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PALMERSTON POLITICS: A STUDY OF

A SINGLE ELECTORATE 1905-11.

A research exercise presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey  
University.

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1977



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List of Abbreviations

AJHR Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives  
MDT Manawatu Daily Times  
MES Manawatu Evening Standard

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

The Liberal enigma - a massive victory in 1905 to defeat seven years later - has proved fascinating for historians particularly those at Auckland University in the 1950's and 1960's. The work produced varied from studies of the Dominion as a whole to those of a particular region. It seems logical to take this one step further and to analyse a single electorate. The advantage of a single electorate study appears to lie in observing national politics at its lowest denominator. The question is, did the politics of Palmerston<sup>1</sup> centre on localism, local figures and local concerns, or on party politics and its cohesion and discipline.

The key to understanding political events is to place them against the social and economic development of the town and the region of Manawatu. The beginnings of the development of the Manawatu<sup>2</sup> did not take place until the late 1860's with the public sale of Maori land purchased by the Wellington Provincial Government - the Awahou and Ahuaturanga blocks had been purchased in 1858 (the latter included the future site for Palmerston) and the Manawatu-Rangitikei block in 1866 (this included present day Oroua County and Feilding). Initially Palmerston was just one of a number of small settlements that appeared in the Manawatu in the 1870's - Sanson (1870), Feilding (1874), Halcombe (1876), Rongotea (1878), and Ashhurst (1879). Palmerston prospered because it became the centre of a communications network. By 1880 Palmerston had been linked, by either road or rail, with Foxton, Wellington, Wanganui, and Hawkes Bay. Other settlements tended to join

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1. The electorate was named Palmerston, not becoming Palmerston North until 1929. However as the town is referred to as Palmerston in contemporary sources, it has been decided to retain the name Palmerston for the town. The text will make it clear whether the electorate or the town is being referred to.
  2. Information on Palmerston and Manawatu is drawn from the following sources: B. Symondson, "Frederick Pirani M.H.R. Palmerston North 1893-1902", unpublished M.A. Thesis, Massey University, 1977, pp. 5-15; E.C.R. Warr, "The Rise of Pastoral Industries" Introducing Manawatu B.G.R. Saunders and A.G. Anderson (eds), Massey University, 1964, pp. 148-180; I.R. Matheson The Birth of Palmerston North, Palmerston North, 1971

this network as they grew; Palmerston benefited from the through traffic and emerged as a centre for the Manawatu. The rail links with Wellington, completed by the Wellington-Manawatu Company in 1886 to the detriment of Foxton, Palmerston's chief rival, and Hawkes Bay, through the Manawatu Gorge in 1891, consolidated the town's pre-eminent position to such an extent that the town's population increased from 800 in 1877 to 10,239 in 1906.<sup>3</sup>

Sawmilling was the only remunerative activity for the earliest settlers as it was twenty to thirty years before the land was in full production. These early years were ones of burning off the forest cover and a subsistence existence. Such was the clearing of the bush taking place that smoke from bush burning in Kairanga in the 1880's was reported as a continual nuisance in Palmerston. By 1900 this activity had converted the forest cover of the low hill country of the Manawatu into a stable cover of exotic pasture.

Refrigeration brought about a change in the very roots of the country's existence and introduced a new dimension to the settlement and prosperity of the Manawatu. It resulted in a greatly increased tempo of development in the latter part of the nineteenth century as the new forms of intensive livestock production provided the basis of widespread closer settlement by large numbers of small farmers. Between 1886 and 1906 rural holdings under 640 acres increased throughout New Zealand by 29,000 and the area doubled from 3.6 to 7.5 million acres. In the Manawatu, between 1891 and 1908, the total area of occupied land in holdings of 1 to 320 acres trebled.

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3. Population of Palmerston North 1872-2000 Palmerston North City Corporation Town Planning Department, Research Section Report No. 5, Jan. 1969, p.2.
  4. J.D. Craig, "Fifty acres freehold - an historical geography of the changing character of land tenure and rural occupation in the six counties of the Manawatu 1891-1921" unpublished M.A. Thesis, Victoria University, 1968, pp. 5,28.

The first cream separator was demonstrated at Karere in 1883 and a dairy factory was opened there in 1884. The largest enterprise associated with the early development of the Manawatu dairy industry was the Dairy Union, established in 1893, with two factories, one of which was located at Palmerston and served by eight skimming stations. The meat industry was a further derivative of refrigeration and local requirements were met by the establishment of a freezing works at Longburn in 1885. The dominance of the small farmer in the Manawatu is demonstrated in the increase of entries in the Manawatu West Coast A. & P. Show between 1886 and 1902 - 290 to 6297.

Palmerston was, by 1905, essentially a focal point for the collection of produce and the distribution of supplies, a centre where townfolk engaged in commerce or in the maintenance of the dairy industry and the servicing of its equipment. The town relied for its prosperity on its hinterland. Pownall<sup>5</sup> in his study of Palmerston North, New Plymouth, and Wanganui, concluded that the last has had little relationship with its hinterland, New Plymouth was very dependent on it, and Palmerston North was somewhere between. His historical background suggests that Palmerston North was similarly dependent on its hinterland as New Plymouth and that as the former grew it lost some of its rural dependence.

Ian Matheson<sup>6</sup> in a Palmerston North centennial publication considers that

Palmerston North owed its existence and growth to the development of the surrounding countryside, firstly in the milling of the bush, and then the farming of cleared land.

Palmerston was not dissimilar to many other New Zealand towns in its relationship with the rural land surrounding it. D.V. Wilson<sup>7</sup> discussing Canterbury manufacturing between 1890 and 1900 commented that

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5. L.L. Pownall, "Town and Region" A comparison of Palmerston North, Wanganui, and New Plymouth New Zealand Geographer 1953, Vol. 9, No. 7, pp. 1-16.

