

Dominion Post, published 15 November 2006

BIPARTISANSHIP OPENS DOORS IN WASHINGTON

By Stephen Jacobi

The launch of the NZ US Parliamentary Friendship Group in the Grand Hall of Parliament on 15 November marks a bipartisan moment, writes Stephen Jacobi

In the wake of last week's Congressional election "bi-partisanship" is back in vogue in the United States as a Republican President reaches out to a Democrat controlled Congress. Here in New Zealand, while elections under MMP may have led to several "coalitions of the unlikely", finding consensus in the rough and tumble of politics is never easy. Sport is usually a safe bet, and trade has for a long time – and with some notable dissent – been an area in which parties in government and opposition have found common cause.

Foreign policy is more difficult which makes today's launch of the New Zealand United States Parliamentary Friendship Group in the 48th Parliament all the more welcome. For nowhere are political passions more aroused than in respect of New Zealand's relationship with the world's remaining super power and largest consumer market. Yet that relationship is critically important to New Zealand's future, especially in the area of trade and investment, regardless of whether we can negotiate a free trade agreement in the short term.

One of the noticeable developments in foreign policy over the last year has been the ongoing strengthening of the relationship with Washington. While Helen Clark and Winston Peters deserve credit for this, bipartisanship has played a role too. At the inaugural US NZ Partnership Forum in Washington DC organised by the NZ US Council last April, Phil Goff and David Cunliffe worked alongside Murray McCully and Tim Groser to ensure the Forum's success and this was noticed by our American hosts. Don Brash's address to the Forum also supported this effort. The principle was reflected by the Co-Chairs on both sides – Jim Bolger and Mike Moore for New Zealand and Clayton Yeutter (Republican) and Senator George Mitchell (Democrat) for the United States.

What this bipartisan approach demonstrates is not that there is complete agreement about the detail of policy but rather that the principle of friendship and co-operation between the two countries is worth striving for. The same is as true for the members of the Parliamentary Friendship Group as it is for their counterparts in the Friends of New Zealand Congressional Caucus in Washington, established for several years now.

Two countries at opposite ends of the Pacific, of different size and with different perspectives, are simply not going to see the world in similar terms. But what the process of relationship building over the last year has shown us is that this need

not be a barrier to co-operation.

We have different views about nuclear weapons but we have a common interest in addressing the crisis brought about by North Korea's nuclear test. We took different positions on Iraq, but we are working together in Afghanistan. We have different views about the Kyoto Protocol, but we pursue joint projects in the area of climate change. We have different trade interests, but we are completely aligned on the need to liberalise trade through the WTO.

There are increasing signs that there is new appreciation in Washington for New Zealand's principled and consistent contribution to global peace and security, in both political and economic terms. This does not mean that either side is reconciled once and forever to policies which continue to present problems. New Zealand is no less determined to remain nuclear free and the United States no less concerned to uphold the freedom of port access for nuclear powered vessels. But both countries at high level are now engaged on a process of relationship building. Hopefully this will lead us to the point where the relationship will be driven by a shared sense of what both countries can achieve by working together, especially in the Asia Pacific region.

There's an old Simon and Garfunkel song – "still crazy after all these years". It would be crazy indeed if the two countries were to continue to allow the memory of past differences to overshadow the potential of present co-operation. High level political engagement – such as Helen Clark's forthcoming meeting with President Bush at APEC - the Partnership Forum and now the Parliamentary Friendship Group are all ways in which New Zealand and the United States can commit to doing more together to make progress on those issues we care most deeply about.

Stephen Jacobi is Executive Director of the NZ US Council.

¹ *Stephen Jacobi is Executive Director of the NZ US Council.*