

A Seat at the Table

New Zealand in the United Nations
Security Council: 2015–2016

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Winston Peters, as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, addresses the United Nations General Assembly, New York, 2006. *UN, 126498*

PART 1: THE CAMPAIGN

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Murray McCully

2. The campaign: An impossible journey?

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Murray McCully addresses the Security Council during New Zealand's first term as President in July 2015. *MFAT*

1. Why seek a seat on the UN Security Council?

Murray McCully

New Zealand's campaign for a seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for the 2015–16 term was initiated by the Clark Government. Its endorsement by the John Key-led National Government was not automatic. It was the subject of some discussion and debate.

The decision to proceed was not a reflection of a wholly positive view of the UN and its various off-shoots. It would be difficult to refute the assertions of its many critics that the UN is inefficient, ineffective, ponderous and often hypocritical. New Zealand's engagement with the UN is not a ringing endorsement of that body's performance; rather, it is the result of a completely pragmatic decision that multilateralism is in New Zealand's interest.

The alternative to multilateralism is a world in which the big guys always win and the small guys always lose. And that would be very bad news for a small country like ours. It is in New Zealand's interest to support good bodies of international rules and good institutions to promote them. Nowhere is this more true than in relation to the UN Security Council — the most important UN body, charged with maintaining international peace and security. And if that body was not performing to an acceptable standard, surely our goal should be to bring about some necessary improvements? We should seek to use a short two-year term on the Council to improve

the manner in which it discharged its responsibilities, and to highlight the structural and cultural changes that might improve its operations for the future.

It was on this basis that I recommended to the prime minister that the government should endorse the campaign for UNSC membership and make it a foreign policy priority. It was on this basis that we campaigned to become one of two Western Europe and Others Group members of the Council for the 2015–16 term.

We sought no additional funding for our Security Council campaign — it was funded entirely from within a Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) baseline, which had already been reduced by 4 per cent in response to the global financial crisis. But we mounted an energetic campaign built around ministerial and special-envoy visits, vigorous use of our diplomatic footprint and consistent messaging. There is no substitute to calling directly on counterparts and asking for their vote.

Our messages were simple. If elected we would be good listeners and fair-minded decision-makers. We would try to do what was right rather than what was popular. We would work to provide a voice at the Council for the smaller states that are so often ignored, and would take a particular interest, given our role in the Pacific, in issues affecting small island developing states (SIDS). And we would work to reform the Council and improve its culture.

Receiving the votes of three-quarters of the UN membership on the first ballot was a very good outcome. Even better, it was my clear impression that our support was even stronger towards the end of our term — a consequence of New Zealand making good on its campaign commitments.

We were seen as a strong champion of the interests of SIDS — a group of over 40 UN members that often struggle to be heard. We tried to ensure that the Council faced up to difficult issues when many of the permanent Council members found this inconvenient. We challenged the privileges of the permanent members, including the exercise of the veto. And when we had to choose between our integrity and our friends, we chose the former.

Our term on the Security Council was good for New Zealand's reputation, but it also brought a significant additional benefit: it made us, at least for a while, much more international in our focus. For a nation that is so dependent on international trade, New Zealand is a very insular country in which foreign policy issues attract limited public debate and lamentably poor media coverage. We underestimate both the importance of international affairs to our own fortunes and the strength of New Zealand's voice when we choose to employ it. Campaigning for, and then serving on, the Security Council provided a useful reminder of both these important messages.



The Security Council chamber. *UN, 764010*

2. The campaign: An impossible journey?

Simon Draper

Election to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is determined by the UN Charter. Article 18 states:

- Each member of the General Assembly shall have one vote.
- Decisions of the General Assembly on important questions shall be made by a two-thirds majority of the members present and voting. These questions shall include: recommendations with respect to the maintenance of international peace and security, *the election of the non-permanent members of the Security Council* . . .

