.

POLITICAL HISTORY became unfashionable in New Zealand before it should have. Following international trends, New Zealand historians turned from the analysis of politics to the analysis of society, leaving many things unresearched, unsaid, or unpublished. David Hamer is one of the few historians who have retained a research interest in politics through the 1970s and 1980s. His interest, originally developed in the late 1950s in an MA thesis on Robert Stout, has now led to a major book on the Liberal era, 1891–1912. The focus of the book is politics but, in keeping with new ways of looking at the past, the politics are linked to a social context, to the social environment of an emergent colonial nation, and to the social origins and aspirations of colonial politicians.

There are few more important decades in New Zealand history than those during which the Liberals were in power. Few periods have attracted more comment, from both contemporary observers and historians. Why was the Liberal era so crucial? The traditional way to answer this question was to explore Liberal ideology and Liberal legislation. Such an approach placed labour relations, land tenure, and welfare at the heart of the matter. This is not Professor Hamer's method, although I think he is asking the same question. He recognizes the central importance of land and to a lesser extent labour, prohibition, and poverty as political issues, but his way to understanding the Liberals is by focusing on their style, on their leaders, and on the way they managed to stay in office. Ideology and legislation are not ignored but they are secondary to a study of politics and politicians. The Liberals are crucial in New Zealand history because they founded a tradition that dominated politics until the mid-1980s. They were the first government to recognize that the central state must deal with the social and economic problems that faced the country; they introduced party government and they, or their leaders, pioneered the prime ministerial style that became the hallmark of the successful leader in New Zealand. These were structural changes in New Zealand politics and government that had a greater and more lasting impact than legislation, much of which was amended, repealed, or forgotten.

Hamer begins his study with a brief chapter summarizing the historiographical debate on politics in the decade or so before the Liberal victory. What was the connection between the Grey Government of 1877–9 and the Liberals? What was the significance of the Stout-Vogel ministry and the period 1887–90? He continues with analytical chapters on the content of New Zealand liberalism, on settlement patterns, on the social and political life of country, town, and city, and the debate on land tenure. These chapters are linked by others of a more narrative character, tracing the development and fortunes of

the party under Ballance, Seddon, Ward, and, in its final months of power, under Mackenzie. Within all of these chapters lesser issues are argued out in a complex way. Other, larger issues, especially that of land tenure, thread their way through the narrative.

Why did the Liberals remain in power so long? This question shapes the entire work. The first conclusion is that the opposition was so weak that it did not, until the very end, present itself, nor could it be seen, as an alternative government. Subsidiary to this view, Hamer puts forward an interesting argument that some of the opponents of the Liberals were actually politicians who opposed the very notion of party in politics. As advocates of independence they had no hope of defeating the Liberals, tenuous as even Liberal party organization was. Second, Hamer argues that Liberal persistence was a matter of the style of leadership. Seddon was the supreme example. He comes out of this study as scarcely having any policy of his own, but being a master of political tactics and popular appeal. However, Ward was no slouch in this respect either. The Liberal leaders were great participants in ceremony and ritual, and Ward enjoyed and courted such occasions even more than Seddon. Ward's political career was marked by a series of publicly celebrated come-backs and triumphs. Hamer's analyses of the political style of these and lesser Liberal luminaries are imaginative, yet controlled. He demonstrates an ability to focus on the quirky and significant characteristics that really do seem to be vital clues to personality.

The third reason that Hamer adduces to explain the Liberals' lengthy term of office was their success in establishing the responsibility of the central state for dealing with the country's problems. Following a well-rehearsed argument in the historiography of the 1880s, he contends that New Zealand settlers were shocked to realize that Old World evils had reappeared in the New World. They reacted swiftly to restore some sort of balance and to try to eradicate the worst effects of poverty, poor housing, low wages, and poor working conditions. The point here, however — as Hamer realizes but does not develop to any extent — is the way the Liberals handled these problems. After all, settlers of the 1860s and 1870s had also observed poverty, wife and child desertion, and squalid housing. Then the problem was on a smaller scale, and the reactions were individualist and based on mid-Victorian ideas of self-help and charity. By the late 1880s such responses were no longer adequate; the understanding of the causes of such problems had developed further, and the Liberals were prepared to use the state in an attempt to deal with them.

