

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

HOME FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS?

An Analysis of Labour's Success in New Zealand

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On 17 October 2020, voters in New Zealand re-elected a Labour Government in what has been labelled an historic, landslide victory. On election night, the Labour Party had won 49.1 per cent of the vote, and 64 seats in the 120-seat parliament, while the Greens secured 7.6 per cent of the vote and 10 seats. In the two weeks that followed, 480,000 special votes (including those from overseas), were counted, and when the final count was announced on 6 November, Labour's share of the vote had grown to 50 per cent and 65 seats.

This result represents a significant win for the left in New Zealand for a number of reasons. First, this is the largest share of the vote won by the Labour Party in 82 years (50 per cent in 2020, compared to 55 per cent in 1938). As a result, it is the first time we have seen a party win enough seats to form a government alone since the introduction of MMP, the German-inspired electoral system New Zealand adopted in 1996. Labour's former coalition partner, the conservative centrist party New Zealand First, failed to reach the 5 per cent threshold needed to enter parliament.

Second, this shift to the left by the New Zealand electorate was also evidenced by the success of the Greens, who not only won nine List seats, but also won an inner-city electorate seat. The latter is a rare win for the Greens, as it is difficult for small parties to achieve sufficient geographical concentration of the vote in New Zealand's general electorates.

Alongside this, the Māori Party (New Zealand's Indigenous party that contested the seven designated Māori electorates) made a comeback after being ousted from parliament in 2017. Between 2008 and 2017, the Māori Party supported the centre-right government. In 2020, with new leadership and a commitment to support a Labour government, the Party won from Labour one of the seven separate Māori electorates, and a sufficient percentage of the party vote to bring in a candidate from their list.

Third, this election was historically different because Labour won several seats in rural and regional New Zealand that have traditionally been won by the centre-right National Party. Labour also secured a higher proportion of the party (list) vote in all the electorates held by National.

Thus, the magnitude of Labour's win cannot be underestimated. And, in combination with the Green and Māori Party, these results indicate that 59.1 per cent of voters opted for the progressive left, which now holds 64 per cent of parliamentary seats. Our New Zealand Election Study survey is still in the field, meaning we can only infer for now why so many voters shifted left. Certainly, the government's response to COVID-19 is part of the story, but whether that explains the biggest net vote shift in over a century remains to be seen.

So what does Labour's comprehensive win signify for progressive politics in New Zealand? To answer this question, it is worth distinguishing between the descriptive and substantive dimensions of progressive politics in New Zealand. In other words, given New Zealand has witnessed a symbolically

powerful shift in whose voices are represented in parliament and cabinet, what implications might this have for policy change? Second, what progressive policy wins did Labour achieve in its first three years, given their unexpected gains in 2017, and their coalition agreement with a conservative centre party? And third, now that Labour is able to govern alone, will the transformational policy reset promised in 2017 feature in their post-2020 COVID-19 economic recovery?

1 ADVANCING PROGRESSIVE POLITICS THROUGH INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP

In one important aspect, the Labour Party that won the 2017 election looked very different to its predecessors. Labour's leader, Jacinda Ardern, was a young 37-year-old, self-proclaimed feminist social democrat, who was elected to the Labour leadership in a unanimous ballot just seven weeks out from election.

In the campaign that followed, Ardern's political rhetoric focused on kindness and inclusion, hope and the possibility of a transformative policy agenda that would address poverty, inequality and climate change. Our analysis of questions in the New Zealand Election Study shows that Ardern's campaign and policy messages were sufficiently inclusive and convincing that there was little discursive space (or time) for a negative, divisive authoritarian populist rhetoric to take hold. By contrast, in the traditions of inclusive populism, her leadership style was positive and presented the ›people‹ as a diverse group coming together to make New Zealand ›better‹ for everyone. As a leader, voters found her likeable, trustworthy, and competent, although women were more positive than men on these measures.

Second, although Ardern presented herself as a progressive feminist on issues such as abortion, climate change, and LGBTQI rights, she also campaigned strongly on material issues such as economic wellbeing, housing, and social policies. Voters' responses to a range of ›cultural‹ or ›identity politics‹ questions in our election survey indicate there was minimal backlash to feminism or environmental issues in 2017. Although we found some differences between younger and older voters, these were not large enough to suggest there was a generational cultural divide in New Zealand. In other words, the right-wing populism seen elsewhere was not a feature of the 2017 election.

In 2017, Ardern's political rhetoric and leadership style led to a resurgence in support from Labour's base, an increase in political donations, and poll ratings went from 24 per cent seven weeks out, to a polling day vote share of 37 per cent. Despite the National party winning 44 per cent, it was Ardern who was able to negotiate a three-party coalition-support agreement that spanned the political spectrum from the conservative centre to the progressive left.

