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Opinion | New Zealand is showing what a viable libertarianism looks like



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*ACT leader David Seymour speaks during a media conference in Parliament on Sept. 28, 2021.
(Getty Images)*

Populist conservatism has been on the march around the globe in recent years. But in New Zealand, many conservatives are beginning to embrace an old ideology: libertarianism.

This surprising trend is thanks to David Seymour, leader of New Zealand's classically liberal ACT Party. He has rapidly transformed his faction from a nearly extinct institution to a vibrant, growing movement, setting an example for conservatives worldwide.

Seymour is a young intellectual. The 40-year-old became politically active in college, unsuccessfully running for Parliament in 2005 against then-Prime Minister Helen Clark, a Labour Party member. He then went to Canada to work at a free-market think tank, the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, for four years. That experience, he told me in an interview, gave him a chance to read classical liberal economic thinkers

such as Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek and Thomas Hazlett, reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's intellectual journey during his pre-political era.

In 2014, Seymour ran for Parliament again and won, becoming ACT's only parliamentary representative for six years. In fact, the party received less than [1 percent of the vote](#) in New Zealand's 2017 election, which brought the Labour Party's Jacinda Ardern to power. At the time, it looked as if classical liberalism in New Zealand was in terminal decline much, much as it was elsewhere.

But that assessment did not account for Seymour's grit and genius. He aggressively used his seat to push new ideas such as legalizing euthanasia. He also did not flinch from other issues, becoming the only member to vote against the legislation Ardern passed after the 2019 Christchurch shootings to confiscate guns. Seymour also made his way onto the select parliamentary committee overseeing the government's covid-19 policies and used social media to gain visibility.

All of these activities raised Seymour's profile and made ACT relevant. The party received its highest share of the vote ever in the [2020 election](#), winning 10 seats in the 120-seat Parliament. More [recent polls show](#) ACT could win [15 seats or more](#) in the upcoming October election. With the traditional center-right party, the National Party, tipped to win 46 seats, ACT could become a crucial governing partner. That's a stunning reversal of fortune in just a few years.

This success is fueled by Seymour's insistence on applying classically liberal principles to issues beyond just taxes, regulation and spending. He can do that because, as he told me, "there is a deep underlying philosophical base to what we're saying, so it's all coherent." That theme — stick to your principles and calmly explain their application to whatever issue is at hand — repeatedly came up in our discussion.

That approach is nowhere better observed than on ACT's stance against identity politics. The ruling Labour-Green alliance has been pushing to provide [special government benefits](#) for the island nation's Indigenous people, the Maori, and even interpreting New Zealand's founding document, the Treaty of Waitangi, to require ["co-governance"](#) between the elected government and Maori leaders. Seymour contends this is wrong and destructive of "classical liberal values of universal human rights" because it gives citizens different political rights and powers based solely upon their race.

This position has provoked a lot of backlash and accusations that Seymour is racist. But Seymour, who has Maori ancestry, has responded with equanimity: "I'm not racist. I'm not prejudiced against people based on their background," he told me. "The only thing that really gets me is if my critics are correct, and they're not correct, so that doesn't really affect me." Seymour emphasizes that New Zealand is built on the rule of law and parliamentary democracy. This, he argues, comes from the idea of universal human rights, which is "incompatible with regarding a person primarily as an identity before we consider their humanity."

Seymour's willingness to lean into cultural issues rather than shy away from them also applies to criminal justice. ACT calls for [trying 17-year-old violent offenders as adults](#) and a host of other ["law and order" policies](#). This further illustrates that his party is not running solely on tax cuts (though it is proposing [significant reductions](#)); he knows political parties need to meet voters where they are before they gain their trust to lead them where they ought to go.

No matter what happens in the October election, this likely won't be the last you've heard of Seymour if his party does well. Ardern was just 37 when her election inspired leftists around the world. Seymour could similarly make freedom cool again.