

Rebecca Cox interviews
Max Bradford M.P. (7/10/00)

Rebecca: What is it like being in the Opposition and being a shadow Minister?

Max: It's quite different to the last ten years I've been in Parliament. The first point is that you're no longer in control, reacting to what the Government of the day is doing you aren't in a position to initiate anything. That's nowhere near as satisfactory as knowing what you're doing, finding the things that are wrong in what the Government is doing, and that's extremely negative.

Having said that, one of the major roles I have as a shadow Minister is that of devising some of our policies for the next election. We're in a learning phase ourselves, reconnecting with our support base, finding out what people think, looking around at what's happening in the world in particular policy areas, and then beginning the process of putting policies together for the next election. When we win the election, we will be in the position to start implementing our own program to make things better for the country.

Rebecca: What does your job involve?

Max: First and foremost it involves continuing to look after the people who voted for me in the Rotorua Electorate. A lot of people think that because there's a new MP, that they're there to represent everyone; which is true - as a constituency MP, you are. But with the MMP voting system we have now, most electorates have got MPs of different party persuasions. Twelve thousand people voted for Steve Chadwick, 10,000 voted for me, and the rest were sprinkled over the other parties, so there is a lot of support in the electorate - for me personally as well as for National. I'm there to represent their interests as well.

The second is, in Opposition, is to be the voice of conscience with respect to the Government's policies. Being a list MP means I also have wider ranging responsibilities across NZ. The things that we're thinking of, the sort of interests that National Party voters have; it's our duty to argue against what the Government's policies are and point out the deficiencies. It is like the negative thing I was saying earlier.

Thirdly is to devise policies for the next election and lastly but by no means least, to prepare ourselves for the next election. Being in Opposition is about being the Government in waiting, the alternative Government. Ultimately when the people get sick of the Government of the day they look for the alternative - which is the Opposition. It's our responsibility to be ready to take over the reins of Government, when we win the next election.

Rebecca: If you get into Parliament in the next election, what changes will you make to the current laws that Labour has introduced?

Max: Well, there will be a lot of changes, but for the most part as Governments get elected, the vast bulk of what has been done isn't changed. This particular Government is making very big changes in the economic area, the social area and defence. A lot of this we fundamentally disagree with, so that we will be making changes, for example, in the defence policy of this Government. Theirs is to run down our defence capability and turn it into a United Nations policeman-type role, rather than one where, if war threatened us, we couldn't play a role with other countries to keep the peace and security in our region and defend ourselves. That's a big area for us.

In economic policy, they are making changes in the tax regime and the way they spend money. Of course, the money they spend is paid for by taxpayers. A lot of subtle things which change the incentives of people to work and save - centre-left governments tend to believe that 'Government knows best', rather than you and I deciding how we earn that money and spend that money, they take over the responsibility in Government policy, social welfare policies and the like. In the social policy area, there are some very big differences between us and the Government on how to manage the relationship between Maori and the rest of us. They have this 'Closing the Gaps' policy which is really about ceding a lot of sovereignty and control to Maori - some of which we agree with, and a lot which we don't - so there's going to be some very big differences in the policies we put forward.

The Government has put a lot more power into the hands of unions, which we think is wrong. People ought to be able to choose who represents them in their workplace, rather than have to become a member of a union. So there are things like that we have already declared where we will make changes. As their policies become clearer in the minds of the people and the laws they pass, we'll be able to distinguish what further changes we will make. But compared to most other governments in the past, I think there will be a lot more difference between the Opposition parties and the Government.

Education policy is a big area; we believe the education policies the Government is introducing amount to really 'dumbing down', rather than rewarding young people that are bright, success-oriented, and really want to do as well as they can. A lot of things the Government is doing are really trying to bring everybody down to the same level, rather than rewarding or encouraging excellence and capability. These are policies we will want to change.

Rebecca: Have you any ideas or plans to help small businesses?

Max: In fact, we put in place a lot of initiatives - I was responsible for some of them - like the BizInfo scheme. That was a completely different way of trying to reach out to small businesses, and giving things that they told us (through surveys) they needed. We used the Internet and modern outreach tools. To their credit, the Government is not going to get rid of that policy, even though they criticised it very severely when we put it in place.