Elsewhere I have labelled this New Zealand's ›Borgen‹ moment: a reference to the Danish political drama that tells how the female leader of a small centrist party finds herself as a

compromise candidate for the role of prime minister following a closely fought general election. While the Labour Party is not a small party, and New Zealand's Mixed Member Proportional system has always held the potential for any leader to form a government if they can marshal sufficient support, the result was highly unexpected and an historic first. But, as we see in the next section, this coalition limited the process of transformation promised by Ardern.

After becoming New Zealand's third woman prime minister, Ardern went on to become only the second prime minister in the world to give birth while in office (in July 2018). Later that year she became the first political leader to have her baby accompany her on the floor of the UN General Assembly. Then, in March 2019, she responded to the Christchurch massacre with words of sorrow and compassion that resonated with many around the globe. Her leadership in that moment was described by one Guardian commentator as unfamiliar and rare because it was neither anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim nor xenophobic. Ardern used that moment to rapidly reform New Zealand's previously lax gun ownership laws. This mix of compassion and determined resolve was also a feature of Ardern's leadership one year later when, in March 2020, with the advent of COVID-19, she locked New Zealand down.

Ardern's and Labour's commitment to an inclusive, potentially more representative style of politics, also resulted in a number of changes to the process of governing early in her first three years of governing.

First, in February 2018, the Prime Minister visited Waitangi, the place where the Treaty of Waitangi between Māori Chiefs and representatives of the British Crown was signed in 1840. Ardern became the first female Prime Minister to be given speaking rights during the pōwhiri (welcome), and she used this speech to commit the new government to a universalistic approach reducing inequalities between Māori and Pākehā (NZ Europeans). She argued that by addressing poverty, unemployment, housing, access to mental health services and the justice system through universalism, the results would positively impact Māori. She also eschewed the previous prime ministerial practice of visiting for one day and meeting only with senior Māori dignitaries. Instead Ardern spent five days at Waitangi, meeting with Māori communities and local leaders, and listening to, (rather than talking at), those the media called ›ordinary people‹.

Second, in their first year in office, the Labour-led government established a number of working groups designed to solicit insights from experts and communities from around New Zealand. These included the Tax Working Group, which involved a wide-ranging review of the tax system and the feasibility of a number of new taxes, including environmental and capital gains tax options; the Welfare Expert Advisory Group, which produced 42 recommendations to significantly overhaul the funding and organisation of the welfare system; the Safe and Effective Justice Advisory Group, and an Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction.

These working groups were criticised by politicians from the right for wasting money and criticised by commentators on the left as being ›old school‹ and uninspiring in terms of process. And as we will see below, the government has not implemented all the recommendations made by these working groups. However, if the objective was also to hear from a wider array of Indigenous communities, advocacy groups and the public on critical, complex policy issues, then this approach could be considered worthwhile.

The culture of connecting the machinery of government with community experts also extended as far as the New Zealand Treasury. This central agency has a long history of keeping its distance from the public and has a strong reputation for elitism. Yet when building the new Living Standards Framework, which would inform the Government's first Wellbeing Budget in 2019, Treasury officials toured the country seeking critical feedback on its initiative. It also established a Community for Policy Research to engage with a wider range of experts and evidence.

Finally, this focus on expanding the voices heard by government was replicated in the revamp of the Government Science Advisers network. The appointment of the first woman to the role of Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor led to the selection of a more diverse group of departmental science advisers. Specifically, the Government Science Advisers Network went from being all male, to including women and Indigenous experts. In addition, the office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor became more inclusive of, and communicative with, a diverse range of communities and interests within New Zealand. Indeed, in the early months of her appointment in 2018, Professor Gerrard visited scientists, researchers, schools and community groups around the country to gain the broadest array of views on how science, and science education, could support New Zealand. This investment on science advice by those inside government and the clear communication of science to civil society was to prove particularly important during 2020 with the advent of COVID-19.

From the outset of her leadership tenure, Ardern's approach to communicating policy also involved engaging with ordinary citizens through the use of social media as well as more mainstream channels. For example, in 2018 she announced her pregnancy on Instagram, and six months later announced a new assistance package for families cradling her 10-day-old daughter via Facebook Live. Ardern's comfortable conversational style of policy communication has enabled her to circumvent the traditional manicured style of television networks and interruptions by political opponents or journalists. In this age of populism, when politicians seek to portray themselves as one of the people rather than part of the elite, such techniques are political gold. They also became an exceptionally important tool for Ardern in allaying anxieties during New Zealand's lockdowns. Indeed, global PRovoke's survey of PR experts globally ranked Jacinda Ardern as the most impressive leader in terms of COVID-19 communications, ahead of Angela Merkel. More recently, an academic study out of Scotland revealed how her warm and informal

use of Facebook Live helped convey vital COVID-19 messages in a clear, relatable and authentic way.

