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BookReview: *Standing for Mana*

Standing for Mana
Peter Cleave
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Reviewed by Paul Moon

Books about politics seem to flow from publishers in a steady stream. For a country of just over four million inhabitants, we are generously served with published analyses on the state of the nation's political parties and the system in which they operate. So does the pile really need to be added to with another yet volume on events loosely surrounding the 2011 General Election? Surely, all the angles relating to the election have been commented on fully? Well, yes they have, but that is partly the issue. While there is a good stock of commentary, the literature which dissects the country's politics and conducts an exploration with all the rigour of an autopsy is slender in comparison.

This is where *Standing for Mana* appears as a vital contribution to New Zealand's political literature: it is a book about the formation and struggle of a political party written with the benefit of an insider's perspective, thus affording the reader the sort of detail which is usually out of reach to those not directly involved in a party. Yet, despite the close proximity of the author to his subject, there is neither the jingoism of a current supporter nor the acrid criticism of a former member tainting the text. In addition, Peter Cleave manages to position the brief history of the Mana Party within

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the context of much broader political, economic, and racial developments in New Zealand. The result is that *Standing for Mana* is less a paen to a party by a loyal member, and much more a serious, disciplined analysis of contemporary New Zealand politics and the roles that Maori have assumed in that milieu.

The book starts with the telescope drawing back to reveal a broad political and racial terrain in which stereotypes abound, and where some of the main political protagonists appear to be talking at cross purposes. It is this miscommunication, predicated on ethnic and/or cultural lines, that is one of the leitmotifs of the work – surfacing at various stages to remind the reader of the intricacies of Maori-Pakeha political dialogue.

Such distinctions are never abstractions in Cleave's book. Rather, they are always quantified, explained, and explored. At no time does then reader feel that they are ever being led up some remote academic cul-de-sac. Instead, Cleave is relentless in his insistence of relevancy, and the result is a book that has a powerful sense of immediacy for the reader.

The Mana Party was the offspring of a period of intense turbulence in racial politics in this country, and Clves charts its conception, gestation, and birth in detail. However, this is no mere retelling of a chronology. Throughout, there are allusions to other developments, comparisons, and the timely the infusion of theoretical considerations, all of which buttress the narrative.

The fact that the party emerged in such a contracted space of time is examined by Cleave, and the implications of hasty policy development are considered, as are the roles of prominent individuals in the formation fo the party's overall position on a variety of issues. The significance of personality-driven politics is especially relevant to the Mana Party, and Cleave discusses at length, and from various angles, the role that leader Hone Harawira played in garnering publicity and attracting support (and opposition) to the party.

And again, historical comparisons are introduced to highlight the precedent for this type of politics. At the same time, though, the existence of the Mana Party in an MMP electoral environment, has recalibrated the role, functions, and expectations of small parties, and this, too, is analysed in the book at various junctures.

One of the more curious intersections which occurred as the Mana party hurriedly matured was that of race and class. Class, as a topic for discussion in the New Zealand political scene, is seldom discussed, as though it is the distant inheritance of a class-ridden European past. The myth of an egalitarian New Zealand is clearly at odds with the reality of the existence distinct economic classes in the country – an acknowledgement that some of Mana’s policies were built around, and which Cleave gives a sense of context to by examining some of the philosophical roots of this thinking.

One line of investigation which Cleave explores – the role of religion in politics – might seem just as foreign to many New Zealanders at first glance. Yet, though carefully piecing together the history of the connections between religious movement and Maori political movements in the country, Cleave reveals a distinct pattern of affiliation and mutual interest of which Mana appears as just the latest incarnation.

And after dealing with some of the themes running through the creation and existence of the Mana Party, Cleave then moves on to scrutinise closely many of the tactical considerations which affected its election result in 2011. Some of these will no doubt make difficult reading for party leaders, but this is part of the attraction of this book – it’s directness, and the clarity of its arguments – which make it such a compelling read. Overall, Peter Cleave’s *Standing for Mana* must be regarded as a seminal work in the analysis of a Maori political party in contemporary New Zealand, and will be highly instructive to all people with an interest in the intimate aspects country’s political system.