

What makes a good Prime Minister of New Zealand?

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About the author

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Being the Prime Minister of New Zealand is an important job. It is also a difficult one – a fact many of the public are liable to forget. For although by the standards of the world New Zealand is a small, isolated, ‘easy going’ country, it is hardly free from strife. It takes effort to manage the economy, to make the big decisions and to be responsible for the welfare of some four and a half million people. All day every day the Prime Minister, as the leader and public face of the government, carries these burdens on his or her shoulders. Although a single essay could never hope to explore the ins and outs of this topic in its entirety, it can outline some key points which I believe are indispensable. In descending order of importance these attributes are character, vision and ability.

By far the most important quality that a good Prime Minister should possess is an upright character. By the word character I mean the moral substance of an individual, or alternatively an individual’s inner nature. Are they honest? Are they dishonest? Can they be trusted? The answer to questions like these reveals a person’s character, and whether or not they are worth their salt.

Although understanding character is useful in every aspect of life from business transactions to family relationships, it takes on a special role with regards to leadership, and especially those leadership positions which carry with them substantial amounts of authority, power and influence. Because these positions place their subjects above ordinary people both in terms of real legal power as well as prestige, and because any mistakes on their part will have wide-ranging ramifications on other people, it is vital that they do their work with integrity. Whether it be police officers who citizens trust to uphold the law, teachers who have been entrusted to educate the younger generations or scientists who carry with them the exhilarating yet terrifying power to bend and alter nature at a whim, good character is critical in making sure that positions of authority are used in an ethical manner that will benefit rather than hinder the nation.

The Prime Minister, as the leader of the government, carries with him or her more power and influence than almost anyone else in the country, making it vital that only people of good character hold this position. In the cynical, apolitical atmosphere within which New Zealand and much of the world has descended in recent years, such sentiment may seem like mindless idealism, or perhaps a cruel joke. Too many people – especially the youth – view politics with pessimism, taking it for granted that politicians cannot be trusted. Many assume that when a person becomes Prime Minister they must have done it by lying, cheating and bullying those around them, and are only involved in politics because they were too crooked to do anything else.

This attitude, although understandable at times, is fundamentally unhealthy because – as old fashioned as it sounds – politics makes the world go round. To neglect it is to neglect life itself. At the same time, this view of politics will only become discredited if Prime Ministers are seen as men and women of character who help, rather than hinder the nation. This starts with how they live their own

lives, and is a matter of practising what one is preaching. Although it may seem difficult, if a Prime Minister's character is reliable, then their leadership of the nation is more likely to be as well.

The importance of character is best exemplified in the person of the Liberal politician Richard John Seddon, who was the Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1893 to 1906. Spending a total of 13 years and 44 days in office, he holds the record as New Zealand's longest-serving Prime Minister. As his most recent biographer notes, the key to Seddon's success lay in his friendly, larger than life persona which endeared him to his contemporaries (Brooking, 2014, p. 25). Unlike some politicians Seddon consciously retained his status as 'one of the lads' by traveling widely to both cities and remote communities to engage with ordinary New Zealanders, retaining his working-class Lancashire accent and transforming political meetings into entertaining, engaging social gatherings through singing, dancing and boisterous speeches. The success of this strategy was enormous, with him "achieving far and away the highest public exposure of any New Zealand politician" in his day (Brooking, 2014, p. 132).

In addition, he was also a man of strong principles who believed in living a moral life. Raised as a broad church Anglican, Seddon remained in the Church throughout his life, and many of his policies, such as the institution of old age pensions and the expansion of state housing, were influenced by his Christian beliefs (Brooking, 2014, pp. 15 & 380). Moreover, in his personal life he was rarely angry or arrogant towards those around him; he always tried to speak cleanly without cussing, and was faithful to his wife and children, with no evidence of affairs or other scandals. Because Seddon said what he meant and meant what he said he was elected as leader of the nation for over 13 years, and even a century after his death he remains one of the most cherished Prime Ministers New Zealand has ever had (Brooking, 2014, p. 423). Significantly, because he died in office he was never voted out, leading Brooking to suggest that had he not died in 1906 he would almost certainly have been re-elected (Brooking, 2014, *passim*).

By itself, though, a good character is not the only attribute needed to become a reliable Prime Minister. A political vision is needed as well, since, after all, it is a political position. A political vision shows an individual is passionate and committed to the task at hand, and are willing to assume the immense workload and stress which comes with the position.

Moreover having a vision is also necessary because, as has already been said, we find ourselves today in a cynical, apolitical age. In New Zealand a significant number of people no longer have faith in their governing institutions. They assume politicians are always 'up to something,' and that governments only exist to enrich their own coffers. Politics is seen as immoral and ineffectual, leading always to more injustice at the expense of ordinary New Zealanders. To counter this prejudice, and to show that the government is valuable and necessary, requires a reinvigoration of politics, which in turn requires a visionary leader.