It is evident that Ardern's communication style and political messages, initiated in the 2017 campaign, continuing through her first term in office, and during the pandemic and associated lockdowns, resonated with New Zealanders. During the 2020 campaign, commentators argued that there was little specific policy detail being launched for consideration or debate. Labour in New Zealand had learned lessons from the 2019 Australian election. The experience of the Australian Labor Party showed what can happen when a party of the centre-left makes itself a big policy target on topics that impact voters' economic wellbeing (like taxes, jobs, and growth). The success of the Australian Liberal Party also highlighted the importance of public relations prowess, which alongside clear policy messaging is increasingly beneficial given social media channels are as important as mainstream media in campaigns. It is unsurprising, then, that during the 2020 election campaign, Labour focused on their policy announcements on the handling of the virus, and their political appeal centred almost solely on their articulate, authentic and charismatic leader.

2 LABOUR'S RECORD IN OFFICE – INCREMENTALISM OVER TRANSFORMATION

Over the past three years, international acclaim for Jacinda Ardern has grown, with two Nobel Prize nominations, appearances on the cover of both UK Vogue and Time Magazine and her leadership during the pandemic cementing this glowing global reputation. Domestically however, she faced a range of policy challenges throughout her government's first three years in office and continues to do so.

During the 2017 election campaign, Labour had run on an agenda of transformation. After becoming the government, expectations from those on the left were high; unions and activists wanted speedy policy change directed at reducing poverty and inequality, soaring house prices and homelessness, and addressing greenhouse gas emissions and polluted waterways.

Meanwhile the business and farming communities struggled to accept the advent of the Labour-led coalition and were suspicious of Labour's capacity to deliver strong economic growth and good financial management. Ultimately, however, the desire to be seen as fiscally »responsible« and the constraints of sharing power with a conservative centre party meant that the Labour Party in government took an incrementalist rather than transformative approach to delivering on the promises it had made.

This focus on the importance of the economy was not the only important issue for voters. Results from our 2017 New Zealand Election Study showed that respondents viewed social policy issues as increasingly important, with the salience

of health and housing doubling compared to 2014. Labour's 2017 100-day plan reflected this concern with social policy.

In the area of housing, the government worked quickly to pass legislation setting minimum standards for rentals to ensure they were warm and dry. They placed a ban on overseas speculators buying existing houses in an attempt to take pressure off the over-heated housing market. And they issued a directive that stopped the sell-off of state houses. They also began work on the KiwiBuild programme to increase the number of houses available for first home buyers, and to reduce homelessness through the provision of more public housing. By 2020, however, the government had made little progress on the KiwiBuild, and stuttering progress on homelessness.

Labour had initially committed NZD 100 million NZD to tackling the need for increased public housing, but over the three years that followed the waitlist grew from around 6,000 to close to 15,000 in 2019. In 2020, an additional NZD 300,000 million was directed towards public housing, and figures showed the Government had built approximately 3,000 state houses, with 3,000 more underway. Nevertheless, by September 2020, the state housing waiting list was up to 20,000. Some experts argued this increase was because the true number of homeless people was no longer being hidden. However, there remains much to be done in this area, in part because the previous government had reduced the public housing stock.

While the Labour government was commended for beginning to replenish the state housing stock, it was less successful in delivering the massive KiwiBuild scheme. It was seriously ambitious, promising NZD 2 billion to support the building of 100,000 homes within ten years. But after two years the programme was »reset«, the relevant Minister demoted, and the target of 100,000 houses revised downwards. Part of the reset involved investing NZD 400m into progressive home ownership schemes for up to 4,000 low- and middle-income families. The options within the scheme could include a rent-to-buy model, or sharing equity with a housing provider, with the aim of eventually buying the provider out. This new approach was praised by some, but by the end of 2020, it has done little to suppress rising house prices. Indeed, on this issue of significant concern to New Zealand voters, Labour is seen to have come close to failure, particularly because it shied away from introducing a Capital Gains Tax or any kind of wealth tax. This has allowed property investors to continue to be rewarded, while the less well-off remained locked out of the housing market and denied the possibility of intergenerational asset transfer.

