

What makes a good Prime Minister of New Zealand?

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About the author

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We New Zealanders are all pioneers. Every one of us has a migrant story to tell. Our ancestral lines recede back to lionhearted waka-riders, intrepid gold miners, fearless farmers and bold globetrotters. Ours is not a population of sticks-in-the-mud, it is an iwi of pioneers. This simple, historic fact has shaped our culture and imbued us with three ‘pioneer values.’ A good pioneer requires: care *manaaki*, courage *kaha* and craft *pūmanawa*. To lead a nation of pioneers, one’s character must be replete with all three elements of this potent tryptic. Therefore, I contend that the characteristics and skills required to be a good Kiwi Prime Minister (PM for short – we New Zealanders are renowned for our colloquialisms) are nicely distilled in these pioneer values. Further, I submit that the most positive actions taken, and words spoken, by our PMs are rooted in these values. The remainder of my short piece fleshes out this idea. I discuss the prime ministership, then I introduce and consider the origins of Aoteroa’s ‘pioneer values.’ I also sketch out some historic examples of our PMs at their refulgent and articulate best. Finally, I underscore the importance of the question which this essay seeks to answer, namely: “what makes a good Prime Minister for New Zealand?”

[tahi] Prime ministership

From the self-effacing Henry Sewell (1853-1876) to the gregarious John Key (2008-present), we have had 38 different Prime Ministers and Premiers.¹ To write coherently about what makes a ‘good’ Prime Minister, we must understand what the role entails. In the dull, operational tones of the 2008 Cabinet Manual the Prime Minister: “head[s] government, chairs Cabinet and has a general coordinating responsibility across all areas of government.”² But moving away from the tedium of parliamentary scrolls affords a deeper insight into the real nature of Prime-ministership. The tersest and most nearly accurate description comes from Helen Clark’s 1981 maiden speech to Parliament. The future PM told the house that: “My greatest wish is that at the end of my time in this House, I shall have contributed towards making New Zealand a better place than it is today for its people to live in.”³ I would add an addendum to Helen’s powerful statement. A PM’s role is certainly to make New Zealand a better place to live in, but it is also to make the whole world a better place to live in. In a recent speech to the United Nations Security Council, John Key extolled New Zealand’s international leadership, noting that: “small states have a positive contribution to make.”⁴ A Kiwi PM has the weight of both New Zealand and the world on their shoulders. The only way to bear such a weighty burden is with the pioneer values which shape our culture.

1 Henry Sewell’s humbleness was on display for all to see when he responded to his 1853 nomination to the General Assembly by ‘blushing’ and writing in his diary that: “My reasons are there are no persons at all fit, and I may be able to help.” See: Guy H. Scholefield, *Notable New Zealand Statesmen: Twelve Prime Ministers* (Chch.: Whitcombe & Tombs, 1946), 40-41. John Key’s chumminess is fast becoming legendary and hardly needs citation.

2 Office New Zealand. Cabinet, “Cabinet Manual 2008,” (Wellington, N.Z.: Cabinet Office, Dept. of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2008), 4.

3 These words were so powerful she echoed them in her 2009 valedictory speech. See: Helen Clark, “Full Text: Helen Clark’s Valedictory Speech,” (2009), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/politics/2324599/Full-text-Helen-Clarks-valedictory-speech>.

4 John Key, “John Key’s Speech to the United Nations,” (2015), <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/72629197/john-keys-speech-to-the-united-nations>.

[rua] Pioneer values

Poet Denis Glover once described our small collection of islands as a place where God “made mountains and fissures; Hostile, vicious and turned; Away His face.”⁵ Yet despite the inhospitable climbs, people settled here. From the “First Colonization” in the 13th Century to the present, many have braved the journey to our antipodean archipelago.⁶ To survive among this land’s “dark deep-rooted hills” and “tenacious mountain tussock”, one requires a pioneering outlook.⁷ And to be a successful pioneer one needs to possess the values of care *manaaki*, courage *kaha* and craft *pūmanawa*.