Thus, election to the UNSC is — like all elections — ultimately a numbers game. As at October 2014, the number of votes needed to be elected to the UNSC was 129 votes (two-thirds of the 193 UN member states). Not 128 nor 130, but 129.

BACKGROUND¹

New Zealand's decision to stand for the UNSC, following a recommendation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT), was announced by then Prime Minister Rt Hon Helen Clark at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York in September 2004. The early decision to stand — even by UN standards — was to discourage

competition and build a secure position for a vote in October 2014.

In March 2008, following a change in their government, Australia declared its intention to run for the UNSC in 2012–14. Internally, this was seen as a complication for New Zealand, as it would mean the informal CANZ (Canada, Australia, New Zealand) grouping would be running UNSC candidatures back-to-back from 2010 to 2016, and thus create a perception that New Zealand was ‘greedy’. Short of withdrawing and waiting another decade or two for a possible attempt, there was little New Zealand could do. It did mean, however, that this campaign would not be able to rely on the CANZ ‘brand’ as New Zealand had often deployed in the past, but would be run totally on its own record.

After some debate about the merits and value of proceeding in 2009, the New Zealand National Government, who had withdrawn New Zealand’s Human Rights Council bid in April 2008 to allow the United States bid to go forward, reconfirmed New Zealand’s commitment at the General Assembly that year through Prime Minister Rt Hon John Key. The appointment of the then Hon Jim McLay in 2009 to the position of permanent representative in New York was one of the first visible signals of the government’s intent.

At this point, MFAT, in implementing the process of formal approaches in New York and in capitals, began to establish a UNSC-dedicated database, and adopt a more organised approach to vote-swapping.² MFAT’s United Nations, Human Rights and Commonwealth Division (UNHC) director Dr James Kember focused on a vulnerability for New Zealand, which was the lack of reach into Africa (54 votes), and eventually he was appointed as New Zealand’s ambassador to the African Union in Addis Ababa.

Spain’s entry in 2005, then Turkey’s entry into the race in 2011, coupled with UNSC campaign losses for Canada and Finland, were potential setbacks to New Zealand’s chances, a project that was always a ‘reach’ for a small foreign ministry like New Zealand’s. Spain had large natural constituencies with the European Union (EU) and the Hispanic-speaking world. As a member of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and as both an OECD (Organisation

for Economic Development and Co-operation) and G77 (a UN coalition of 135 developing countries) member, Turkey had a natural pool of votes, too. Things did not look good for New Zealand; indeed, the prevailing narrative was that New Zealand would lose against such formidable, well-resourced, well-connected and active competitors.

Soon after arriving in the role of Divisional Manager UNHC in January 2012, it was clear to me that two immediate tasks needed to be completed. The first was agreeing on a simple, clear but authentic message as to why countries should vote for New Zealand. What was our value proposition? And how would we sell it? This was achieved through some relatively quick but intensive brainstorming, with input from our Communications Division. When finalised in March 2012, this became *the* reference document for what we would say, how we would act, how we would *not* act, how we would get our message to resonate with different audiences, and finally how we would deliver the message. Referred to simply as the ‘map’, this single A3 page was, I believe, the single most important document in driving the campaign consistently and coherently over 2012–14 until the vote.

At its core was a simple message that New Zealand is ‘fair, practical and constructive’. All of New Zealand’s messaging and actions from March 2012 to October 2014, from New York to Ouagadougou, hung on the central proposition that ‘New Zealand’s record as a fair-minded and practical nation at home means we are committed to working with all member states to find constructive solutions’. While this does not exactly slip off the tongue, it provided enough substance for us to have a consistent message, which could still be adapted for any particular member state(s) with whom we were engaged.

Secondly, the restructure of MFAT through 2012–13, and the decision to run a candidature for the Director-General position of the World Trade Organization (WTO), meant that it was necessary to prosecute an intensive internal campaign *within* MFAT. In 2012, there was a general ambivalence about the campaign. While the New York embassy post (NYK) was focused on the campaign, it was clear from the failures of Canada and Finland that

this needed to be a whole-of-Ministry — indeed whole-of-government — effort, if we were to succeed.