In the area of health, the Labour-led government's policy on mental health reform was considered an important step forward. The establishment of a Ministerial Inquiry into New Zealand's mental health crisis led to the creation of a permanent independent Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, designed to assess and report publicly on mental health and wellbeing, make recommendations to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and adequacy of approaches, and to monitor

mental health and addiction services and advocating for improvements in the system. Close to NZD 13 million funding over four years was tagged for the Commission's work.

Alongside the traditional focus on health, the Labour-led government signalled its commitment to advancing both current and future wellbeing. In addition to empowering her Minister of Finance to shift New Zealand's budgeting system to one that went beyond traditional definitions and measures of growth, Ardern made herself Minister for Child Poverty Reduction, and two pieces of legislation followed. First, the government introduced the Child Poverty Reduction Act, which included three- and ten-year reduction targets and, second, amendments were made to the Public Finance Act to ensure agencies addressed these targets in their budget bids. How successful the government has been in meeting those targets depends in part on the measures used. In June 2018, child poverty statistics showed that around 16 per cent (about 183,000 children) were living in households with only half the median income before costs were subtracted. However, after deducting housing costs, this figure rose to 23 per cent. While this latter figure represented a drop of 4 per cent compared to the year prior, by 2019 hardship grants had increased, as had demand for emergency food parcels, up 40 per cent, in New Zealand's largest city, Auckland.

The 2020 Child Poverty Monitor Report released one month after the 2020 election showed that 56 per cent of children living in families receiving welfare do not always have enough healthy food to eat, while 20.8 per cent of children are living in low-income households, double the Government's target of 10 per cent. In the election campaign, Labour claimed that they had lifted 18,400 children out of poverty, but advocacy groups maintain that New Zealand's current welfare arrangements are insufficient to ensure the government meets child poverty reduction targets by 2028.

The lack of transformation in this policy domain is disappointing for many. In May 2018, when the Welfare Expert Advisory Group (WEAG) was established, the terms of reference were explicit in their desire for transformation. The Government stated that its vision was »for a welfare system that ensures people have an adequate income and standard of living, are treated with and can live in dignity.« In its 2019 response, the Expert Advisory Group produced 126 detailed recommendations, one of which was that benefit levels should increase by between 12 and 47 percent. No benefit rise was forthcoming until COVID-19 hit, at which point main benefits were increased by NZD 25 per week. In response to this rather limited action by the government, more than 50 reputable charities signed an open letter calling on the government to raise benefit levels by Christmas. There has been no response from the Ardern government. A stocktake released by the Child Poverty Action Group in November 2020 noted that to date only four of the 126 recommendations from the Expert Advisory Group have been fully implemented.

This is not to say that nothing changed in terms of social policy during Labour's first term in office. Free school lunches were introduced (albeit not universally), free GP visits were ex-

tended, and a new families' package was announced (made up of support for newborns, a Winter Energy Payment for all beneficiaries and additional tax credits for working families). Student allowances and living cost loans increased by NZD 50 per week, and new students in higher education were given their first year of study fees-free.

In terms of wage growth and equal pay there were mixed results. Under the previous nine years of the National government (2008–2017) the minimum wage rose by just NZD 3 per hour, despite this being a period of sustained economic growth. In the three years since 2017, the Labour-led government has increased the minimum wage by NZD 3.15, as well as raising abatement thresholds so people on a benefit who seek out part-time work can keep more of what they earn. Alongside this, we saw the reinstatement of the rights of workers to meal and rest breaks, easier access to union membership and collective bargaining, and a limiting of the 90-day trials to businesses with fewer than 20 employees.

However, the promise of the introduction of fair pay agreements was less successful. One of Labour's core promises in 2017, the Fair Pay Agreements, was aimed at setting minimum standards to lift wages and conditions across an industry or occupation and go further than current legal standards. The Fair Pay Working Group outlined the challenges facing New Zealand in terms of balancing income inequality with productivity and profit. However, from the outset the business community was hostile to this proposal, and in the end little progress was made. It was not clear that Labour's Coalition partner, New Zealand First, would have supported new legislation on this issue. Indeed, nurses, teachers and public transport workers, amongst others, engaged in a range of protests during Labour's first term, and strike action numbers increasing considerably in the two years after the Labour-led Government came to power.

On the issue of gender equality and the labour market, however, more progress was made. Labour extended Paid Parental Leave from 18 to 26 weeks, and increased the amount paid to those taking leave by up to NZD 20 a week. The Equal Pay Amendment Bill introduced in Parliament on 19 September 2018 finally passed its third reading in late July 2020. Why it took so long for Labour to have this signature item passed remains unclear. The Bill remained low on the parliamentary order paper for two years, and it would have damaged Labour's reputation if it had been unable to see it passed before the election.

