

NZ 54TH PARLIAMENT

MP CAREER REPORT ANALYSIS

2024

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PREPARED BY
BLACKLAND PUBLIC RELATIONS

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Introduction

BlacklandPR has been tracking the careers of MPs in Parliament for over a decade. We undertake the study at the start of each Parliament so we can better understand the experience and interests that will influence their political work and decision-making.

We do this because research^[1] indicates that the qualifications of lawmakers influence not just their decisions, but even the matters they choose to look at. As public and government relations advisors, this information helps us make better predictions and advice.

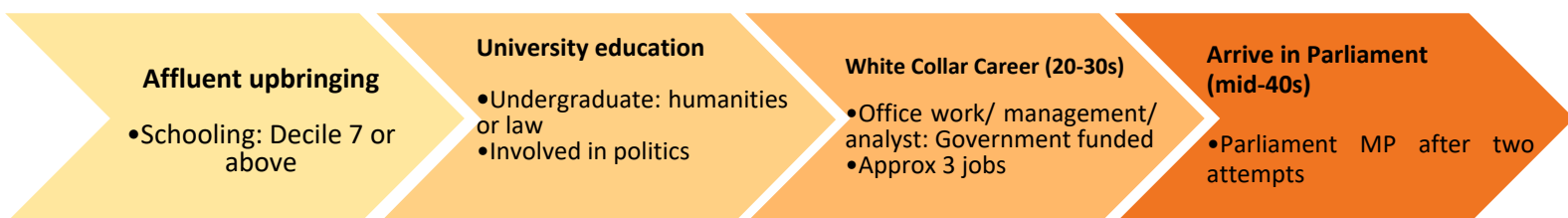
We publicise the report as a public service. Representative democracy requires strong connections between voters and their representatives. Self-reflective politicians will make better practitioners. This information should help MPs appreciate the differences between themselves and their voters and strive to close the gap so they can produce wise and voter-reflective decisions.

Summary

The most notable change in this Parliament is the fall in the number of MPs with working backgrounds in the education sector, and the increase in the number of MPs with agricultural backgrounds. This reflects the fall in the number of Labour MPs, and the rise in the number of MPs from National and ACT.

A distinctive factor about this Parliament is that half of the MPs studied arts, humanities or law at university, and before entering Parliament 35% of them worked mainly in jobs funded by the Government. This continues the growing trend over all our studies whereby the main path of MPs into Parliament is as white-collar professionals in government-funded work.

Now we can say that the most likely path MPs take into Parliament is to grow up in and go to school in affluent neighbourhoods (decile 7 or above), go to University and study humanities or law, where they get involved in political activity, work in about three white collar jobs – probably funded by the Government, while standing twice for an electorate or list seat, before finally entering Parliament in their early to mid-forties.



Upbringing

We did not seek data on family background and circumstances but did find information that helps draw some broad conclusions. For example, biographies provide indicators of upbringing such as parent's employment, and type and decile of schools indicates household income.

From that information we can say that at least two thirds of MPs come from families with above average incomes. Their parents are usually well-educated white-collar workers or in specific professions.

It is notable that one third of the MPs for whom we could source primary and secondary school data attended private or integrated schools. Parents usually pay high annual fees to these schools.

Education

High School

We were only able to find schooling details on 70 of the 123 MPs.

The High School with the most MPs was Auckland Grammar, with seven ex-pupils in the current Parliament. There were no other schools with over three MPs.

The average decile rating^[2] of high schools attended by MPs was 7 or over. 10 MPs attended schools with decile rating 3 or under.

The number of MPs who went to private or integrated schools was 24, or 35% of MPs. In contrast, the percentage of New Zealand children who attend private or integrated schools is 18%.

Tertiary Education

We identified 171 separate tertiary qualifications among Parliament's 123 MPs – slightly down on the 174 under the 53rd Parliament.

85% of New Zealand MPs have a tertiary qualification – slightly down on 90% in the last term. Half of the qualifications are in humanities, arts, or law – the same as the previous Parliament.

61 MPs are qualified in law or the arts, while only 13 MPs have qualifications in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) subjects.

68% hold at least one university degree - a similar level of university education to Australia (76%^[3]) but under the UK (85%^[4]), and under the US (95%^[5]).

33% (41/123) of New Zealand MPs have postgraduate qualifications; 8 PhDs (same as previous Parliament) and 33 other masters and diplomas (first time counted). This is similar to Australia (30%) but triple that of the US and UK (3.4%^[6] and 3.2%^[7] respectively).