The MFAT leaders' meeting in April 2013 — at which Minister McCully articulated the UNSC campaign as New Zealand's number one foreign policy priority — led to increased buy-in from regional divisions and embassy posts, including outreach by a cadre of special envoys of the prime minister to nearly every country of the world. Despite initial fears that this year of 'internal' focus was lost time for campaigning, it did not damage New Zealand's prospects. Many member states were clear they would not focus on the 2014 WEOG (Western European and Others Group) election until the 2012 WEOG election had been held. This meant, however, that as soon as the 2012 election was completed New Zealand could quickly move with an internal cohesion that may otherwise have been absent.

By 2014 the campaign was seen as a rallying point for MFAT organisational unity, and an opportunity to rediscover and regenerate New Zealand's vision of itself in the world. It can be argued that by the time of the vote New Zealand had a better sense and connectivity to the global interests and issues of all other 192 UN member states. Key to the campaign was a development of 'one team', especially between NYK and UNHC, which traditionally can be a testing relationship. The idea was to use the time difference between the two units so that staff were seamlessly joined up helping and supporting colleagues to prepare material for use in NYK and Wellington, and the wider network. The key was to see the time difference as an advantage, not a disadvantage (as we did for example during the July/August period, during which the northern hemisphere is on summer break, but the southern hemisphere is not).

STRATEGY (WYSIWYG)

In a June 2012 speech to the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs (NZIIA), Minister McCully made clear the parameters under which the New Zealand campaign would operate:

Both the Prime Minister and I laid down two very clear conditions: we would not attempt to buy a seat on the Security Council, either by spending New Zealand taxpayers' dollars or by changing New Zealand policy positions. It is very important that these conditions should be understood. Because they defy what some commentators and analysts believe to be the accepted wisdom associated with modern Security Council campaigns. That view holds that contested Security Council seats will always fall to the highest bidder of aid dollars, or to the holder of the most flexible positions on the controversial foreign policy issues of the day. Let me be very clear: if the proponents of that view are correct then we will lose our bid for a Security Council seat for 2015–16. We will lose because we, as a small country, do not have the aid resources to be able to campaign effectively on that basis. And even if we did, I, for one, would decline to do so.³

This very useful enunciation of the government's attitude towards the campaign, which aligned with our internal value position, enabled us to consistently project an 'authentic' message. It was a case of WYSIWYG: what you see is what you get. It also informed our decision not to run a negative campaign, and to use the campaign as an opportunity to learn more about the 192 other UN member states. This was our 'no regrets policy' — that is, win or lose the UNSC vote, New Zealand's foreign policy knowledge and skills would be of a higher standard because of the campaign itself. With clear direction from ministers and clarity over our own messaging, key decisions made in terms of our strategy included the following.

Discipline around messaging

As wordsmiths, there was considerable internal angst that our message could be 'tighter, or richer, or more expansive, or did not resonate with region X or Post Y'. The UNHC/NYK teams were relentless in ensuring that key messages were adhered to. We were aware that our competitors would look for inconsistency or incoherence in our messaging, so we were ruthless in terms of consistency. Nevertheless, we needed to ensure that

when responding to the inevitable requests from member states for some sort of assistance, the ‘no’ was conveyed in such a way as not to damage the relationship.

Hearts and minds vote

Each country in the UN had two votes to cast. In order to secure our election, we calculated that existing ‘obligations’ (vote swaps, regional alliances, economic inducements, etc.) would tie up one vote. New Zealand’s objective was to get the other available votes. We wanted to position ourselves to obtain the ‘hearts and minds’ vote, the ‘do the right thing’ vote. This was to some degree considered naïve. Australian Ambassador Richard Butler’s 1996 pronouncement on Australia losing their UNSC campaign — that ‘New York was full of rotten lying bastards [RLB]’⁴ — had influenced opinion in New Zealand that there was little honour in New York. As it turned out, New Zealand’s euphemistically called ‘discount rate’ or ‘RLB factor’ — the difference between those who say they will vote for you and those who actually do — was in single percentage figures. The vast majority of countries kept their word.