The new law allows workers to make a pay equity claim using a process aligned with New Zealand's existing bargaining framework. The changes were brought about after the 2013 New Zealand Court of Appeal ruling in the case *Bartlett & Service & Food Workers Union vs Terranova Homes & Care*. That landmark ruling acknowledged that in certain industries wages were lower because the work was mainly carried out by women, and as a result, the employer discriminated against its female workforce.

The Amendment builds on the Equal Pay Act of 1972 by encouraging collaboration and evidence-based decision-making to address pay inequity, rather than relying on an adversarial court process. Government, Business New Zealand and the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions were strongly involved in developing the process for raising and resolving pay equity claims that would be collaborative rather than adversarial.

Claimants (individuals, groups or trade unions) raise claims in writing and set out evidence that the work being undertaken is, or was, predominantly performed by female employees, and present an argument that the work is currently undervalued or has been historically undervalued. As soon as reasonably practicable, but not later than 45 days after receiving the pay equity claim, the employer must decide whether in its view the pay equity claim is arguable (which does not mean that the employer agrees that there is a pay equity issue, or that there will be a settlement).

If the employer does not accept the claim, it must explain the reasons for this decision. The claimant may then refer the issue to mediation or seek a determination from the Employment Relations Authority. If the employer accepts the basis of the claim, both parties then begin good faith bargaining to resolve the claim through a pay equity settlement. Thus, the process requires that considerable research be undertaken by unions on behalf of their female workers, but the legislation is nevertheless seen as an important next step in closing the gender pay gap in New Zealand.

The legislation came into force on 9 November 2020, at which point ten pay equity claims affecting thousands of women across the education sector had been raised by the New Zealand Education Institute. The claims cover early childhood teachers, school librarians, science technicians, therapists, advisers, psychologists and service managers working for the Ministry of Education as well as administrators, cooks and teacher aides, beginning with kindergartens where those roles are already clearly defined. These claims are in addition to those already underway for school administrators and Māori language teachers. The Union is also continuing to campaign for immediate funding for full pay parity for early childhood teachers who face a pay gap of up to 49 per cent with their kindergarten and schooling colleagues.

However, more work on equal pay and pay transparency remains. For example, while the gender pay gap overall is around 9 per cent, this figure masks some significant distortions. For example, there is a 27 per cent gap between Pacific women and NZ European men in the public sector. This has led the New Zealand Human Rights Commission to launch an inquiry into Pacific Pay Gap to highlight the way racial discrimination impacts the gender pay gap.

One further critical policy area that Jacinda Ardern laid out as significant for her government in the 2017 election campaign was addressing climate change. Ardern labelled this issue her generation's »nuclear free moment«. This is reference to the passage of the New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act in 1987, which rewarded

the protests of tens of thousands of New Zealanders over several decades who had long been campaigning against French nuclear testing in the Pacific and the docking of US nuclear warships in New Zealand harbours. One of Ardern's first commitments in addressing Climate Change was to ban future explorations for oil and gas, and to invest more funding into sustainable infrastructure including light rail. While the latter was stymied by Labour's coalition partner, a focus on reducing carbon emissions through legislation followed, albeit in a manner that was cautious rather than radical.

In addition to Labour's Coalition agreement with the conservative New Zealand First party, Labour had also signed a support agreement with the Greens. Labour's Minister for the Environment and the Greens Minister of Climate Change worked together to advance a Zero Carbon Bill, which was passed with the support of all but one member of parliament. The 2019 Act involves the creation of an independent Climate Change Commission, which would advise governments on how to meet targets set in law by the bill – zero net carbon emissions by 2050 and a reduction of between 24 and 47 per cent of methane emissions by 2050. These targets are intended to keep global warming to within 1.5 C by 2050.

Alongside this environment, economic and social policy work, business confidence was beginning to turn around but, in February 2020, it was not clear that this would be sufficient to win Labour a second term in office. Ardern's personal popularity had always been higher than her opponent's, but support for National remained in the 40s. A Colmar Brunton poll from November 2019 had Labour's support at 39 per cent, up only 2 points from the party's 2017 election result, while support for the National Party was at 46 per cent. By February 2020, little had changed; Ardern's personal popularity had increased by six points to 42 per cent, and Labour had gained an additional two points to 41 per cent, but the opposition party's popularity remained firm.

Commentators were claiming the September 2020 general election was too close to call. It seemed the realities of a three-year term, a coalition arrangement with a conservative party acting as a handbrake on fast-paced progressive reform, a determined antipathy by some farming groups to environmental reforms, and a Labour's own conservative approach to much-needed increases in welfare benefits and tax reform, meant that, at the beginning of 2020, a solid minority of voters on the right and the left remained unsure about whether the Ardern-led government deserved a second term.