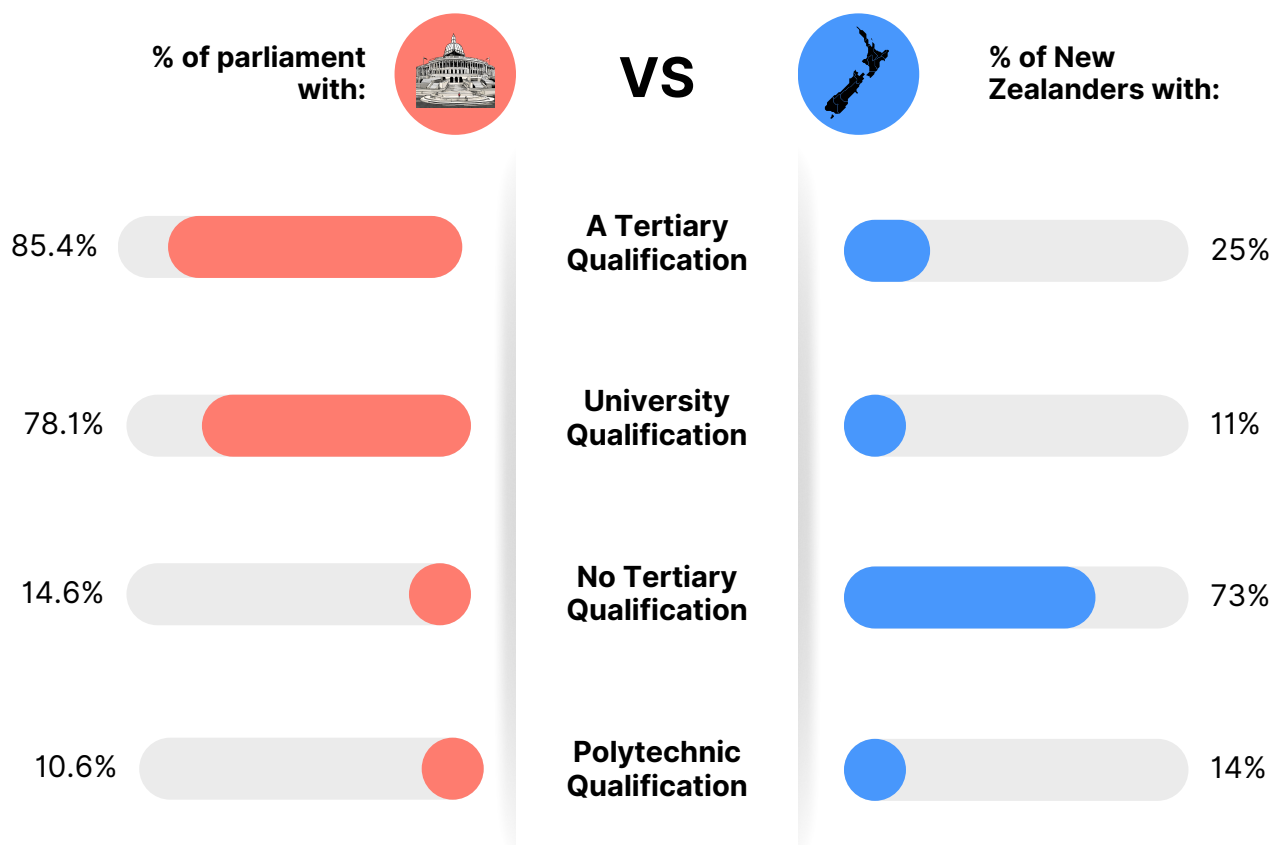
The most popular tertiary institution was the University of Auckland, with 24% of MPs studying there. The parties with the most qualifications per MP are Greens (a ratio of 1.60 tertiary qualifications per MP) and Labour (1.59 tertiary qualifications per MP).

About 18 MPs have no post-secondary qualification (or none can be identified). The party with the lowest number of tertiary qualifications is Te Pāti Māori, with a ratio of 0.5 per MP. ACT also has fewer than one tertiary qualification per MP.

Only 11% of New Zealanders have a degree, compared to 68% of MPs.

Only 25% of New Zealanders have a tertiary qualification, compared to 85.4% of MPs.