First, what is care? Care is neither exactly compassion nor empathy. Both of these concepts are too passive to describe what I mean. Care is at once a verb and noun. It describes the active interpersonal relationships that grow in pioneer communities. The steadfast bonds of whanau, hapu, iwi and tribe characterized early settler society and, in the face of bracing environmental challenges, grew to become unbreakable. Absent an ethos of care for one another, early New Zealand pioneers would have simply fallen into the sea. Judith Binney’s whanua-centric approach to history in the brilliant *Redemption Songs* highlights the centrality of community and the care ethos to early New Zealanders.⁸ Our people-orientated nature is captured in the proverb: He aha te mea nui o te ao; He tangata, he tangata, he tangata. This very same caring ethos also led esteemed filmmaker Peter Jackson to describe New Zealand as “not a small country, but a large village.”

Second, *kaha* or courage is a necessary trait for those of pioneering inclination. It takes certain something to up-sticks and immigrate to a cluster of islands “prised loose from” its neighbours 80 million years ago.⁹ What it takes is courage. Courage is not bravery; bravery is too outward-facing an idea and too close to boldness to truly capture the essence of *kaha*. Courage is an inner and outer strength. It is the resilience we pioneers need to last. In 1865, Jane Oates wrote heartbreakingly of her experience in the Wairarapa “my children have had to go barefoot...[Samuel] Oates sold the clothes off his back...it is a miserable place in winter and not fit to live in.”¹⁰ It took great inner courage to bear the material privations of pioneer life, and this courage has never left us.

Finally, pioneers need craft or *pūmanawa*. Craft is simply the ability to do a lot with a little. According to Micahel King “It was the adaptation to the new environment of the concepts and practices they [early pioneers] brought with them, and the new skills and practices they developed to meet unfamiliar environmental challenges that transformed East Polynesian culture into that of New Zealand Maori.”¹¹ These innovative skills and practices included new-fangled hunting methods and the cultivation of root vegetables. This diversification of Maori economy led to a “well-nourished and healthy” population within a few decades of landfall.¹² In parallel, modern refugees to Aotearoa face innumerable challenges. Yet many are able to make the most of near impossible circumstances; according to 2009-10 figures, nearly

5 Jock Phillips, “Perceptions of the Landscape - Landscape and Identity: 1930s–1960s,” *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2012), <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/perceptions-of-the-landscape/page-6>.

6 Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (2003), 61.

7 Dennis Glover, “Holiday Piece,” in *An Anthology of Twentieth Century New Zealand Poetry*, ed. Vincent O’Sullivan (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1979).

8 Judith Binney, *Redemption Songs: A Life of Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki*, ed. Creative New Zealand (Auckland, N.Z.: Auckland University Press Bridget Williams Books, 1995).

9 King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, 21.

10 *The Lives of Pioneer Women in New Zealand from Their Letters, Diaries and Reminiscences*, ed. Sarah Ell, *Pioneer Women in New Zealand* (Auckland, N.Z.: Gordon Ell, Bush Press, 1993), 47.

11 *The Penguin History of New Zealand*, 62-3.

12 *Ibid.*, 65-66.

half of New Zealand's refugee population get by without public assistance.¹³ Clearly, being able to do a lot with a little runs thick and fast through today's journeymen (and women) as it did those of yesteryear.

I believe that the three pioneer values of *manaaki*, *kaha* and *pūmanawa* are the chief prerequisites for a good Kiwi PM. It is all very well for me to assert this, but how closely does my claim fit with our shared history? The first thing to say is that the record of New Zealand Prime Ministership is a proud one, though it is not without blemishes. First rate 'warts and all' style accounts of NZ PMs are very accessible.¹⁴ But this is not my brief, my task is a more positive one. So I intentionally skirt the warts of our political leaders, and aim for the beauty spots. Since history is "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts", it is important that this preliminary bias is clear.¹⁵ So, I call what follows 'an optimist's political history of New Zealand.' My subject matter is the oratory and actions of PMs, my analytical framework is our pioneer values.