And then COVID-19 arrived. New Zealand's approach to eliminate the virus rather than manage it, via herd immunity or some equivalent, was in part possible because we had time on our side. New Zealand officials witnessed what was emerging in China and parts of Europe weeks before the first case was found locally. The decision to close New Zealand's borders occurred on 19 March to all but NZ citizens and permanent residents, was articulated as a strategy of going »hard and early«. The government then created a range of alert levels, subsequently locking New Zealand down for a period of six weeks to stamp out the escalation

of community transmission. These actions proved acceptable to the majority.

Indeed, the daily updates provided by Prime Minister Ardern and her Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield of daily case numbers, and the implications of these for the policy decisions taken, proved reassuring to New Zealanders. Ardern's rhetorical approach was a mix of warm, sometimes witty, calm determination that called on New Zealanders to be kind, »to create a »bubble« of loved ones to prevent community transmission, and to work together as a »team of five million« to eliminate the virus. She even quipped that the Easter Bunny was an essential worker. Ardern conveyed these messages formally, with the Director General of Health, daily at 1pm on mainstream media, and in more conversational tones through Facebook and Instagram. Hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders tuned in, almost daily, to catch her updates.

Alongside this, the government implemented a number of emergency economic packages designed to keep businesses afloat and workers in jobs. A wage subsidy scheme was introduced in March 2020 and extended in August after a second wave of community transmission hit the biggest city of Auckland. In its campaign messaging, Labour claimed that more than 1.7 million people had been supported by the scheme. The Government had also used its May 2020 Budget to establish a NZD 50 billion COVID-19 Response and Recovery Fund, with a considerable proportion going to physical infrastructure projects and apprenticeships in trades.

More specifically, around NZD 1.6 billion was dedicated to trades and apprenticeships training, with »critical« industries being the focus – defined by the Minister as including building and construction, agriculture and manufacturing. Alongside this, close to 10,000 hospitality and aviation sector workers were to be retrained for work in the primary sector, while NZD 1.1 billion was earmarked for 11,000 new jobs in regional environment projects. However, this »rebuild together« was very much skewed in favour of male jobs. Women comprise around 30 percent of those employed in agriculture, forestry and fishing, with similar proportions in manufacturing, and in the electricity, water and waste management industries. In the construction sector, women represent a mere 14 percent of those employed.

There was near universal acclamation that the 2020 Budget represented an important first step in rebuilding the New Zealand economy. However, investment in social infrastructure (services that provide healthcare, education, long-term care and childcare), which also benefits the economy and society, and women's employment, was less of a feature. As such, the Ardern-led government looked a little like the social democracy of old – a party representing the aspirations of working men rather than working women.

Despite this rather retro-looking approach to economic recovery, politically, Ardern's COVID-19 policy response led her to become the most popular prime minister New Zealand has seen in recent memory. Or at least since systematic

opinion polling first began in New Zealand (which was in the 1970s). Colmar Brunton's first pandemic-period opinion poll in May 2020, and media headlines reported a seismic shift in the political landscape. Labour's support was up 18 points to 59 per cent, National's had dropped 17 points to 29 per cent, and 63 per cent of respondents rated Jacinda Ardern as their preferred prime minister. This surpassed the 59 per cent achieved by the popular former National Prime Minister John Key in September 2011.

One week later, according to an IPSOS poll of 1,000 respondents, the Labour Party was seen as the party most capable of managing 18 of the country's 20 key issues. The top six concerns were the economy, unemployment, housing, healthcare, poverty and inflation, and on each of these items (and 9 others), Labour scored significant increases in their capability rankings.

The comparative success of New Zealand and some other countries with women leaders also led to increased media speculation that perhaps women have been better at managing this crisis than their male counterparts for a range of reasons. One I have argued for elsewhere is the halo effect caused by some of the world's high-profile male leaders who have proved themselves so inept. However, in the case of New Zealand, the focus on Ardern's COVID-19 leadership overlooks her cumulative record as Prime Minister, including the range of challenges she has faced compared to prime ministers past. As mentioned earlier, Ardern had brought Labour into government by creating and holding together an unlikely coalition. She had a baby while holding the office of prime minister, and had to respond to the Christchurch terror attacks, an event the likes of which had never been seen in New Zealand before. In a sense, Ardern's earlier crash courses in crisis management, and her innate ability to lead and communicate with calm resolve, came to the rescue of the country and of the Labour Party. And perhaps the fiscal conservatism during the first two years in government gave Labour the political freedom they needed to offer subsidies and stimulus packages during the first nine months of COVID-19 without the risk of business backlash or claims of a return to a »nanny state«.