We announced, just before the last election, a new policy called 'Bright Future', which was a collection of policy initiatives in the education, science, business area. That really pulls together the basis of our small business policy; it's not about throwing taxpayers' dollars at businesses, but it is about helping those, say with technology grants in areas we thought are important. Or encouraging young people to get degrees and skills that we need as a country, but which our education system hasn't produced anywhere near enough, for example science graduates. We announced three or four things that would have helped both individuals and small businesses, to get the skills they needed to grow.

Rebecca: What do you think of the money that was given to the NZ Army instead of the Air Force?

Max: The money that this Government has given to the NZ Army was to buy the equipment we were going to purchase anyway, so they're not doing anything new, in the sense of what we had committed to do. What the Government has done is show they don't like having a defence force that has a sharp end to it - the ability to deal with the people who shoot bullets or rockets at you. And this goes back to what I said before, that the Government wants to turn our defence force into a UN policeman-type role based around the army. We fundamentally disagree with that, and think there needs to be balanced re-equipment of the Navy, the Army, and the Air Force. This means buying new planes for example, for our Air Force - replacing some old aircraft with relatively new ones.

Rebecca: If you had a choice of portfolios, which would it be?

Max: That's a very good question - I've been talking about that with Jenny Shipley over the last few days. I've been lucky that I've been Minister over a pretty fair range of things. I guess my first love would be Minister of Finance, but that's not to be. I think I'd like to concentrate on an external area - defence and foreign affairs - and thirdly in the area that the Bright Future package was, tertiary education and business. But at the end of the day that's up to the Prime Minister; she will determine the allocation as she thinks best.

Rebecca: Has it been difficult to maintain your public profile since you have been in Opposition?

Max: It's much, much more difficult, although I have probably had a lot less difficulty than other people - partly because I'm responsible for the Opposition's policies on, and opposition to, the Employment Relations legislation. It was a big issue that was reported comprehensively. But it is much more difficult, because the media is much less interested in Opposition members than they are in Government members. Secondly, because you don't have access to the same press resources you used as a Minister. I had two press secretaries, so I could always get more information - whereas I have to do most of the work myself now, or use the Opposition's press office - I think it's four press people for 39 MPs, which tends to clog the resources. My ability to get to the media in that respect is nowhere near as great.

Rebecca: Have you found the Internet to be effective in spreading your ideas and thoughts to the public?

Max: Yes, very much so. My own web site, of course, but in addition to that, when we ran the campaign against the Employment Relations Bill, we primarily used the Internet to reach people. We got a list of about 60,000 businesses in NZ and we posted out a pamphlet to all these companies. We asked people who wanted to be kept advised on what was going on with the Employment Relations Bill to let us know what their email address was. We now have an email list of around 10,000 people.

In addition to that we established a web site, called www.dinosaur.org.nz which was explaining what was happening with the Bill. This was hugely popular. We kept it simple - some sites are very complex and full of stuff - with a pretty direct message. We are using the Internet much more than we ever did in

Government - and even more successfully than the Government has. They tend to take a passive view of things, just put information up on the web site and don't try and reach people much beyond that. We've done the passive bit, here's the information, but we've also aggressively gone out and invited them to respond. I guess for that campaign, I must have had four or five hundred direct emails to me - which I have always answered directly.

Rebecca: What do you do in a typical week?

Max: Let's start with Tuesday. Normally on a Monday night I try and have dinner with the family. Later, Monday afternoon or Tuesday morning, I fly to Wellington. On Tuesday, we have several meetings in the morning to plan for the week. We have Caucus - that's when all the National Party members of Parliament meet together. We do that on a Tuesday morning from 10 am to 1 pm., when we exchange views and establish what our position should be on particular issues. Tuesday afternoon: well, on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday there's always an hour of questions in the House. Everybody goes down for that, and sometimes I'll ask questions. And after that you're involved in the Parliamentary process - passing legislation etc. We work through to 10.30 pm on a Tuesday.