[toru] A history

History is the study of crucial moments. New Zealand has experienced many moments which have shaped our national experience and which undergird our historic narrative. All the while, the PM has set Aotearoa's political pulse both domestically and internationally. I believe that ever-present in the most seminal and positive of our PMs' actions are our pioneer values of care, courage and craft.

First, let us look at care *manaaki*. It is clear that an ethos of care pervades key Prime-ministerial moments on the home front. Social welfare is the most obvious example of our caring ethos. In 1938, then PM Michael Savage delivered a stirring budgetary address. In it he explained his vision for the future: "I want to see humanity secure against poverty, secure in illness or old age."¹⁶ Michael's vision established our social welfare state. Regardless of how thick or thin party politics render it, our welfare apparatus stands testament to Savage's foresight and the value of a caring PM at home. Other standout examples of the care ethos are John Key's personal charity efforts and Richard Seddon's people-centric leadership.

Abroad, New Zealand hoists the banner of *manaaki* more than most. In a reptilian international environment it can be hard for a nation's representatives to retain moral uprightness. Not so for Jim Bolger. On Jim's behalf, New Zealand diplomats in the United Nation's Security Council pushed hard for intervention in the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Despite our efforts the genocide claimed nearly a million victims. Though our caring approach to foreign policy did not go unseen; it was noted after the fact that: "the only members of the Security Council who cared [about Rwanda] were New Zealand and the Czech Republic."¹⁷ Our Tamper policy under the Clark government and Norman Kirk's U-turn on the 1973 Springbok tour are other examples of our uniquely care-based foreign policy.

Kaha means courage. The strongest evidence for the courage of New Zealand PMs comes from our autonomous foreign policy. The most well-known example is David Lange's willingness to fracture ANZUS on the ethical precept that "Nuclear weapons are morally indefensible."¹⁸ His eloquent defence of this position in a 1985 debate is legendary, but it was his willingness to face downgrade a long-standing

13 ChangeMakers Refugee Forum, "People with Refugee Backgrounds Can Do the Job", (Wellington: ChangeMakers, 2012), 7.

14 Michael Bassett's highly readable – though not always strictly neutral - political biographies of Lange, Fraser and Ward are a as a good a place to start as any.

15 Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (1961), 23.

16 Barry Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave: A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage* (1986), 224.

17 Jim McLay, "Tracing Our Footsteps; New Zealand and the Un Security Council," Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand, <http://www.mfat.govt.nz/Media-and-publications/Media/MFAT-speeches/2010/0-25-August-2010.php>.

18 It was Lange's "crowning achievement as Prime Minister" according to Jon Johansson. See: Jon Johansson, *Two Titans : Muldoon, Lange and Leadership*, 2 Titans (Wellington, N.Z.: Dunmore Publishing, 2005), 148.

defence agreement with America in the same year that showed true courage (we quickly went from ‘allies’ to ‘friends’). A matter of months later, David was again thrust into the atomic limelight over French nuclear testing in the Pacific. The resultant protests and Rainbow Warrior bombing in 1986 were political crises of the highest order. New Zealand, not to be bullied, responded with resolute and legitimate legal action in the International Court of Justice. David’s take on this issue was simple, and his words speak louder than mine: “We are an enemy of the nuclear threat and we are an enemy of testing nuclear weapons in the South Pacific. New Zealand did not buy into this fight. France put agents into New Zealand. France put spies into New Zealand. France lets off bombs in the Pacific.”¹⁹ It took great *kaha* for David to set New Zealand’s proud nuclear-free course.