By July 2020, most commentators acknowledged that Labour would be the party most likely to form a government, but were hesitant to predict the possibility that Ardern would be able to form a majority government despite the polls. In the end, the 19 September election was delayed by one month due to a second lockdown in Auckland in August, and National changed its leader in an attempt to win back the support of its base. The OECD's predictions were looking dire – the expectation was that the economic consequences of our lockdown measures would be severe and long-lasting. Unemployment rates were expected to rise significantly, and debt levels were concerning, after years of running surpluses and keeping government debt at 20 per cent of GDP. National, and the libertarian right party ACT, ran campaigns that centred on these issues of potential risk, but ultimately to no avail. Labour won a landslide victory.

3 THE FUTURE OF PROGRESSIVE POLITICS IN NEW ZEALAND

On 17 October the election result proved an historical high for Labour. After special votes were counted and released on 6 November, it became apparent that for the first time in the history of an MMP government, a party had won both the majority of the seats and 50 per cent of the vote, meaning Labour could govern alone. A cooperation agreement was signed between Labour and the Greens, with the latter's co-leaders (James Shaw and Marama Davidson) being given ministerial portfolios outside cabinet (Climate Change and Prevention of Family and Sexual Violence, respectively).

Two weeks after the 2020 election win, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a cabinet and outer ministry that is more diverse than any witnessed before in New Zealand. Of those inside Cabinet, 40 per cent are women (up from 35 per cent in 2017), 25 per cent are Māori (up from 20 per cent), 15 per cent are Pacific (up from 10 per cent), and 15 per cent are LGBTQI (including Deputy Prime Minister Grant Robertson). This diversity is also reflected in the outer ministry. There remain voices missing from Cabinet and the parliament, most notably disabled people, who comprise the largest minority group in New Zealand. Nevertheless, Ardern's ministry does reflect her caucus, which is also history-making in its representativeness: on election night before special votes had been counted, Labour's caucus comprised 55 per cent women, 20 per cent Māori and 19 per cent Pacifica and 11 per cent from the Rainbow community.

While large-scale comparative studies suggest women leaders are no more likely than their male counterparts to select women ministers, in New Zealand at least we know that it was New Zealand's second female Prime Minister Helen Clark who substantially increased the proportion of women promoted to cabinet to 35 per cent in 1999. Ardern has moved the bar higher by selecting 40 per cent women. The fact that we have yet to reach gender parity may raise some questions from scholars and activists overseas. However, our major parties have long resisted implementing strict gender quotas, meaning incremental progress is the norm. That said, our global gender ranking in terms of female ministerial representation has gone from 50th equal to 26th equal. Ardern appeared prepared for some questions about promoting women into cabinet: when asked about the basis of selection, she responded by saying it was based on »merit, talent and diversity«. She did not mention gender.

We know that not all ministries are created equal. Globally it is finance, foreign affairs or defence and resource-intensive portfolios that are most prized, and can facilitate access to the leader's inner circle. However, the Interparliamentary Union's annual maps on Women in World Politics reveal that these ministries continue to be allocated to men more than women.

This is not the case in Labour's new cabinet. Ardern's inner circle, or top five, includes two women; the top ten positions in Cabinet are shared equally between the sexes, in a near perfect zipper format (whereby portfolios on the list alter-

nate between women and men in order, leading to equal representation). Fourth-ranked Megan Woods, who holds a number of big-budget portfolios, is also Associate Minister of Finance. There are also four new women ministers (one of whom has come straight into cabinet from outside parliament) who have portfolios of their own, but who are also associate ministers working with others more senior. This is an important strategy – if those senior ministers take their roles seriously, it will ensure these women are more likely to succeed.

Perhaps the most interesting and future-focused ministerial choice was Nanaia Mahuta in the role of Foreign Minister. Mahuta is a senior member of the Māori Caucus within Labour, and is the first woman to hold this office, having formerly been the Associate Minister for Trade. While many have focused their attention on the possibility of a friendlier trade policy environment between NZ and the US under President-elect Biden, the reality of ongoing standoffs between the US and China on the trade front will continue to pose some challenges for New Zealand. However, the selection of Mahuta as Foreign Minister strengthens the potential reach of other aspects of our foreign relations, including in Asia Pacific, but also in terms of advancing our obligations under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and bringing a more inclusive dimension to both foreign and trade policy.