COMPARISON CHART



Commentary

Tertiary qualifications are desirable because they can provide familiarity with matters MPs and Ministers encounter in portfolios.

Over-representation of arts qualifications (half of tertiary qualified MPs) makes it harder to find MPs with relevant knowledge in any of the wide range of topics considered by Parliament.

Matching qualifications to portfolio is not entirely necessary. Being able to think well is arguably the most valuable asset for any MP. Academic experience and success develop valuable transferable skills in teamwork, leadership, and analysis.

In addition, qualifications do not necessarily mean MPs are competent. Highly specialist or very high-level qualifications may not be applicable to the topics they consider.

Moreover, qualifications are not the defining factor of success as a politician. Life experience, personal attributes like intelligence and judgement affect suitability.

There may be a problem though in most MPs having a much higher level of qualification than the public, especially ones heavily favouring humanities and the arts.

In short, the very similar types of people, from similar backgrounds, will bias the decisions and output from Parliament.

They are similar sorts of people; from a similar socio-economic group, sharing school and university experiences, and preferring academic and cerebral interests. This increases the potential that they would not share or appreciate the concerns of many voters.

Studies have shown that the qualifications of MPs affect what they choose to address legislatively. This would result in a bias to the issues and legislation being generated by Parliament. Even more worryingly, this similarity between the class of MPs suggests that, aside from ideology, their frame of reference and concern for the content of legislation will differ from many voters.

We conclude that the dominant tertiary and humanities education path of MPs is likely to lead to very a particular focus for policy that excludes many parts of the nation's business and society. Where and when they do deal with issues less familiar to them, it will lead to decision-making different to what would be made by voters.

Careers

The research identified 248 careers across New Zealand's 123 MPs, with most MPs having two distinct professions before being elected to Parliament. 88% of the careers were in social, community and service-related employment categories – a slight fall on the previous parliament.

The six most popular careers for MPs are (in descending order);

- elected representatives
- managers
- business owners
- analysts
- lawyers
- farmers.

Elected Representatives

These are people who have mayoral, councillor or over 2 terms' MP experience.

There are 65 MPs in Parliament whose job experience has included being an elected representative. Almost all of them are in the National (27) or Labour (25) parties.

47 MPs have 2 or more terms of Parliament experience (39% of all MPs). The bulk are equally shared between Labour (20) and National (20).

More MPs than any previous Parliament in the series have had experience in local politics. Examples include the Green's Lam Pham (ECAN for 2 terms), Tamatha Paul (WCC Councillor) and Celia Wade-Brown (WCC Mayor). Cameron Brewer (Nat) served on the Auckland Council; Ryan Hamilton (Nat) was a Hamilton City Councillor; and Andy Foster (NZF) was a Wellington City Councillor and Mayor of Wellington.

Managers

There are 45 MPs in Parliament whose job experience has included management roles. National has 16, Labour 12 and the Greens 8.

The type and seniority of these roles varies greatly. For example, Chris Luxon (Nat) was a CEO of Air New Zealand. His management peers within National include Penny Simmonds, CEO of Southern Institute of Technology, and Scott Simpson, CEO of Make-a-Wish foundation, and general manager at a safety equipment company.

Management peers in other Parties include Property Manager Karen Chhour (ACT), and Business Manager at Plant and Food Megan Woods (Lab).

Analysts

Analysts were the fourth strongest occupational category, and most strongly represented inside Labour and the Greens. Analysts are over-represented inside Greens (5 MPs) and Labour (7). National has 7, and ACT 2.

Examples include: Labour's Deborah Russell was an analyst with IRD, and Jenny Salesa an analyst in various public health organisations. ACT's David Seymour was a policy analyst with think tanks in Canada.

Lawyers

There are 16 MPs with work experience as lawyers, and almost all are in National (6) and Labour (9). There are even more (24) with law qualifications. This is the qualification least likely among MPs to have been turned into employment.

MPs with law experience include Judith Collins (Nat) who worked in the field for 21 years; Joseph Mooney (Nat) who set up his own legal practice; and Rachel Brooking (Lab), an environmental lawyer.

Teaching vs Farming

The only career missing from the Top Six list compared to the last Parliament is teaching, due to the exit of many Labour MPs in the 2023 election. Farming has replaced the teaching as the sixth most common career.

There are 12 MPs with farm related occupations (and 18 with farming backgrounds) compared to 7 in the 2020 Parliament. There are 6 MPs with education backgrounds in this Parliament compared to 20 in the previous.