People-to-people links

Connected to the ‘hearts and minds’ approach was an acceptance that although it was ultimately a policy decision whether or not to vote for New Zealand, the time to vote and put pen to paper (as that is still the process: you write down a country’s name) is very personal. There was a deliberate effort to get New Zealanders in front of decision-makers to present our case and to cultivate these contacts over the years, building up to the vote. Key elements of this included the personal diplomacy of Minister McCully, of Permanent Representative McLay and the wider NYK team, the deployment of prime minister special envoys, and the visit of some 56 New York permanent representatives to New Zealand in the last year of the campaign.

Identifying the vulnerabilities (and having a response)

We were aware of the potential criticism that a country of New Zealand's size would not be able to cope with the demands of being on the Security Council. Our approach to this vulnerability was to remind member states that the majority of UN member states were 'small'. If New Zealand could not get elected on this basis, what chance would they have?

Additionally, we were very disciplined in ensuring we focused our scarce human resources on events that could amplify our voice. Selected regional meetings were a key element of this. As a rule, when faced with a vulnerability, our approach was to see if it could be used to our advantage.

Leveraging a great reputation

A short paper was commissioned in early 2012 to gather together in one document what exactly New Zealand had done over the past 60 years in the multilateral space. This was a major focus of our messaging in New York, enabling us to point to New Zealand's long contribution, attractively, and repeatedly, and to people and friendships in the UN. We drew on our UNSC tenure in 1993–94, and our long-term active work on small island developing states (SIDS), disabilities, disarmament, oceans and peace support. The coherency of this strategy reinforced the key messages about New Zealand — and was a useful contrast to our competitors.

TACTICS

The key tactics the campaign employed included the following:

Ministerial lobbying and guidance

Minister McCully was foreign minister from 2009 to 2017. His tenure throughout the campaign enabled him to establish strong personal relationships forged through a gruelling travel schedule. His ability to have other New Zealand ministers engage at key moments was crucial. The inclusion of Opposition Foreign Affairs Spokesperson David Shearer in aspects of the campaign was also an important political signal, both

domestically and internationally. As an organiser of national electoral campaigns, McCully's political instincts about when to push, when to pause and when to retreat were more honed than those of officials. This particularly came to the fore in the last few months of the campaign when we moved from getting votes to keeping votes.

Permanent representative and mission outreach in New York

The 'bread and butter' of campaigns is getting the candidate out in front of voters. The appointment of a skilled former politician in Sir Jim McLay made the outreach possible. This was amplified by the very careful choosing of targeted engagement to lift New Zealand's profile and emphasise the core narrative. This included taking on a role in a small-arms conflict prevention seminar, and funding a project on the challenge of small states representation in New York. All New York staff attended several events per night to ensure New Zealand was seen 'everywhere'.

Special envoys

One minister cannot travel everywhere, so New Zealand boosted its reach through a network of special envoys. They were Rt Hon Sir Donald McKinnon, Rt Hon Jim Bolger, Ambassador Colin Keating (who was a crucial mentor and adviser within the UNSC taskforce), former Ambassador Sarah Dennis, MFAT Deputy Secretary Lucy Duncan and Permanent Representative to the UN in Geneva, Amanda Ellis. Supported by a policy officer, these envoys, who carried a letter of introduction from Prime Minister John Key, afforded high-level access and drew on their policy, culture, relationships and language skills. The simple fact that these New Zealanders would travel long distances to numerous capitals⁵ to listen, as opposed to lecture, was commented on favourably by member states.