The remaining of my three ‘pioneer values’ is craft or *pūmanawa*. The ability to do a lot with a little is a trait that characterizes many PMs, but a handful of examples at home and abroad will illustrate my point. First, our PMs have a predilection for no.8-wire style diplomacy. In 1999 New Zealand roughed it with the big boys, entering a trade dispute with America over lamb tariffs. Our no.8-wire approach was crucial in scoring an important victory. Then PM Jenny Shipley promised to leave “no stone unturned in our lobbying” against the tariffs.²⁰ It was this informal lobbying alongside our solidarity with Australia and extensive use of World Trade Organization channels that eventually led to the repeal of trade restrictions in 2001. This was diplomatic craftsmanship at its finest. Other examples of international *pūmanawa* abound. The most relevant today is the Clark and Key governments’ diligent approach to China’s rise, which has seen New Zealand accede into the enviable position of honest broker in the Asia-Pacific. Clearly, our PM’s penchant for craft allows New Zealand to punch above its weight internationally. Second, craft is a vital Prime ministerial trait domestically. John Ballance provides two important illustrations of this. First, in 1892 John broke with convention and instituted a progressive income tax and a land tax, much to the dismay of wealthy land-owners. His policy was raucously slated at home and abroad. His chiders were promptly muted a few years later when in 1892 his government booked record budget surpluses. Second, John’s oratory helped propel the burgeoning women’s suffrage cause. John often made bold statements in the house to this effect; in 1890, for example, he declared that: “I believe in the absolute equality of the sexes, and I think they should be in the enjoyment of equal privileges in political matters.”²¹ This and other statements contributed to the eventual achievement of women’s suffrage in 1893. The actions of Jenny, Helen, and both Johns espouse the very finest of our pioneer values.

[whā] Why the question matters

There are two reasons why the question “what makes a good Prime Minister for New Zealand?” matters. First, the nature of our democracy means that this is a question that we confront on an approximately triannual basis. Our next election is scheduled for 2017. Before this date, it is of the utmost importance that New Zealanders think carefully about what makes a good PM. A brief look at our history suggests to me that a good PM must espouse the best of our pioneer values. Indeed, such a reflective sentiment would certainly fit with Michael King’s immortal guideline for modern Kiwis: “We’ve got to be able to trace our own footsteps and listen to our own voices or we’ll cease to be New Zealanders, or being New Zealanders will cease to have any meaning.”²²

Second, Aotearoa is a world leader. Our list of home-grown world-firsts is long and swelling fast: in 1893 women won the right to vote; in 1899 the eight hour working day was enacted; in 1903 Richard

19 Michael King, *Death of the Rainbow Warrior* (Auckland, N.Z.: Penguin, 1986), 200.

20 New Zealand Government, “Lamb Tariff Unacceptable - Prime Minister,” news release, 08/07/2015, 1999, <http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA9907/S00110.htm>.

21 Tim McIvor, “Ballance, John,” in *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand* (2013).

22 *Michael King a Moment in Time*, (New Zealand): Go Go Media, 2007).

Pearse manned the first solo flight; in 1953 a lad from Auckland climbed Mt. Everest; in 2008 *The Lord of the Rings* swept all eleven of its Academy Award nominations. We are trailblazers across the board. Consequently, other nations look to our example. They look to us to see the positive impact a caring, courageous and crafty pioneering country can have on the world. The sweeping international support for our 2014 UN Security Council seat bid highlights this global esteem. Since we are a role model for nations around the world, the question “what makes a Prime Minister good for New Zealand?” matters not just for God’s Own but for the whole globe too. As Aotearoa goes, so the world follows.

[rima] Reflections

In a mere 2,500 words I have tried to grasp the personality traits and skills that make a good New Zealand PM. I have argued that a good PM must espouse the best of our pioneer values. These values of care manaaki, courage kaha and craft pūmanawa have long, deep roots in our pioneering history and continue to shape our experiences to this day. Word limit considerations restricted the breadth of my ‘optimistic political history of New Zealand,’ as a result some great PMs missed out. Yet despite its brevity, my review indicates that Kiwi PMs act in accordance with the pioneer values of care, courage and craft. Moreover, they do so at the seminal and positive moments in our young nation’s history. *Kia Ora.*

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