Wednesday, there are Select Committees in the mornings, and the House in the afternoon through until 10 or 10.30. The same on Thursday again until 6 pm; then I'll either come home or because I'm a senior spokesman I tend to catch a plane somewhere else in the country. I talk to people, go on visits, give speeches, get involved in local press work wherever I am. If I don't have to be elsewhere in NZ on a Friday, I'll be here in the electorate, talking to people. On Saturday I'll hold clinics, not as often as I used to. On Sunday I'll try and have a bit of time off - do the garden. On Monday I'll be off somewhere else around the electorate of the country. So that's the sort of work takes place in a Parliamentary week.

When we're not sitting in the House - in what's called a recess - it's generally around the country, talking to people. There's a lot of travel involved. I can tell you that the last thing you want to do as a Member of Parliament is going travelling. If I had an option, I'd rather be home with my family.

Rebecca: Is New Zealand's economy in real trouble or is it only fiction?

Max: Some of it's in real trouble. The New Zealand economy is traditionally dependent on agriculture; we have done ever since we were formed. The trouble with agriculture is that the prices for our products or the goods we sell, have generally been going down in real terms (after you adjust them for inflation) for forty or fifty years. So a bale of wool in 1960 for example, would have bought for the farmer an awful lot more than it buys now. It's had more downs than ups in terms of its ability to generate goods for the rest of us. We haven't really moved fast enough into the high technology area, unlike a lot of other countries. That's called the Knowledge Economy and that's where the real income is generated, the real wealth in today's globalising world. We do some, but not enough. We've consistently trained people with the wrong sorts of skills - lots of lawyers and accountants, but nowhere near enough with communications or scientific skills. And frankly, those who have those skills will tend to disappear overseas, as we've seen. We just don't pay enough to keep them here, and that's because we're not rich enough as a society.

That's a long term problem which is not easy for any one government to deal with; it does very much depend on the sort of mix of economic and social policies you have. If tax rates are too high, for example, you have people saying "I'd rather go overseas and earn a much higher level of income and pay less in tax, because I don't think my tax in this country is being used in the right way".

The total mix of government policies can send very strong signals about how much they value people, value their initiative and innovation. We take the view that people ought to be rewarded for their own effort, their own education, their own motivation - and not tax them so they can enjoy the rewards of their own efforts. Labour and centre-left parties tend to take the view there's something bad about earning lots of money. They want to take it off you and give it to the poor - or the unmotivated poor, the people who'll just sit back and take a Social Welfare benefit. So those are some of the long-term difficulties, and why people are pretty down at the moment.

Rebecca: How do you think the rest of the world sees New Zealand's economy?

Max: Not very positively at the moment - that's a relatively recent change in attitude. I've got to be fair - it's not just because of this Government's present policies, but it's a very substantial part of it. Through the mid-80s to a couple of years ago, New Zealand was seen as a great place to invest. We had good policies; unlike a lot of other countries around the world where, if a foreign investor comes to invest in a country they can never be quite sure that they can get their money out and will be dealt with fairly. For example, those

people who invest in China - there's a lot of optimism about China - but the legal system there for business people is not as predictable or as fair as our law is. Here, if you invest your money, you can always take it out. Whereas, you invest your money in China and you never know what some administrative body is going to tell you whether you can or can't take your money out. So in that respect, we're seen as a good place to invest money in.

But because of the things the Government's done, and because America and Europe are in real boom for ten years NZ is not as attractive a place to invest in as it used to be. People are switching off, perceiving us as not providing as good an environment as we used to have.

Rebecca: What do you think will happen to the New Zealand economy in the near future?

Max: I think it will be pretty sick for a couple of years, and unless we deal with those bigger term issues - getting more high technology industries etc, then we'll have a slowly sagging economy for a few more years. I think there's a realisation we have to do something about that. The National Party's got different policies than Labour - Labour's are clearly not working at the moment. At the end of the day I'm still very optimistic about New Zealand - it's still the best place in the world to live. It's just that if you want to make a lot of money, it isn't -not at the moment, anyway.