One question that remained after the selection of the new cabinet is whether this new-look ministry would enhance the substantive representation of women and gender minorities. Women workers (as well as the young, Māori and Pacifica) have borne the brunt of job losses during COVID-19, reinforcing the need for more systematic gender and diversity analyses of all future economic recovery commitments. In other words, whether Ardern's government will advance a feminist policy agenda remains to be seen. Certainly, the diversity of expertise, perspectives and lived experiences around the cabinet table offers an opportunity to bring that diversity into its policy deliberations and decisions.

Nevertheless, there are several challenges facing Labour as a result of winning so many votes from both the right and the left. A brief deep dive into the election results gives a sense of the possible range of expectations that might now be placed on this Labour government.

First it is worth remembering that in the period between 2008 and 2017, the centre-right party had consolidated its vote in a way not previously seen under our Mixed Member Proportional electoral system. National regularly reached mid-high 40s and, on election night in 2014, they appeared to have won the first majority since 1994 with 61 of the 120 seats. While they later lost one seat to the Green Party after the special votes were counted, in 2017 they went on to win 44 per cent of the vote. That fact that close to 400,000 of previously National voters have turned to Labour in 2020 is significant – no doubt in part a result of the success of the government's approach to controlling COVID-19 and keeping the economy

ticking during the global crisis, but is not necessarily likely to be ideologically aligned to the values of Labour's base.

Second, in addition to shoring up its vote in urban areas, Labour surpassed expectations in many rural and regional seats traditionally understood to be »true blue« conservative. Indeed, Labour won more of the party vote than National in all the South Island seats. Immediately following the result, some members of the Federated Farmers Association suggested that the red tide in blue seats was attributable to farmers who voted tactically to keep the Greens out. A geo-social analysis of polling booth data, and a review of split voting statistics suggests this is an unlikely explanation. When we look at polling booths located across a number of rural electorates, we find that Labour won the small- and medium-size towns, rather from the large farming areas, just as they did in 2002. Moreover, split vote statistics show that National voters were still the most likely to give both their votes to that party (87.5 per cent); only around 8 per cent of Labour's Party vote came from those who gave their candidate to National.

Nevertheless, the combination of winning new votes over from the centre-right, and the perception that farming communities have opted for Labour, may mean that Labour feels obliged to sit closer to the centre of the political spectrum than it might otherwise to ensure it can retain these voters in 2023. Juggling this with the additional expectations from members of the left, who argue there is no better time for the government to reduce inequalities, is already producing tensions.

In addition to balancing the demands from the left and the right, the Ardern-led Labour Government has an unpredictable economic outlook ahead. Economists have recently acknowledged the NZ economy has shown surprising resilience, ending 2020 3 per cent smaller than it finished 2019. This is attributed to several factors: a relatively quick exit from lockdown, consumers spending again and China's rebound, which has had a positive impact on New Zealand. However, there remain a number of concerns surrounding future growth, given our continued border closures. While exports are tracking well, there are sectors of the domestic economy, like tourism and services, that continue to struggle. Meanwhile the housing market is booming, proving positive for consumer spending, while locking others out of affordable rental options and first homes.

There are reasons for New Zealand to be cautiously optimistic going into 2021, but the challenge for Labour remains how to ensure this optimism is shared equitably across the population. The first post-election opinion poll released on 7 December shows Labour's popularity is on the rise, at 53 per cent compared to National's 25 per cent. Whether Ardern and her colleagues are ready to reward that support with progressive, far-reaching social policy initiatives that lift people out of poverty remains to be seen.

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HOME FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS?

An Analysis of Labour's Success in New Zealand



Jacinda Ardern presented herself as a progressive feminist on issues such as abortion, climate change, and LGBTQI rights, additionally she campaigned strongly on material issues such as economic wellbeing, housing, and social policies.



In March 2019, she responded to the Christchurch massacre with words of sorrow and compassion that resonated with many around the globe. Her leadership in that moment was unfamiliar and rare because it was neither anti-immigrant, nor anti-Muslim or xenophobic. Ardern used that moment to rapidly reform New Zealand's previously lax gun ownership laws.



In the area of housing, the government worked quickly to pass legislation setting minimum standards for rentals to ensure they were warm and dry. They placed a ban on overseas speculators buying existing houses in an attempt to take pressure off the over-heated housing market. And they issued a directive that stopped the sell-off of state houses.



After becoming New Zealand's third woman prime minister, Ardern went on to become only the second prime minister in the world to give birth while in office (in July 2018). Later that year she became the first political leader to have her baby accompany her on the floor of the UN General Assembly.



In the campaign, Ardern's political rhetoric focused on kindness and inclusion, hope and the possibility of a transformative policy agenda that would address poverty, inequality and climate change.

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