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‘For Light and Liberty’

The Origins and Early Development of the Reform Party, 1887-1915

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Elizabeth Ward
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Abstract

The Reform Party was one of the main political parties in New Zealand prior to the Second World War. Despite this, very little research has been conducted into its origins and growth as a party. This thesis examines that period of the Reform Party's development, beginning in the late 1880s and ending with the formation of the National Government in 1915.

It argues that a 'reform' identity began to emerge at the 1887 election and that in the 1890s the Opposition to the Liberals continued to refine 'reform' ideals. Furthermore, the establishment of the National Association in 1891 provided the Opposition with an extra-parliamentary organisation. This meant that it was better organised than the Liberals, and not the disunited group that some have previously characterised it as. Although the Opposition had relatively good political organisation, it was unable to win an election during the 1890s because its political message did not resonate with the electorate.

In the first decade of the twentieth century the Opposition transformed itself into the Reform Party, beginning with the formation of the Political Reform League in 1905, and then taking the name Reform Party in 1909. During this period Reform displayed a profound understanding of the changes occurring in New Zealand society and shaped its rhetoric to appeal to voters. This thesis proposes that Reform's rise was due to their superior organisation and political messaging; and challenges the idea that the electoral swing to Reform was the sole result of Liberal decline and societal changes.

Furthermore, it contends that by 1915 Reform tended to operate like a mass party. It built a nation-wide branch structure, with separate sections for women and Māori. From 1912 to 1914 Reform held annual conferences which were attended by delegates from throughout New Zealand and enabled the general membership to propose policy ideas. The party itself had an executive committee which oversaw its functions and this committee consisted of nine men and two women elected by the delegates at the annual conferences. Reform also employed a general secretary who oversaw the day to day running of the party. This is contrary to previous descriptions of Reform, which portray it as a party which was controlled by the leader of the Parliamentary Party, William Massey. By 1915 Reform was the most organised and extensive political party in New Zealand.

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List of Abbreviations

- AJHR** *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives.*
- MHR** *Member of the House of Representatives.*
- MLC** *Member of the Legislative Council.*
- MP** *Member of Parliament.*