This may seem a little dramatic, but it is no coincidence that those held to be the best Prime Ministers of the nation also happened to be its most passionate visionaries. By far the most famous of these leaders was Michael Joseph Savage, who Gustafson has dubbed, along with Seddon, as "undoubtedly the most loved of all New Zealand's Prime Ministers" (Gustafson, 1986, p. 1). Savage was an idealist and a socialist, and this vision exerted a powerful influence on New Zealand. Even though he was Prime Minister for only 5 years, he left a deep imprint on the political landscape. In the domestic sphere he was a key proponent of the welfare state, and endeared himself to many New Zealanders in the 1930s who were struggling in the midst of the Great Depression. On the international stage Savage was a staunch supporter of international peace, and is remembered for being one of only two world leaders to publicly condemn fascist Italy's invasion of Abyssinia in 1935. For decades after his death thousands of families hung a portrait of him in their homes, and for generations his name has been uttered with respect by

supporters and detractors alike. This example in and of itself shows the power that vision has, and how it can make someone into an exemplary Prime Minister.

Thirdly, a good Prime Minister should have the ability and the competence to do their job well. Ability is obviously one of the key attributes any leader should have – especially if they are a Prime Minister! For instance, a Prime Minister should know how to make a lively, informative, off-the-cuff speech when needed to explain what they are doing and why they are doing it. They should have the courage to make the big decisions which arise and to assume responsibility for these decisions if need be. They should also have an understanding of the logistics of government by understanding the law of the land, how the economy works and (in the international sphere) who are allies and enemies are. Knowing these things is critical, even indispensable when leading a nation.

However, the reason why I rank it third behind character and vision is because ability by itself is not necessarily a positive thing. It is what lies behind that ability that really matters. There have been too many examples throughout history where individuals have risen to positions of power through talent only to morph into tyrants, dictators and rogues. As Lord Acton once famously said, “power tends to corrupt, and absolutely power tends to corrupt absolutely.” In other words, just because someone has the ability to be a Prime Minister does not mean that they should be elected. Rather, it is when that person has talent which is guided by their character and their vision, for only then will they be a good Prime Minister.

Two examples from New Zealand’s history can be used to reinforce this idea, firstly by looking at the political career of Sir Joseph Ward, 1st Baronet. Ward holds the distinction of being the only New Zealand Prime Minister to be elected into office on two separate occasions, first in 1906-1912 and later in 1928-1930. He was also one of the most enduring politicians in the country’s history, serving a total of 23 years as a cabinet minister under various governments, and remaining in parliament for an astounding 37 years (Bassett, 1993, p. vii). Moreover, he possessed an exemplary character. A devout Roman Catholic throughout his life, Ward had no skeletons in his closet, and avoided the scandals and sexual affairs which tarnished the records of other world leaders at the time, for example David Lloyd George the 1st Earl Lloyd-George of Dwyfor and H.H. Asquith the 1st Earl of Oxford and Asquith, the wartime Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom (Bassett, 1993, p. 45). His vision for New Zealand was also inspiring, with optimism being the cornerstone of Ward’s political programme. (Bassett, 1993, p. xiii).

Nonetheless, as leader of the country Ward’s abilities were somewhat lacking, particularly because he assumed the role after the tragic death of Seddon. Compared to Seddon his speeches were never as good, his policies never as successful, and his control over the government and his own party less firm and assured (Bassett, 1993, pp. 189 & 200). Certainly he was popular among the electorate, which is why he lasted so long in parliament. Yet his lack of ability is why in 1912 his own party asked him to step down as leader, a significant reason why the Liberals were finally defeated in the 1912 election, and why he is little remembered in the 21st century outside of academic circles.

The second example that shows the value of ability is epitomised in the person of Ward’s chief rival, William Ferguson Massey. Massey holds the record as the second longest serving Prime Minister with a total of 12 years and 304 days in office from 1912 to 1925. Known as “Farmer Bill” or “Old Bill” by his contemporaries, he was a transparently sincere leader who inspired confidence and affection among the electorate (Sweetman, 2011, p. 84).

Massey's chief talent was that he was a competent organiser. When he first entered politics, the faction he joined was a "small, dispirited and effectively leaderless group of conservative independents" (Patterson, 2011, p. 53). More than any other individual it was Massey who changed this state of affairs, fashioning this disparate group into the Reform Party and leading it to victory, driving the Liberals into opposition for the first time in over two decades.

This in itself is remarkable, but where Massey really distinguished himself was in his leadership of the nation during World War One. During the war Massey made it a priority to visit the soldiers near the front, where he became popular among the soldiers because of his care for the wounded (Harper, 2011, p. 95). He was a frequent critic of the British war effort – which he saw as too callous and wasteful – and was one of the first to say that the Battle of Passchendaele was a disaster that should never have happened (Olssen, 2011, p. 25). In terms of international politics he was an influential figure at the Versailles Peace Conference and in London, where "he ... won more rights for New Zealand than most New Zealanders wanted" (Olssen, 2011, p. 27). His competent leadership during this conflict led to a landslide victory in the first election after the war, a tide he continued to ride until his death in 1925 when he, like Seddon and Savage, died in office (Harper, 2011, p. 95).

Although this essay is hardly comprehensive, and could discuss only a few examples, it does show how critical these three attributes are in making a good Prime Minister. First and foremost is character. A Prime Minister should be a person of integrity, honesty and good conscience who can be relied upon to do their duty. Secondly, they should have a worthy political vision for the country. This will prove they are willing to invest themselves in the job, handling with the work-load and stress with diligence and passion. Lastly, a Prime Minister needs to have the ability and talent to do the job properly. If a person can combine these three attributes, with ability guided by vision and vision underpinned by character then no matter which political party they may be from, they will be well upon their way to becoming a worthy Prime Minister.

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