

The Mighty Totara: The Life and Times of Norman Kirk. By David Grant. Random House New Zealand, Auckland, 2014. 511pp. NZ price: \$44.99. ISBN: 9781775535799.

NORMAN KIRK'S brief prime ministership (21 months) stands at a pivotal point in the history of the New Zealand Labour Party. As one of five leaders of the nation to die in office (John Ballance 1893, Richard Seddon 1906, William Massey 1925, and Michael Joseph Savage 1940), 'Big Norm' has assumed a status within the folklore of the New Zealand Labour Party akin to that afforded Savage. In part, this reflects the hopes implicit in the slogan 'It's Time', which on successive weekends in 1972 carried Kirk, in New Zealand, and Gough Whitlam, in Australia, into power. On both sides of the Tasman, the 1950s and 1960s had been wilderness years for Labour, briefly relieved in New Zealand by the one-term Walter Nash government (1957–1960). The governments of Kirk and Whitlam espoused change and, in quite different ways, stimulated nascent expressions of national identity. Both leaders had their terms as prime minister cut short: Kirk tragically died in office in 1974 and Whitlam was controversially dismissed by the Governor-General of Australia the following year. The hopes each leader had engendered in 1972 were swept aside at the polls in 1975. The Australasian labour moment had passed.

David Grant constructs his substantial and convincing life of 'Big Norm' around the dynamics that lay behind this political moment. He suggests that Kirk's rise to prominence occurred at a transition point in the evolution of the New Zealand Labour Party. It was a process that ushered in changes in attitudes to leadership that reflected a philosophical shift taking place within the party. In its early years, Labour's style of leadership grew naturally enough from its origins as a party of protest. Harry Holland, who led the party from 1919 until his death in 1933, has been described as a leader who did not believe in leadership. During his period at the helm, he was effectively chairman of a Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) that, as a collective entity, defined policy and shaped party organization. Thereafter, as the party attempted to increase its parliamentary representation and sought to build up its mass membership base, this style of political leadership was difficult to maintain. By the time Kirk began to make his way within the party in the 1960s, activists of various hues — opponents of apartheid, environmentalists, members of the peace movement and the women's movement — were beginning to make their presence felt within party branches that were seeking a greater role in party affairs. Representing this newly evolving party required a style of leadership that accommodated greater democracy throughout the party.

It is a strength of Grant's biography that he recaptures the power of Kirk's appeal to this generation of New Zealanders, while also taking care to define its limits. As he demonstrates, within the Labour Party Kirk possessed a 'moral authority' rooted in an authentic working-class experience based upon a Salvation Army upbringing and embraced New Testament values. In the community halls of 1960s election campaigns, Kirk gave Labour a humane and dignified face and inspired a liberating sense of nationhood. The image of Kirk at Waitangi in 1973 walking hand-in-hand with 10 year-old Moana Priest, and the establishment that year of the Waitangi Tribunal, are rightly judged as embodying the spirit of the brief Kirk prime ministership.

Grant's engaging and comprehensive account reaches behind these images and demonstrates the extent to which Kirk embraced some elements of this change, but was at odds with others. Activists within the enhanced extra-parliamentary Labour

Party that Kirk had done much to build, advanced progressive social agendas that ran counter to Kirk's brand of moral conservatism. Kirk's attitude to these predominantly middle-class, socially liberal, university-educated newcomers was, as Grant shows, cautious. And, in his tendency to see the more permissive society that they sought as symptomatic of a general moral decline, Kirk may well have been closer to mainstream New Zealand opinion than the party activists. Whatever the nature of Kirk's reluctance to embrace the social agenda being promoted within the party, his hesitations did not prevent him from introducing a Domestic Purposes Benefit in 1973 against considerable opposition. And, as Grant makes clear, these difficulties need to be balanced against the popularity of his desire to reframe the nation's foreign policy, so that it was less concerned with appeasing Britain and America and more actively involved in the Pacific. Nowhere was this more boldly evident than in sending a frigate to disrupt French nuclear testing at Mururoa.

The hope of an 'Australasian moment' presided over by two Labour giants, Kirk and Whitlam, bent on expansionary and, in some respects, visionary agendas, was ultimately undone by unfavourable economic circumstances. Of neither leader could it be said that grappling with the economic realities of their day was a task they embraced with confidence or patience. It was a tragedy for Kirk and for New Zealand that declining health robbed him of both. Grant's balanced and perceptive life of New Zealand's last working-class leader allows us to understand the opportunity that passed New Zealand by when Norman Kirk died in office on 31 August 1974. Some 14 months later, on 11 November 1975, Sir John Kerr, the Governor-General of Australia sacked Whitlam in circumstances that divided the nation. Thus did dream become disillusion and politics on both sides of the Tasman seem somehow diminished.

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