UN permanent representatives visits to New Zealand

Four rounds of visits by some 56 New York permanent representatives to New Zealand was seen as having a huge impact on perceptions of

New Zealand. While New Zealand had a positive profile within the UN, knowledge about New Zealand as a country was minimal.⁶ That the visits reinforced the key messages about New Zealand — that we were authentic — was crucial. The visits changed the perception of our being ‘another wealthy European country’ to being a Pacific Rim multicultural nation with a strong indigenous story and an economy based on agriculture. As a number of African permanent representatives commented, New Zealand’s experience gave them ‘hope’.⁷

Champions

A number of countries approached New Zealand as advocates who wanted to see us elected. New Zealand also partnered with Spain in advocating for each other. These champions were able to amplify our message and be a third-party confirmer of New Zealand’s credentials. An important role of a designated champion was to give us ‘free and frank’ advice on how they saw our campaign tracking. Unable to poll members, we relied on this advice as a reality-check as we inevitably got caught up in the race for election.

UN policy initiatives and policy focus

As the campaign developed, a number of themes emerged concerning where member states thought New Zealand could make a valuable contribution. In the policy space there was a clear need for SIDS to get their voice heard — a message conveyed to us not just by our Pacific neighbours, but also by SIDS in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean. Additionally, New Zealand’s expertise with renewable energy (particularly geothermal), disaster risk recovery and agriculture were policy issues about which countries felt New Zealand had valuable learnings for the international community. The Pacific energy conference in Auckland in 2013, then the SIDS UN Conference held in Sāmoa in mid-2014, did not happen in isolation and were aligned with the overall campaign message.

SYSTEMS AND TOOLS

To deploy the tactics noted above, the ministry developed a number of specific systems and tools, including those outlined below.

UNSC taskforce

An important signal internally and externally was the establishment of a UNSC taskforce in late 2012 with UNHC. A seven-person team headed by a unit manager, reporting to the divisional manager, combined multilateral experience, regional expertise, official development assistance expertise, and expertise in communications, project management and logistical support. It provided a central point of co-ordination, including between New York and capitals. The securing of votes, however, remained the responsibility of posts and regional divisions. The taskforce's role was to provide the tools and information to enable them to do so. But given the enormity of the task it could not sit only in the UNHC and NYK — it was very deliberately a whole-of-ministry effort. While the vote may be delivered in New York, delivery of that vote would be possible only after an extensive lobbying campaign in capitals, at regional meetings and in New York.

An 'operations room'

In addition to providing a visual and physical representation of the campaign, the operations room allowed staff to transcend a highly transactional process to focus and collaborate on strategic objectives. It was replicated in New York.

Status board and tiered rating system

A lesson from others' campaign failures was the lack of rigour around assessing votes. New Zealand used a system based on undertakings in New York and the capital — that is, written and oral commitments, and political versus bureaucratic commitments. MFAT, New York and Wellington had, as is to be expected, some discrepancy in the various status boards. These were aligned in late 2013.

Vote database

New Zealand's campaign was described as a 'data-driven campaign'. Data security was a key feature of the database. It allowed posts to see their accreditations, and the vote status for countries in their specific region only, with complete oversight by only a very narrow group of senior leaders. It provided a single point of truth and was key to enabling New Zealand to be truly as agile and nimble as it claimed. As an example, the database revealed that to secure the vote of an important South American country, some 90 separate interactions around the globe were recorded.

Reporting templates

Timeliness in reporting and variation in content across the diplomatic network are always a challenge. Simple, concise and consistent templates were designed, and within 24 hours of any meeting a report was sent to Wellington and NYK. Feedback from others was that this enabled New Zealand to present itself as nimble and 'joined up' — and helped negate the sense that we were 'too small' to be effective on the Council.

Face-to-face co-ordination meetings

There was weekly, then daily, video-conferencing with New York, using a standard agenda, so that it became muscle memory, while weekly, then daily, interdivisional meetings broke down any inadvertent silos. It was a manifestation of the 'one team' concept.

A professional communications package

The campaign's visual identity and any associated collateral was provided by a communications expert. At the time an innovation for the ministry, it brought a freshness to the New Zealand image. The simple idea that all collateral had to be either 'useful or edible' was a new concept in the UN campaign sense.

