

*Kiwi Keith: A Biography of Keith Holyoake.* By Barry Gustafson. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007. viii, 429pp. NZ price: \$59.95. ISBN 978-1-86940-400-0.

THIS IS A COMPREHENSIVE and eminently readable biography which will confirm the view of those who, like this reviewer, rate Keith Holyoake highly among New Zealand's twentieth-century Prime Ministers.

Keith Holyoake's early life and career are covered briefly. His rural upbringing is not sentimentalized, and the early promise of his first period in Parliament is noted. I would have liked a little more on the beginnings of Holyoake's relationship with Norma Ingram; she emerges through brief references as forceful and down to earth. There is a full discussion of the deal by which Holyoake secured his Pahiatua farm; the purchase price was not far short of a million dollars in today's terms and Holyoake had to find only a sixth of it. Although not exactly improper, it is clear that Holyoake was not averse to mixing business and politics. His long association with A.E. Davy is also hard to reconcile with the image of the benign centrist.

The discussion of the Holland administration and Holyoake's part in it is a prelude to the long premiership. Holyoake was a successful and competent Minister of Agriculture, and his instincts in 1951 were a little more conciliatory than Sidney Holland's and William Sullivan's. I would have liked more on the broad approach of that administration; apart from Holland's last disastrous year there is little on Holyoake as Deputy Prime Minister. The decade was one of growing prosperity for Holyoake, though, and his interest at Kinloch is well discussed. While again avoiding outright impropriety, Holyoake did not remain at arm's length; no doubt officials and commercial men were more than happy to assist the schemes of a senior politician.

Holyoake's four straight election wins remains a post-1914 record, but his success was not preordained. The group around John Marshall and Leslie Munro was much more right-wing than Holyoake, and some leading businessmen contemplated funding an Auckland party leader, an unsavoury approach which has resurfaced more recently. This discussion is extensive and valuable. The right-wing gave Holyoake an opportunity to develop, and certainly to expound, his centrist philosophy.

There is much discussion of foreign policy. Holyoake was his own Foreign Minister, initially because of the stature the portfolio gave him. The insular provincial of 1960 became shrewd and deft over the decade, and quickly developed considerable liberal instincts, earning the respect of Alister McIntosh and other officials. After McIntosh's retirement, Holyoake allowed George Laking considerable autonomy. Between them, Holyoake, Laking and Frank Corner developed a foreign policy that seriously annoyed the British by its emphasis on independence and alignment with emerging states in the third world.

Barry Gustafson demonstrates convincingly that Holyoake was quietly but strongly anti-nuclear. He renounced the weapons for New Zealand and vocally opposed testing, again despite British and American displeasure. He always engaged seriously with the disarmament lobby and shared ground with them. The contrast with Robert Muldoon is instructive. On other hot foreign policy potatoes Holyoake was also distinctly liberal. He resisted pressure from many quarters to delay self-government in the Cook Islands and insisted on UN oversight of the process. Holyoake's realism, tempered with a desire for compromise, was also evident in his approach to China, but I wondered if a whole chapter was justified. John Marshall does not emerge with credit from this account. Harold Wilson asked Holyoake to mediate with Ian Smith; on Rhodesia Holyoake also had to contend with the right-wing and racist views of some of his own ministers. He was necessarily much more cautious here and with respect to South Africa. Especially compared to a lot of his colleagues, Holyoake was a liberal internationalist and could even have made the refusal to prevent South African rugby tours seem defensible given his record; he remained distinctly left of Muldoon on foreign policy.

It is well known that Holyoake procrastinated on Vietnam and did the absolute minimum. Here the pressure was not only from the Americans and backwoodsmen in his own party, but also from McIntosh in what was easily the most egregious mistake of the latter's career. In the end, Holyoake was persuaded to make a commitment in order to preserve the American alliance, but his private communications to the US predicted exactly what happened between 1964 and 1975. He constantly sought a pathway to a negotiated peace, fearing not only continued bloodshed but also the end to New Zealand's foreign policy consensus and the loss of urban liberal support.

The other major foreign policy issue was the EEC. A brief discussion of Holyoake's approach to the British market in the mid-1950s, when fragility first became evident, would have been useful. As Prime Minister, Holyoake left most of the detailed negotiation to Marshall. Gustafson perhaps could have given greater emphasis to the fact that the export trend was to diversification well before 1973, which reinforced the British argument that New Zealand would survive and mature. In time, Holyoake came to appreciate this. Otherwise, there is only one relatively brief chapter on the economy, which is a little surprising given the firm oversight which Holyoake exercised (Henry Lang's praise of him as the cleverest man in New Zealand is high praise from that quarter). Holyoake's general approach to economic management rested on the importance of farming, restraint in public spending, gradual rather than radical change, private enterprise and competition, and informal corporatism. It was reasonably successful, and allowed more industrial development than Gustafson implies. Tom Shand's attack of conscience in 1966 was interesting given that he, like Holyoake, had been a party to exactly the same sort of postponement of bad news in 1957. With the exception of incomes policy I would give the government greater credit in the late 1960s; some readers might wish for more sense of the international economic context.

Economic difficulties coincided with Muldoon's elevation. Gustafson shows that Holyoake was initially very cautious about Muldoon and it still remains something of a mystery when and why his misgivings were overcome. What does emerge is that Brian Talboys had no more appetite to challenge Marshall than he later did to challenge Muldoon, and we may regret that such a decent and intelligent minister lacked that spark. In the end, one infers that Holyoake perceived Muldoon as the best chance to evict the Labour interlopers; the cost, unfortunately, was the destruction of Holyoake's National Party.

It was unfortunate, too, that Holyoake could not bring himself simply to retire from Parliament at the end of 1972 or 1975. Had he done so his appointment as Governor-General in 1977 would have been less objectionable. Complaints that the appointment tainted the office with partisanship are borne out by Gustafson's account of Holyoake masterminding the destruction of Rowling in 1975. In the end, although aging, Holyoake performed the vice-regal office well enough.

There are few shortcomings in this biography. The cartoons are too small. It might be thought that Gustafson sometimes overstates his case a little; Savage and Fraser were as self-consciously nationalist as Holyoake, unless one has to be born here to be a nationalist. There are many valuable vignettes, not only relating to Holyoake; if Shand treated Alan McCready's views with 'imperious contempt' then Shand rises in my esteem. This biography is an outstanding contribution to New Zealand's political history.

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