Media- special mention

The fastest climbing career in Parliament is media and communications. The number of MPs with backgrounds as journalists, PR or general media has tripled since 2011.

Election Year	MPs with media and communication experience
2011	6
2014	10
2017	14
2020	17
2023	19

Variation from the public

Parliament is dominated by people with careers in “brain work”. It has proportionately more lawyers, analysts and business owners than are found in ordinary life. While it currently has MPs who were previously butchers and builders, much of the variety in work experience in the previous Parliament has disappeared[8].

The single biggest difference between Parliament and the public is over-representation of lawyers. 13% of MPs have legal work experience, compared to 0.5% of the public.

The construction sector is the least represented in Parliament. Only 2.4% of MPs have building-related work experience, compared to over 10% of the NZ public.

Over- and under- representation in Parliament:

Parliament	Work/sector experience	Public
13.1	Law	0.53
11.4	Primary sector	6.1
11.4	Education	7.5
8.9	Healthcare	10.6
8.9	Creative	6.5
2.4	Construction	10.3

A change from the last Parliament is that most of the jobs held by MPs were related to their training. There was a lower incidence of significant employment outside their qualifications. The careers of this crop of MPs therefore did not follow the growing flexibility and variation found in general employment.

Business Ownership

A total of 42 MPs own or owned businesses: 17 National, 11 Labour, 8 ACT, 3 NZ First, 2 Greens, 1 Te Pati Māori. We have included self-employment in this category.

ACT has the highest representation of current or prior business owners in their caucus – 72%. This is almost double the next highest party – NZ First. 37% of its MPs have experience owning a business. 34% of National MPs have business ownership experience, 32% of Labour MP, 16% of Te Pāti Māori and 13% of the Green MPs.

The types of businesses vary a little between parties. For example, Jo Luxton (Lab) owns a childhood education centre, and Damien O’Connor (Lab) an adventure tourism business.

ACT’s business owners were self-employed consultants in engineering, health and safety and building. The Green’s Chloe Swarbrick owned a fashion design business, and others were self-employed consultants.

National and NZ First’s small business experience is the most varied – across business ownership or self-employment in services such as health, or ownership of farms or business serving the agriculture sector. For example, National’s Miles Anderson owned a livestock scanning service, and NZ First’s Mark Patterson owns a lamb and beef farm.

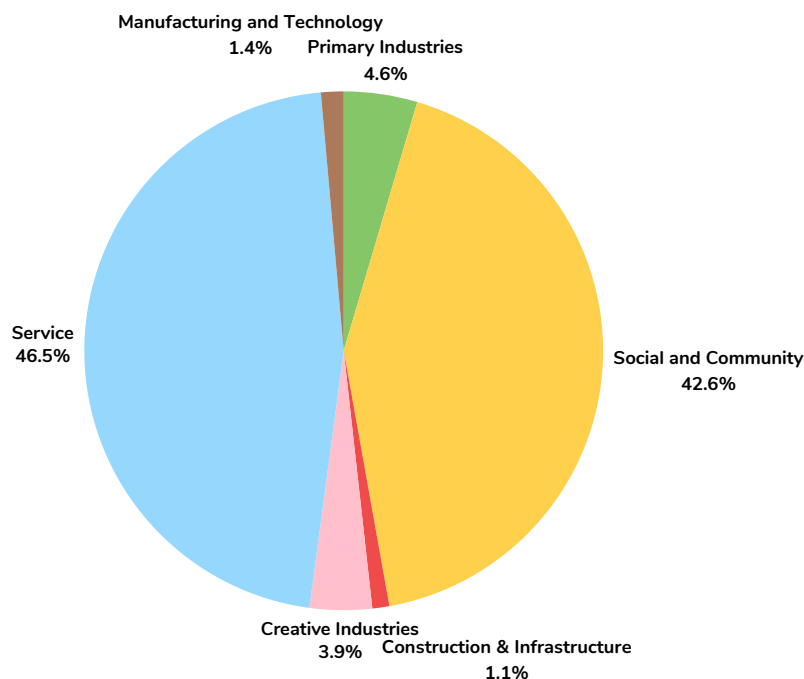
% of MPs by sector experience

Parties not significantly differentiated by career

There is less variation between the working backgrounds of Parties than in the past. The majority of employment no matter what party the MP belongs to, is some form of manager, analyst, lawyer or representative.

