Open Letter: Keep the “P” in MMP

To the members of New Zealand's new Parliament,

We are calling on all political parties to commit to adjusting MMP’s settings to safeguard proportionality.

New Zealand has voted three times in favour of the MMP voting system: in 1992, 1993 and 2011.

New Zealanders support a proportional system like MMP that aims for fairness between different parties, where each party’s share of the seats in Parliament is intended to closely mirror its support amongst the voters.

Proportional systems, with the right settings, ensure each person’s vote counts equally regardless of where they live in the country, and mean the diverse views of the country are accurately reflected in the composition of Parliament.

The proportionality of MMP is now at risk. Under MMP the party vote should be the primary vote determining the number of MPs each party gets, with the electorate vote only determining who represents each local community in Parliament.

The 2026 election has exposed a significant weakness in some of the specifics of how New Zealand’s MMP works. There has been a breakdown, both accidental and deliberately engineered, in the purpose of the party and electorate votes that we have not seen in the 30 years New Zealand has had MMP.

The 2026 election preliminary results would give the second-place party six more MPs than the party with the most party votes. Another party has five times the number of MPs its party vote would allocate to it. These are not proportional outcomes and they give more power to some voters over others.

The 1986 Royal Commission into the Electoral System that recommended MMP for New Zealand believed that under MMP “accidental deviations [from proportional results] are most unlikely, and that any attempt to deliberately manipulate the system would be both difficult to implement and likely to attract an electoral backlash”.

It may have been “most unlikely” in the 1980s political context, but in a world where the two major parties have a combined vote of under 60%, a major party overhang will continue to be a genuine possibility at future elections if we do not fix MMP.

We can also see that the “soft” safeguards against deliberate manipulation of the system will likely be insufficient in the future. In 2026, overhangs were not difficult to engineer.

The risk is that the genie is out of the bottle. Parties and voters will see the success of these disproportionate results and will work to counter any benefit the other side has accrued by using their own tactics.

There are significant risks that future elections will be an arms race of who can best shepherd their voters to create disproportionate results for their party or bloc of choice. We have seen this happen overseas. For example, parties may commit further to gaming the system by running their incumbent electorate MPs as independents.

Already, some voters are questioning aspects of this outcome, and found the focus on split-voting during the campaign confusing. If this becomes an established part of New Zealand’s elections, it is likely to lead to voters becoming disillusioned, lower trust in our democracy, and Kiwis feeling that the system is rigged.

We must act now to change the incentives so that a sincere vote for a party or candidate of a person’s choice is again worth more than an insincere tactical vote that tries to game the system.

We call on all parties in Parliament to commit to adjusting MMP’s settings this term to safeguard MMP as a proportional system into the future. There are a number of ways to do this and different packages of changes, for example:

- increase the number of list MPs or reduce the number of electorate MPs so that the proportion of list seats in Parliament is higher and can more effectively ensure proportionality between parties
- combine the proportional vote and the vote for your local representative so there is not the same split vote effect
- allow one or two overhang seats per party, but rule out large disproportionate overhangs through the German approach of requiring parties to have enough party votes to cover their electorate wins
- adjust the voting rules in Parliament so a party’s voting strength in Parliament is based on its party vote not its total MPs.

These adjustments to MMP (and other options) each have strengths and weaknesses, and there is legitimate debate as to which is preferable. They should be considered carefully and transparently, with input from the public.

The best process to consider those options is an urgent select committee inquiry with MPs from all parties in Parliament. The MMP Review Committee (2000-2001) and the Electoral Legislation Committee (2010-2011) provide a model.

Its inquiry should be narrowly focused on this issue and report back by mid-2027 so that a Government Bill can make the necessary changes to the Electoral Act 1993 well before the next General Election. The inquiry should take public submissions, and advice from public servants and experts.

The adjustments to MMP should be principled, based on proportionality and fairness, and acceptable to as many political parties as possible. The Inquiry should look at overseas examples and potential fixes, but also look at what works for New Zealand's own constitutional arrangements including Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi.

They may also look to relevant recommendations of previous independent reviews (the MMP Review in 2012 and Independent Electoral Review in 2023) as a starting point, although the issues faced after this election are novel and were not fully considered in those reviews.

We urge all parties in the new Parliament to work together urgently to address this new vulnerability so that we can Keep the “P” in MMP.

Signatories *(in alphabetical order)*

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