

# What makes a good Prime Minister of New Zealand?

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## About the author

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Leadership is a complex concept, necessitating vast amounts of patience, determination, and passion to work with others towards a position of improvement in the chosen field of expertise or service. Leaders not only bear the burden of setting the direction of actions or inactions for their team, but are also often accountable to stakeholders, with varying degrees of accountability and size of the cohort to which a leader is accountable. However, there is no more complex job in existence than the leadership of a country like New Zealand — this burden falls squarely on the Prime Minister, in charge of policy both foreign and domestic, all the while totally accountable to each and every citizen in his or her realm. Unsurprisingly, some make a better fist of it than others, with the essence of this good leadership a highly sought commodity. Three areas are critical to ensuring a Prime Minister can effectively lead — a measurement of how 'good' they are at their job — these fall under the umbrellas of political, social, and economic leadership ability. Politically, Prime Ministers must have foreign credibility, alongside the ability to form a cohesive support team. Socially a Prime Minister must not only recognize and promote popular ideas, but must also be relatable in part to the people. Economically, they must be able to be future-thinking, and be able to work with businesses while retaining their independence and position of status. With these all met, their ability to affect real change in New Zealand society is at its highest potential.

Within the political system, power is held by the populace at large, and welded by the leadership of the country — often in great part by the Prime Minister. With the mandate domestically to lead, Prime Ministers invariably turn to the international community for acceptance and willingness to interact on a world platform, recognizing New Zealand's place in an increasingly interconnected world (Pettman, 2005). However, this alone is not enough to distinguish a good leader. Instead, begrudging respect for a Prime Minister from the international community, alongside the ability to hold their own in the face of adversary from conceivably 'greater' world powers, can be seen as the mark of a great leader. New Zealand's geographically isolated location necessitates staunch and proactive ability in foreign relations to ensure the continuity of New Zealand on the terms of the New Zealand people (Patman, 2005). Numerous Prime Ministers have extolled this value, and are hence highly regarded in academia and wider society for their leadership ability with other nations. Notably, Prime Ministers including Norman Kirk and David Lange gained respect from many within the international community for their stances on the Vietnam War and nuclear policy respectively, with Kirk withdrawing New Zealand from the Vietnam War in 1972 and sending naval assets in protest to French nuclear testing in 1973, while Lange is immortalized for his nuclear-free policy (Bassett, 2013) (Gustafson, 2013). More presently, Helen Clark's ability on the world stage has been rewarded with the United Nations confirming her as the head of the US\$5 billion United Nations Development Programme, while current Prime Minister John Key has been continually recognized for strong international leadership, with both the Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and American President Barack Obama praising his abilities (Radio New Zealand, 2013) (Sydney Morning Herald, 2015).

The mark of true leadership can often be seen in the ability for a leader to both pick a cohesive team, and gear them towards significant positive impacts in their areas of service. Prime Ministers, having the ability to allocate ministerial portfolios as they see fit, as well as the assignment of the Chief Justice and Governor-General, can be adjudicated on the performance of his or her company (The House of Commons, 2009). Prime Ministers with good leadership ensure that their fellow Cabinet colleagues are able to, and succeed in completing, their attained tasks and areas of responsibility for the betterment of all New Zealanders. To do this, Prime Ministers must be able to judge the character, skills and ability of (potential) Ministers to ensure that full and comprehensive service will be given, and that outcomes will be achieved (Laski, 2014). David Lange ensured to retain a solid team of workers in Cabinet during the Fourth Labour Government, placing Roger Douglas in the Finance role, Geoffrey Palmer as Attorney-General, and Helen Clark in both Health and Housing (Gustafson, 2013). Similarly, Jim Bolger selected a strong Cabinet with Ruth Richardson in charge of Finance, Don McKinnon looking after Foreign Affairs and Jenny Shipley controlling Social Welfare (Prebble, 2015). Clark, in the Fifth Labour Government, continued this with the appointment of Ruth Dyson for Social Development and Michael Cullen to Finance (Eichbaum, 2012). John Key has further cemented this good judgement, with Bill English seen as one of the best Finance Ministers ever, alongside Amy Adams in Justice and Judith Collins in Police and Corrections (DPMC, 2015).

Leaders must inevitably ensure society is positively impacted by their work. As a result, Prime Ministers, responsible and accountable to ‘the people’ at large, are continually promoting and evaluating policy options conceived and further refined to change their lives of new Zealanders in a plethora of ways, from regulation to ensure the necessary conditions for business to occur exist, laws to protect citizens, government expenditure to provide good and service for citizens, and taxation to ensure the government has the financial capacity to discharge their duties (Cheyne et.al, 2011). They face tough and complex decisions surrounding policy options. Will a certain policy be popular with the people? If it isn’t, will it regardless provide a public good or service that will be beneficial? Good Prime Ministers are this who are able to receive numerous viewpoints on a particular topic or policy and then coalesce these into analysis that provides the benefits weighed against any costs and risks. They must then go further, selling their decision to the public and ensuring there is support and acceptance of the position taken by their government by a majority of New Zealanders to ensure the benefits can be granted to citizens (Geddes & Zaller, 1989). Michael Savage’s First Labour Government certainly achieved this, with the Social Security Bill and other policy changes responding to a genuine need by the New Zealand people and in the process cementing his ability to bring about change with the consent of the people (Gustafson, 2014).

