



Thursday, 20 September 2007

Into the bear pit after blind date with Destiny

Not exactly a marriage made in heaven, then. And maybe a hell of a quick divorce.

Gordon Copeland's less-than- rapturous reaction to his blind date with Destiny was about as bad an advertisement for new-found unity as you can get.

What he said was that he could "probably live with" Destiny NZ leader Richard Lewis as co-leader of the party. That a lot of mentoring would be needed. That he, Gordon, had five years' experience in Parliament. And yes of course he, Gordon, would be the other co-leader who was referred to, but not named, by Destiny Church leader Brian Tamaki.

The impression left was not just of disunity and poor coordination – what National leader John Key chose to describe as not exactly "seamless" – but of an MP who did not allow the occasion to overwhelm his self-importance.

This from the man who once gave credence to the possibility of perpetual motion, who failed to turn up for the vote on the child discipline bill over which he quit United Future, and who recently issued a press statement attacking the answer to a question he had not yet asked.

But wait, there's more.

By yesterday Mr Copeland had decided that no one had been so badly blindsided as him since TV3's John Campbell kicked open Corngate on Helen Clark. And he gave every impression that the "Mickey Mouse and shambolic" start did not bode well for the future, and that they might just call the whole thing off.

(He might have added that his own ducking and diving with the media, including some sophistry about what he knew, had already ensured a sceptical reaction before the party was even launched. Had that been a minister there would have been calls for him to quit in short order.)

Claims about the so-called National Advisory Council to the party, with its individuals representing the broad Christian spectrum, have similarly deflated.

These 12 apostles of the new party, who apparently dare not speak their names, have been disowned by several churches including the Salvation Army.

The press release from the Sallies' territorial commander, Commissioner Garth McKenzie, made it clear he had been badgered by Mr Copeland but had rejected the advance on the basis that the church needed to stay apolitical. So how did this parade of ego turn into such a case study in political ineptitude?

It seems at least possible that, far from requiring any "mentoring", the leaders of Destiny NZ were showing real political smarts, by ensuring that they did not deregister their party before establishing part- ownership of the new one.

Were they taking out insurance in case Mr Copeland – with his obvious reluctance to share power – chose to play hard ball?

Or is he a master tactician who has manoeuvred Destiny into dissolving and will now cut them loose?

Nah. Mr Copeland is on the surface gentlemanly and kind; for all the world the small town vicar or accountant.

But he is just not cut out for the bear pit. The sooner he realises that, the better for him and for the future of Christian politics.

Against a background of such pole-axing ineptitude it is difficult to treat the whole question of a "Christian" and "family friendly" party seriously.

But it does have serious ramifications. The most obvious would be its dilution of the centre-right vote if – as happened in 1996 – it drew significant support but failed to win a seat or reach the 5 per cent threshold. To top 5 per cent such a party would require appeal across the political and religious spectrum, embracing the liberal

as well as conservative instincts in the Christian congregation.

A PARTY based around Destiny and the conservatives represented by Mr Copeland and his former colleagues Larry Baldock, Paul Adams and Bernie Ogilvie is more likely to draw mainly from the centre-right well.

Far from assisting National into power, it is likely to do just the opposite.

At the moment National's best chance of winning is not just to open a big lead over Labour but also in getting within cooee of 50 per cent so its minor party allies, UnitedFuture and ACT, can help it across the line.

Peeling off some of that support – and maybe throwing it into the electoral rubbish bin – can only compromise Mr Key's chances of winning power.

The putative party's counter-argument is that it can also win potential Labour voters in Mangere and other South Auckland seats that were crucial to Helen Clark's victory in 2005. But that would all be for nothing if it wrecked National's chances of forming a government with the support or acquiescence of the Greens – who it is hard to believe would ever countenance a National- Tamaki government.

An even bigger concern for National would be the risk that such a potential alliance will turn off centrist and liberal voters in its increasingly broad church.

As UnitedFuture leader Peter Dunne noted, the last thing National wants is to swap the Exclusive Brethren of 2005 for Destiny in 2008.

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