

Still room for criticism within coalition

DEAR Mr Anderton, your letter to members asks us to tick one of two boxes: to "stay on course as common sense, constructive coalition partners" or to "head off on an alternative course of oppositional politics". I'm afraid I cannot tick either box in such a slanted "have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife-yet?" questionnaire.

Option 1 invites us to sign a blank cheque, an uncritical endorsement of current policy with no room for "ifs" or "buts".

Option 2 misrepresents the views of the majority on council (which to the best of my knowledge still supports the coalition), and even misrepresents the views of your more radical opponents (such as myself) who advocate (a) remaining in coalition during the present parliament while pursuing a more independent line, and (b) remaining in coalition during the next parliament so long as we make a certain threshold - say 7%.

Thus the questionnaire is not a genuine attempt to poll opinion within the party - to do that the rival opinions would have to be fairly stated - but rather an attempt to manufacture the appearance of consent. It is not just travesty of the democratic process but an insult to the intelligence of party members.

There is much in your letter which seems to me untrue, but that is not the worst thing about it. More astonishing is the authoritarian cast of mind which it betrays. It is hard to see it as anything other than a fishing expedition designed to garner the addresses and subscriptions of those naive enough to follow you when you eventually decide to split.

Let's start with a pair of truths which are made to imply some falsehoods. You state that "in 1998 the Alliance agreed to enter a constructive coalition with Labour" and that this meant that we had to "put aside opposition strategies". Both claims are true - we did agree to a coalition and this meant, for example, that we could not slag off Labour with the vituperative abandon of yesteryear.

But the 1998 coalition policy did not mean, as you seem to imply, that we were committed to coalition for evermore and no matter what. Hence, those who propose supporting Labour from the cross-benches in 2003 are not, as you claim, "fundamentally at odds" with the agreed-on party strategy. Nor did the decision to go into coalition entail the supine parliamentary tactics that we have in fact pursued. Coalition is consistent with a little constructive criticism.

You state that a "significant number of the current Alliance council have never been able to accept" the coalition policy. This comes as some surprise to me. Those members, such as myself, with reservations about the coalition policy had little or no support from council during the first year and a-half of the current Parliament. We felt ourselves to be voices crying in the wilderness. If a significant number of councillors secretly agreed with us, this was a very well-kept secret.

But the worst thing about your letter is its authoritarian attitude. So far as I can tell, most members of council *did* agree to the coalition policy and recent votes suggest that they still do. But suppose that they did not. You seem to be suggesting that it was somehow wrong of them to retain their reservations. But aren't council members (like other party members) entitled to their opinions? And aren't they entitled to agitate for those opinions within the confines of the party?

Thus the fact (if it be a fact) that not going into coalition is now regarded as a live option does not show that the council is doing anything wrong - unless disagreeing with the party leader is supposed to constitute a crime.

You claim that the party organisation has put "almost no effort" into building membership or fund-raising. This is an ungrateful slur on many devoted party workers. Until December 2001, when you pulled the plug, a constant stream of propaganda flowed from Matt McCarten's office encouraging, wheedling, cajoling and even bullying us into getting organised and getting busy with fund-raising. These repeated pleas fell on deaf ears because of the

widespread disaffection within the party. And this disaffection was largely due to your failure to articulate and defend an independent Alliance agenda. Like the love that dares not speak its name for fear of persecution, we have become the party that dares not speak its ideology for fear of offending our coalition partners. We have degenerated into a left-leaning clique within a post-New Right Government, with one or two practical achievements to boast of but no independent programme of our own. People just do not feel like donating their time or money to a party which has ceased to stand up for the ideals that they believe in. So don't blame the party organisation for the moribund branches and the declining membership. Blame yourself for the crisis of morale that you have helped to create.

But let us suppose that I am wrong. Let us suppose that there is a cabal within the Alliance national council which is running an anti-coalition strategy (unlikely as that is given their recent votes). Let us suppose, too, that this strategy is as silly as you make it out to be and that most members agree with you. In other words let us suppose, as you claim, that both the logic and the numbers are on your side. Then, if the council can't be persuaded, there is an obvious remedy. Call an emergency conference and thrash the matter out. If the vote went your way, the wicked councillors might not be persuaded, but for the moment they would have to submit. Your evident preparations for a split suggest that you don't believe your own rhetoric - for if that rhetoric were true there would be no need for a split.

I admired you once, Mr Anderton, and I am still grateful for the part you played in leading the Alliance through the dark days of the 1990s. But your current course of conduct shocks and saddens me. You are about to betray me and all the other people who gave of their time, effort and money to put you where you are.

You had the chance to end your career with honour as one of the greatest figures in New Zealand's political history. You are now about to end it as the man resolved to ruin or to rule the party that he helped to create. Your choice.

Yours no longer, it seems, in solidarity, Charles Pigden.

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