Similarly, Clark’s actions around Superannuation payments and a revamp of Education in the form of the National Certificate of Educational Achievement also represent these aforementioned needs to provide actions on issues critical to New Zealanders (New Zealand Herald, 2009).

Political leaders, due to their position of representing the people and hence responsible them, must retain varied communication with the populace. For this reason, relatability is crucial to being a good Prime Minister. Leaders must be able to make constituents feel comfortable with that leader in the position that they’ve been elected. In our representative democracy, that means leaders must appeal to the sense of normalcy and neighborly bond present in great swathes of the population (Fung, 2006). This sense of ‘commonality’ for Prime Ministers ensures their legislative agendas are allowed to progress with popular support and ensure the implementation of any policy is smooth as the populace embraces policy championed by someone revered as an icon of the nation but also someone with the ability to speak to the people, and more importantly, with the people on important topics and convince them around the

right direction to move forward by (Forbes, 2012). Savage was a chief example of this, with his manner working with the people for the people and ensuring that people were protected by what was, at the time, system to support cities in need (Gustafson, 2014). This view is reinforced by the story where he assisted a family to move furniture into a state house (Baker, 2014). Lange is similarly remembered as a great Prime Minister because of his ability to remain ‘in touch’ with the views of New Zealanders and communicate policy to all New Zealanders in a way that galvanized public opinion and support for his enactment of policy, including his nuclear free policy and firm stance in the face of American indignation (Gustafson, 2013).

The last of three broad areas critical to assess the ability of a Prime Minister is economic, in recognition not only the massive impact a Prime Minister and their government can have on the economic climate, but the impact the economy can have on each and individual private citizen in New Zealand and ergo the need for Prime Ministers to closely monitor and react to in a prompt manner to ensure stability and continuity of New Zealand’s way of life (Oxford Economics, 2015). Pivotal to economic leadership is the ability to be forward focused and having awareness of the long-term. This provides greater information and often certainty to both businesses and households, allowing for future planning and investment and a progressive agenda of changes with options to scale projects to enhance benefits. A long term outlook for progress also allows policies to be trialed and implemented towards reducing systemic and cyclical issues that might require longer time frames to comprehensively resolve, such as poverty eradication where a generational cycle may exist (Harvard Business School, 2013). Kirk’s recognition of Treaty of Waitangi through legislation was seen by many to be a long term move, with policy surrounding its enactment and subsequent use still seen to this day. He also brought about reforms of housing availability, social welfare provision to ensure the long term livelihood of those unable to provide for themselves, and investment in education to future-proof educational assets such as schools for future generations (Bassett, 2013). Some core policy directions of the Key administration can also be seen to be focused in the future, with changes in housing provision to community administered housing being an option to ensure housing is better available for years to come, while attention is also on bringing down Crown debt to sustainable levels to ensure fiscal maneuvering if needed in the future (Treasury, 2015).

Lastly, good Prime Ministers must keep a balance between sound private business engagement and governmental independence. New Zealand’s market position in the world dictates a strong need for collaboration between central government and the business sector to ensure conditions conducive to profitability and adequate consumption (Treasury, 2005). As previously stated, New Zealand’s future is inextricably linked with that of its economic ability, meaning a good Prime Minister should be able to discuss policy options with businesses for the common goal of prosperity for the public, while ensuring that they as Prime Minister retain their integrity and ability to enact policy without undue pressure from some areas of society, for example businesses, for the betterment of all (New Zealand Government, 2015). Lange was one such Prime Minister that was able to achieve this balance, working with the corporate sector on the privatization of state assets, and ensuring free-market access while containing the potential adverse impacts of these as leader (Gustafson, 2013). Clark further emphasized the need for business integration with her moves to ensure market stability with Air New Zealand and later KiwiRail, alongside her promotion of the Buy Kiwi Made campaign (New Zealand Herald, 2009). Key in his current term as Prime Minister is again displaying this with the mixed ownership model sell down of government control of electricity assets, and the introduction of employment relations law to allow for better business choice around employees and minimum wage changes (James, 2015).

New Zealand’s Prime Minister bears the unique burden of responsibility for the entire population – accountable to each individual in Aotearoa for policy decisions made not necessarily by him but his government. Good leadership has here been characterized by the ability to succeed in the political,

social and economic spheres. Politically, foreign relationship are key to ensuring policy action, while the ability to construct a crack team of expert supporters in Cabinet is also core to success domestically. Society demands that a Prime Minister work for the improvement of public outcomes, resulting in the need for a Prime Minister to promote and sell policy ideas to the public for approval, with relatability is also necessary for effective leadership. The economy is a core driver of New Zealand, necessitating a strong emphasis by successful Prime Ministers on the economic prosperity of the country through long term foresight and planning, alongside the ability to work well with businesses while remaining independent and able to enact policy without restriction. Throughout, revered New Zealand Prime Minister such as Michael Savage, Norman Kirk, David Lange, Jim Bolger, Helen Clark and incumbent John Key have been mentioned for their ability to demonstrate these abilities. However, each decisions and Prime Minister must be assessed on their own merits by studying the mood of the people at the time. Successful Prime Ministers are all are swiftly rewarded for the good work they do, and just as swiftly demoted if the reverse occurs.

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