

Stage-managing unity: the gov't's blue-print announcement

The coalition gov't put on a forward-looking display of unity in Auckland on Sunday afternoon, delivering a slick, **stage-managed event for a large, hand-picked audience and the media** in a lecture theatre at AUT.

The PM's Office was at pains to emphasise that the 'blue-print', which both formalises the gov't's future priorities and the process for developing policy through Cabinet committees to final Cabinet approval, had been in development for months. **To prove the point, it released several Cabinet papers to demonstrate that the first formal consideration of this process and the identification of priorities began in March.**

However, **the lack of new policy and the unremarkable nature of the processes outlined suggests the event was engineered to deal with untidy coalition cracks** created over a string of issues in recent weeks: the refugee quota increase, the party's support for employment law reform, and most recently whether this is a 'Labour-led' gov't being the most visible. The Deputy PM, Winston Peters, was the source of those cracks. The failure of PM Jacinda Ardern to exert any discipline over him left them unpapered.

As a result, the choreography of today's event was more interesting than its content.

Peters was the warm-up to the Prime Minister, with a short speech in which he took a swipe at the media for being unable to see the unity that he says the public recognises, given the way the coalition's polling has held up. He also **claimed an imminent upgrade to the Super Gold Card as part of the gov't's reiterated wealth redistribution agenda.**

A professionally produced video followed, heavy on images of the PM, but with just the right proportions of NZ First and Green MPs also appearing. Ardern then adopted a Ted-Talk style, apparently ad-libbing a pitch-perfect version of her speech notes, which were projected on large screens at the back of the auditorium.

To hammer home that the coalition doesn't include the Greens, there was no separate presentation from either of its co-leaders although James Shaw answered questions in a Q&A session at the end.

Key to the PM's speech was reiteration of a gov't determined to do things differently, that is not afraid of **"kindness and compassion"** in its approach, determined to enhance NZ's reputation on the world stage, and to **make NZ "the best place to be a child"** – perhaps the only new political rhetoric of the day.

A new six-monthly review process, accompanied by a set of measures against three major themes with 12 areas of focus, will allow the Cabinet to "identify the policies that are succeeding, change those that are not working and align our resources with priorities". The first such review will be in February next year.

For all the verbiage, **this looks like a version of what any gov't would or should be doing.**

The themes and focus areas are summarised as:

- **Theme 1: Build a productive, sustainable and inclusive economy**, including pursuit of trade agreements, r&d tax credits, affordable housing, and educational qualifications;
- **Theme 2: Improve the wellbeing of NZers and their families** through higher incomes, thriving regions, home ownership, employment, and increased "kiwi content" in media;
- **Theme 3: Providing new gov't leadership**, including an independent foreign policy, targeting a lower prison population, and reduced homelessness and child poverty.

If the intent was to create positive media coverage from the army of senior political journalists present by showing the PM reasserting leadership of a coherent policy agenda and a coalition, it almost certainly failed. The lack of specificity and new ideas failed to counter the narrative that the PM is unable to manage her Deputy PM. Indeed, it may have made the gov't's perception problems with the political media worse. ■