

How the 'Alienated' call the shots

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Minister for regional development Shane Jones, pictured, knows how to excavate support from the Alienated Tribe. Kate Judson

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OPINION: More than ever we need social cohesion.

In New Zealand we can generally turn it on when we need it. A crisis like the pandemic or an earthquake brings people together and no doubt the country would co-operate fully if the fuel crisis becomes more serious.

Some might argue that society has become so fractured and polarised that nothing is certain.

The latest Social Cohesion Report lends some support to that argument but it contains plenty of material to suggest we can call on reserves of cohesion. More than 80% of those surveyed felt pride in New Zealand and a sense of belonging.

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The report, which surveyed 2882 people in late 2025, has a succinct paragraph about why cohesion is invaluable.

“New Zealand faces multiple long-term challenges including geopolitical turbulence, climate change, ageing population, and stagnant productivity. Our ability to navigate this complexity and challenging decisions require both excellent technical policy and good social cohesion for the right solutions to endure.”

The report identifies three main groups whose preferences and whims show differing senses of cohesion.

The Connected make up 30% of the respondents in the study and experience “high cohesion across all dimensions”. They feel valued and have a strong sense of belonging, and in turn, are accepting of others. They are comfortable and settled.

If you are a member of the Ambivalent category (41%) you don’t feel the love quite as much and experience “middling cohesion and low participation”.

“This group contains most of the country’s older homeowners, retirees, and centre-right voters. They are materially comfortable, happy, but not deeply connected to the social fabric,” the report says.

Then comes the most interesting grouping. The Alienated (28%) feel disconnected and show oppositional activity and participation. “They report low belonging, low acceptance of other New Zealanders and the highest sense that the system is unfair. Almost half of Māori and Pasifika are in this group. So are nearly half of Green voters and seven in 10 New Zealand First voters,” the report says.

The great irony about this tribe is they have tremendous political power. The Greens have neutered themselves by tying themselves to Labour, but Te Pāti Māori used to decide its allegiance on how it could get some real gains for Māori.

The fact a good deal of the Alienated feel some affiliation to New Zealand First means they will decide the next Government. Through New Zealand First, the people who feel the least invested in the country hold the king-making role.

The Social Cohesion Report is not the only publication to identify and describe the Alienated.

An intriguing article by Danyl McLauchlan in a March *Listener* issue identified five tribes gleaned from the 2023 NZ Election Study data. The largest group is Middle New Zealand (26%) – the silent majority which McLauchlan says is the hardest to describe because it has no strong opinions.

“This group decides elections by voting for whoever seems competent.”

Apart from a grouping called the Educated Progressives (21%), the Precarious Left (18%) and the Establishment Right (18%), McLauchlan pinpoints a class called the Alienated Conservatives who make up 17% of voters.

According to the article, these voters are far more likely to be male and less likely to own property or be in the top income bracket. They are distrustful of government and the courts and believe MPs are out of touch. They think politicians don't care about people like them and are the most likely tribe to be born overseas.

In 2023 they were twice as supportive of New Zealand First as any other tribe.

"Winston Peters speaks to his combination of social conservatism, economic modesty and disaffection in a way Christopher Luxon and David Seymour cannot," McLauchlan says.

So where do you fit in? If you are reading this article in a physical newspaper that you have paid for, you're very probably not a member of the Alienated tribe. According to the Social Cohesion Report, there's a good chance you are over 60, financially secure and vote in general elections.

This makes you one of the Ambivalent and it's not a bad grouping to be in.

As a 60+ newspaper reader, you are substantially happier than those under 30, you get more respect than that age group and you have more financial satisfaction, probably because you own your own home and receive superannuation.

Membership of that elite 60+ group also means, the report says, you are more likely to feel stronger neighbourhood bonds, believing that neighbours would help and you have a stronger sense of neighbourhood belonging.

You are also more likely than other groups to feel a pride and connection to New Zealand's way of life and culture but have the highest level of concern, along with Pacifica people, about cost pressures.

Of course we have to take these sorts of reports with a grain of salt. Most people vacillate and defy pigeonholing. Tribes bleed into each other and assumptions are dangerous.

But next time you hear New Zealand First Minister Shane Jones say something like a "butter chicken tsunami" you know who he is talking to. And we need to bear in mind they will decide who governs.

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