Innovation

Over the campaign period, the ministry engaged in several successful innovative projects. These included turning the longstanding MFAT *UN Handbook* (the ‘unofficial bible’ of the UN) into an app, publishing an *African Union Handbook* in March 2014 (a Herculean task), providing a policy officer in New York to support African missions, and developing a mathematical model to test the status board.⁸

THE LAST SIX WEEKS

The 2014 vote was scheduled for 16 October, some six weeks into the UNGA. New Zealand undertook an all-out effort in New York (despite it being during the New Zealand election cycle and the unavailability of the New Zealand prime minister). The task shifted from gaining more votes to ensuring we did not lose votes. We know that voters like voting for ‘winners’, so to that end we had to establish the delicate line of projecting confidence, but not arrogance. We knew member states would be pressured to change their voting intention, and we needed to remind states of their commitments. Special envoys were rotated through New York, building on their previous visits; Jim McLay handwrote notes to all of his permanent representative colleagues; discipline was taken up a notch; and New Zealand posts were under instruction not to act in the UNSC space unless directed by UNHC, but staff were to be present at every UN event. It was about optics and momentum.

A key moment was the event that all candidates host before the election. In our case, with the actual vote on a Thursday, Turkey hosted an event on Monday night (at the Waldorf Astoria), New Zealand on Tuesday (at the UN building) and Spain on the Wednesday (at their residence, having had their new king in town for the General Assembly). The moment that the New Zealand team felt our campaign was truly on track was during our event. Numbers were double what we had anticipated, and, unlike our competitors, we had delegates from across all UN regions — something we felt Spain and Turkey had not quite managed.

OUTCOME

The New Zealand government's UNSC campaign efforts over the preceding 10 years culminated in the General Assembly's session on a drizzly Thursday morning at approximately 11.10 a.m. (2.10 a.m. in Wellington), when the President of the General Assembly announced the election results. New Zealand had been elected to the UNSC in a decisive first ballot with 145 votes (75 per cent of the UN membership) — against 121 for Spain and 109 for Turkey. Spain was subsequently elected on the third ballot. For a contested WEOG election this was an outstanding result.⁹

In addition to the relief and joy among the team in New York, 20-plus staff watched the vote live at the MFAT head office in Wellington. Later that day the NYK team video-conferenced back into Wellington head office twice, because the thirteenth floor of MFAT was not large enough to hold the staff from the policy and corporate divisions who wanted to share the moment. It was important for the whole organisation. As we in New York headed off to celebratory drinks that evening, a whole new project completed some three months earlier — to 'stand up' the team required to serve on the Council both in New York and across the network — was activated. Accommodation, security clearances, conditional employment contracts, staffing structures and travel had all been executed so that New Zealand was one of the very few countries to have its full UNSC team in place and functioning when the Security Council came into session a mere nine weeks later, on 1 January 2015.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

To represent my country as a New Zealand diplomat has been a great privilege for me. Like many involved in policy work, though, the often lack of a visible outcome on long-term policy issues can be frustrating. As is often the way with important issues, there is incremental progress over a number of years. Indeed, the ability to point to a discrete outcome is something that I have from time to time envied of my colleagues who have worked on free trade agreements.



The New Zealand delegation after being voted onto the Security Council. *MFAT*

New Zealand's election to the UNSC, when 75 per cent of the UN membership decided to cast their precious and valuable vote for New Zealand, is a moment that cannot be undermined. It is of great personal satisfaction. Ultimately, this election was not only a credit to the many people who worked directly on the campaign — from the prime minister through to locally engaged staff across the entire diplomatic network, and other government departments and champions — but also to New Zealanders. The pitch was that New Zealand would be 'fair, practical and constructive', and those who looked at our record, or visited us, or saw us in action in New York, Geneva and across the globe, saw that we were authentic. It was for this reason New Zealand was entrusted with a position at the pinnacle of the most important multilateral body in the world.