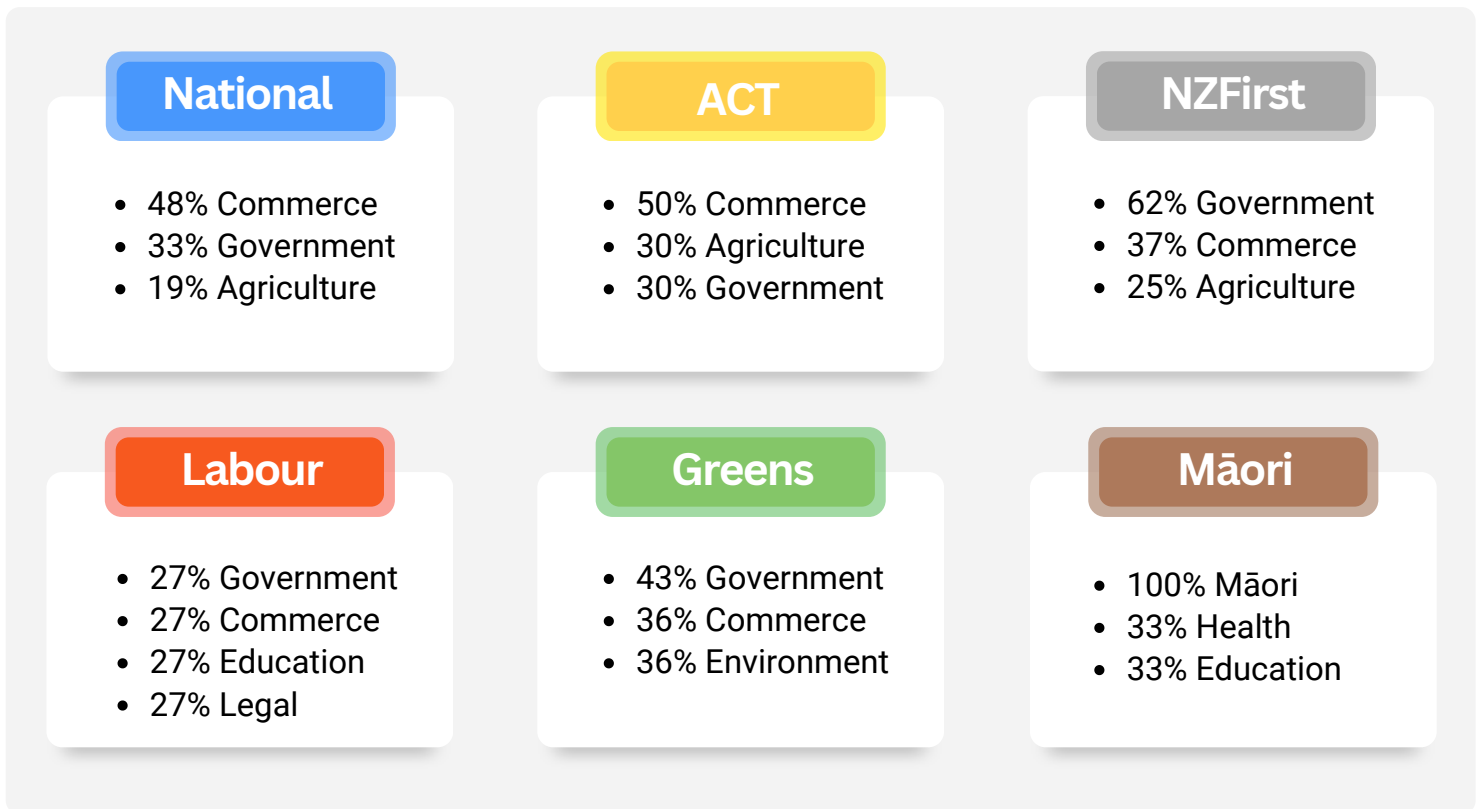
There is an intriguing commonality between National and Labour, whose MPs almost entirely dominate the categories previous work as an elected representative or lawyer.

The only differences are in ranking of the employment categories that dominate Parliament.



National's biggest employment background is in commerce and business management. ACT's is in agriculture and business consultants. NZ First's is in government and commerce. The biggest career of Labour, Greens and Te Pāti Māori has been in the service sector (managers).

The Greens and Labour almost entirely dominated the category of analysts.