6. Matheson, p.42.

7. D.V. Wilson, The Development of Industry in Canterbury, Christchurch, 1950, p.20. Wilson was President of the Canterbury Manufacturers Association in 1944 and 1945 and his comments were made in a Canterbury Centennial address.

the interdependence of the farmer and the manufacturer became more evident and it is interesting to observe just how many of our principal industries relied upon farming products.

Direct farm investment in the town came from large weekly stock sales, the A. & P. Show, the Dairy Union factory, and the United Farmers' Co-operative Association. The U.F.C.A. operated a large store which stocked a large variety of goods having over twenty departments. Farmers invested in the U.F.C.A. and received a rebate on purchases as well as interest on capital. It also loaned capital to farmers. Attempts were made to stock only New Zealand made goods, illustrating the rural community's dislike of tariffs and corresponding artificially high prices.<sup>8</sup>

Firms advertising in the Cyclopedia of New Zealand<sup>9</sup> give a further indication of the relationship between town and country. Barraud and Abraham, general merchants, stocked mainly farm and station requirements and similar to other firms operated a cart service for rural delivery; Holden and Kirk, dairy refrigeration and electrical engineers, stocked a "wide assortment of articles adapted to the use of dairy farmers"; Lane and Co. carting contractors, carried agricultural requisites throughout the Manawatu; and Beattie, Lang and Co., were successful farmers operating a dairy and general produce business. Throughout the 1890's the Manawatu Daily Times was edited by J.P. Leary, a semi-retired farmer. These are indicative of a strong relationship between the two sectors and the Cyclopedia itself, refers to Palmerston as "the centre of an essentially agricultural and pastoral district."

Industrially Palmerston was not a radical town. It exhibited little of the militancy which was a feature of many New Zealand cities at this time. It lacked the militant unions of these centres - the waterside workers in Wanganui, the flaxmillers in Otaki, the miners in the Waikato and the Auckland transport workers. Industry was mainly of a cottage type and filled the needs of the town and the Manawatu.

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8. Matheson, p.42.

9. Cyclopedia of New Zealand, Vol. 1, Wellington, 1897, pp. 1139-1203; Vol. 6, Christchurch, 1908, pp. 663-693.

The three biggest employers were the timber mills (up to 100 employees), the Post Office (80 employees in 1908), and the railways (57 employees in 1908).<sup>10</sup> Dahl's factory in Grey Street employed forty workers manufacturing products of the district producing ropes, tents, horsecarts, and oilskin clothing. Few other concerns employed more than twenty workers. These included bootmakers, cordial manufacturers, builders, and tailors. These characteristics suggest Palmerston's working class were less radical than other centres. No in-depth study has been made but other research on Palmerston tends to confirm this. Val Smith<sup>11</sup> suggests workers in the period resented radical interference and were essentially conservative and were more responsive to the views of the farming elements in the Manawatu than radical unionists.

The interdependence of town and country and the resulting conservativeness of the town had important political consequences in the three elections under review. It will help explain many of the issues, the candidates' and the electorate's stances on them, and the election results.

Palmerston was first represented in Parliament in 1870 in the newly created Manawatu seat. The first member was W.W. Johnson and he retained the seat until 1884, serving as Postmaster-General and Commissioner of Telegraphs in the Hall Ministry of 1881-82. D.H. MacArthur, a Manawatu County Councillor from 1877 to 1882 and Chairman for all but the first year, represented Manawatu from 1884 to 1890.<sup>12</sup> The Palmerston seat was created in 1890, and included the town, all of Fitzherbert West and stretched northwards into the Ruahines. The first member was J.G. Wilson, who had represented Foxton for the previous eight years. The contest in 1890 included Fred Pirani who was to be the member from 1893-1902, and John Stevens, a future member for Manawatu.<sup>13</sup> The Parliamentary

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10. Cyclopedia of New Zealand, 1908, p.668.

11. Val Smith, the author of a study on socialism, came to her conclusions after studying Department of Labour files and Palmerston life pre-World War I. The conclusions were given verbally.

12. Matheson p.77; M.H. Holcroft, The Line of the Road, Dunedin, 1977, p.205A

13. Symondson, p.24.

representative from 1902 to 1905 was William Wood who had won the seat on Pirani's retirement.

This work is as much a study of the rise of Reform as one of Liberal decline. Historians have tended to place more emphasis on the decline of the Liberals and neglected the rise of Reform. This may be because they see no difference between the two, or for more complex reasons. In Palmerston because of the absence of a Labour Party and the various characteristics of the electorate the Liberal decline does equate with Reform's rise.

Only one study exists on Manawatu politics<sup>14</sup>, and this has proven an unsatisfactory background as it concentrates on the political career of an individual. Manawatu history, though voluminous in extent, seems confined to personal reminiscences and brief surveys. The analysis of the three elections - 1905, 1908, and 1911 - which comprises the major portion of this exercise, is drawn almost exclusively from the two contemporary newspapers - The Manawatu Daily Times, a morning daily from 1882, and the Manawatu Evening Standard, an evening daily. Though founded five years later than the MDT, the MES was the first daily published in Palmerston. The latter from 1892, when it was purchased by the Pirani brothers, followed the political fortunes of Fred Pirani and by 1905 was pro-Opposition. The MDT played a neutral role in politics until 1905 from when, under the editorship of E.D. Hoben, it came increasingly to favour the Government. The factual reporting was surprisingly dispassionate in both papers though the editorial comment was predictably partisan. The newspapers provided a reasonable source of information for covering the three elections if, and only if, they are taken in conjunction with each other.

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14. Symondson