



# New dawn for higher education?

**The recent elections in New Zealand were a close-run thing, but, for the university sector at least, the outcome has been positive. Prime Minister Helen Clark has been able to forge an agreement with smaller parties which maintains a Labour-led government into a third term. Despite two weeks of complex horse-trading to put the agreement together, political commentators generally agree that the Government should be able to last a three year term.**

The choices in the election were stark. On the one hand, the conservative National Party platform offered little hope for new funding for the university sector. New funding, for salaries and for other investment, is vital if the New Zealand university system is to maintain or improve its current standing. This is a consensus that unites both employers and unions in the sector.

On the other hand, the last Labour-led government had initiated tripartite discussions about both salaries and wider university funding. The survival of this tripartite depended on the outcome of the election. The National Party and its allies would have abandoned tripartism as a matter of course. In the event, the outcome reinforces tripartism to the sector's advantage.

This is not the only advantage flowing from the election for the sector. The Tertiary Education portfolio in government has been taken up by Michael Cullen (ranked 2 in the Government and the highly-respected Minister of Finance). Moreover, it has been made independent of the Education portfolio and given its own financial appropriation. And the Associate Minister is the Progressives' leader, Jim Anderton.

This is a sea-change in the political status of the tertiary sector. It reflects recognition at the highest level of government that the sector generally needs greater attention, and that the university sector in particular has pressing salary and funding problems. Indeed, Michael Cullen is on record to that effect.

Tripartism in the university sector was an outcome of the bitterly-fought, but recently successfully ended, industrial dispute that has dragged on since the beginning of the year. Central to the combined unions' platform was the view that the sector as a whole faced funding problems (particularly in relation to salaries) and that a sectoral response was needed. For much of the dispute, the employers opposed this view, arguing instead for enterprise-based outcomes. In the event, a union-sponsored case for a tripartite approach to the issues facing the sector was accepted by the then Minister, Trevor Mallard.

The employers have joined the process in good faith and a series of meetings have been held, focusing on salary and funding issues and



New Zealand Prime Minister, Helen Clark

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the sequencing of future policy initiatives designed to respond to these issues. So far, the tripartite process has been marked by constructive goodwill.

The recommendations from this process will land on the new minister's table shortly and if anyone can respond to them effectively, it is the Minister of Finance.

The sector – unions and employers – see the next three years as an important opportunity for the university sector to recoup financial losses suffered over the last two decades and ensure the recruitment and retention of high-quality staff.

Rarely in recent university history in New Zealand have the political stars been so well aligned with such hopes.

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