The top career sectors for National MPs are in commerce, government and agriculture. Top careers for NZ First are in government, commerce and agriculture. Top careers in ACT are commerce, agriculture and government.

The top career sectors for Labour are in government, commerce, education and legal. The top careers for the Greens are in government, commerce and environment. The top careers for Te Pāti Māori are Māori, health and education.

ACT has a high proportion of small business owners, including Nicole McKee who ran a firearms safety consultancy, and Laura Trask who operated an evacuation consultancy.

Not surprisingly, many members of the Green Party caucus have backgrounds in environmental work: Steve Abel was a Greenpeace campaign advisor, Darleen Tana an environmental scientist for Manawatu-Wanganui Regional Council, Lan Pham was an environment Canterbury regional councillor, Celia Wade-Brown was the director of predator free Wellington, Kahurangi Carter was an advisor for the Ministry for the Environment and was national manager for a Māori zero waste company.

The Green's environmental experience is matched by social and community work. Co-leader Marama Davidson previously worked as a Race Relations Advisor for the Human Rights Commission and Ricardo Menéndez March was a community worker.

The Labour Party has the largest proportion of MPs with public sector experience, with MPs such as Ginny Anderson and Barbara Edmonds who worked for other elected officials. The caucus also has many lawyers and union officials in its ranks.

The National Party caucus has many former private sector managers such as former Air New Zealand CEO Christopher Luxon, and Dan Bidois, who was a strategy manager at Foodstuffs. Other prominent career backgrounds include financial services and the primary industries.

Te Pāti Māori's MPs are the least qualified and least predictable of careers. Co-leader Rawiri Waititi has been a lecturer and worked in the health and social sectors through the Waipareira Trust, while co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer has experience in Māori broadcasting, management and as the former Deputy Mayor of South Taranaki District Council.

Commentary on work experience

The unifying thread between careers among MPs is that they were in professional, reasonably paid, "knowledge work".

The term "white collar" is even less well suited to the work experience of most MPs than it is to the current era of the casual workplace and work-from-home workforce.

Most MPs, by dint of their effort, qualifications and/or networks, have had comfortable working lives before Parliament.

The work can require disciplines of thinking logically, broadly and sometimes deeply. It also requires resolving competing demands, working collaboratively inside alliances and hierarchies, and achieving consensus. But it is also largely comfortable, unpressured, and removed from implications of decisions by groups and hierarchy.

Despite this similarity across all MPs, ideology does shape the job description or employer. The jobs are the same, but the objectives are different. For example, while National's managers and consultants are more likely to be serving private business, Labour's managers and analysts are more likely to be serving organisations paid for by the State.

Conclusions

Psychological research shows that not only does education, careers and peers reflect our interests, these things also in turn heavily shape the way we view ourselves and the world.

Parliament is largely staffed by people with similar backgrounds, experiences, and cultural norms -which the research suggests would create a similar view of the world. Despite an apparent polarisation of views, and despite MPs looking different, they have more in common in their backgrounds with each other than with voters.

There are exceptions to the general picture, and wealth does not equal a comfortable or sheltered path through life. MPs have had ordinary and extraordinary jobs, everyday and extraordinary stresses, and have done well for themselves and others from strenuous effort and care.

Neither do economic comfort and cerebral powers dictate that MPs cannot or do not put themselves in the shoes of others or make decisions in the wider interest.

Politicians are, like all of us, framed by their genes, their upbringing, environment, and the people they know. There are very strong commonalities amongst politicians – more than would be found if MPs were chosen randomly from the public. This is likely to result in a commonality in approach to the job, and even commonality of points of agreement and dispute – and reasons for these.

Given the scale of the difference in education and careers to most other New Zealanders, it is likely that Parliament's perspective and worldview is also very different.

What Parliament looks at, and what it decides, differs from the public's choices.

If MPs are to accurately represent voters, they require particular care and attention to step outside this common frame.

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BlacklandPR is contemporary in every sense of the word.

Founded in 2012, we focus our extensive knowledge and experience in public communication into the modern art of persuasive conversation with real people.

The smarts and thinking of a modern corporate consultancy, with insight into what makes ordinary New Zealanders tick. We help organisations persuade audiences in every part of New Zealand.

Contact Us :



Phone Number
+64 04 471 1268



Email Address
info@blacklandpr.com



Office Address
City Chambers, Level 11/142 Featherston Street, Wellington Central, Wellington 6011