Fourth, the Liberals remained in office because Liberalism was such an imprecise ideology. This argument is based on Hamer's substantial second chapter, 'New Zealand Liberalism', and on scattered analyses of the political philosophy of individual Liberals. Chapter two is an original piece of research which puts quite a new slant on the Liberals and shifts the ground rules for the debate on Liberal philosophy. It begins with a brief summary of the old debate on the influence of imported political theories, or doctrines, on the Liberals. Hamer comes to the sensible conclusion that 'New Zealand must be seen as part of a changing world scene, and the relationship of ideas and political practice can only be judged within this context' (p.39). My expectation was that a further analysis of Liberal ideology would follow and finally settle the question of socialism, with or without doctrine. But what Hamer does is to shift entirely the analysis to focus on the content and the expression of Liberal political debate, the social origins and personal experiences of Liberal politicians. Liberalism thus becomes a set of political views, shaped by changing conditions here and abroad and by the world view of emigrants who became politicians, and applied during the process of creating a new nation. No wonder Liberalism was vague and could encompass such a variety of supporters that an opposition had little in the way of policy to lay claim to.

Hamer's second major original contribution is his extended discussion of town, city, and country. Here Hamer tries to develop a typology of the settlements most likely to vote Liberal. Rural areas were unlikely to vote Liberal (although some did) and cities were overwhelmingly Liberal, so neither get much discussion. Hamer is most at home with small and medium-sized towns, of which there were a large number in this era, and he draws on a rich source of material to examine the politics of these towns. However, this analysis leaves me feeling very uneasy. An association is made between towns with a full institutional life and Liberal voting. But is this the correct link to make; and does the evidence always support the conclusions? For instance, at one point Hamer claims: 'Liberal towns were towns with ambition' (p.153). Two pages earlier he cites Rangiora, which voted Liberal from 1890 to 1931, as an example of a Liberal town. However, he himself says that Rangiora was in decline by the 1880s and had abandoned 'any ambition to be anything more than a market town' (p.151). Hamer's material here has got the better of him. It is fascinating, but the link between the institutional life of small towns and voting patterns is not convincingly established. One might suggest that the upturn in export prices and the scarcely-mentioned return to prosperity after 1895 were more significant in the success of Liberal candidates than the predominance of tradesmen and storekeepers in community affairs.

The focus of this book is the Liberal party and the Liberal government in Parliament and in the country. Inevitably there is more about Parliament than the country. Part of the story is the failure of the Liberals to create a grass-roots, electorate-based organization. There is also more about 'the Government' than about government. The history of Liberal administration and the day-to-day operation of running the country still wants its researcher. Political issues are covered. Here most attention is given to the controversies over land tenure. Despite the current interest in issues of landownership and land tenure, the debates of the 1890s and early twentieth century on the virtues of leasehold, the 'inherent instinct' for freehold, and the need for urban allotments, seem remote indeed. However, Hamer is convinced, and convincing, in his belief that these issues were absolutely central to the politics of the time. For this reason he unravels their complicated history at more length and with greater skill than anyone else has ever done.

At the risk of being considered predictable, I would like to comment briefly on Hamer's consideration of the women's franchise. The enfranchisement of women is seen solely in terms of its being a political issue for the Liberals during their first term of office. Did it really mean nothing more to them than this? After all, the 109,000-odd women who enrolled in 1893 were the largest single group who ever acceded to the electoral rolls. In some electorates the women's vote outweighed that of men. Didn't this make any differences to the way Seddon, Ward, and the others operated? If not, surely one must ask, why not?

The history of governments in New Zealand is now being slowly put together. For those who wonder exactly how to write the history of a political party or of a government, Professor Hamer's book will provide a stimulating example. It is the most important book we have on the Liberals and a major contribution to our understanding of the origins of modern politics. It helps us to see why the Liberals and the electorates which returned them to power in election after election were both similar to, and different from, the politicians and electorates of today.

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