

A Different Kind of Power?: A Memoir.

By Jacinda Ardern.

Auckland: Penguin Books, 2025.

RRP: \$59.99, ISBN: 9781776951277.

Reviewed by Josh Van Veen.

Jacinda Ardern's book, *A Different Kind of Power?: A Memoir*, skilfully weaves together the personal and the political. While some reviewers argue that Ardern gives short shrift to her record in government, the book will be an indispensable source for scholars. Ardern's introspection goes deeper than simply recounting events, or re-litigating policy debates, and can be read as a meditation on the important role of emotion in politics. If Ardern does avoid engaging with criticism of her government's record it is likely because this would detract from the central purpose of her memoir: to explain how, at the age of 37, she became prime minister in unlikely circumstances, and why it matters. Ardern did not succeed in transforming New Zealand, as she once promised to do, but her leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed qualities that are rare in a politician. The fact that New Zealand experienced fewer deaths from COVID-19, per head of population, than almost any other OECD country is a testament to Ardern.

To understand the deeper meaning behind Ardern's writing we should consider the Australian political scientist and biographer Judith Brett's advice that the main question a political biographer should ask of their subject is: *Why politics?*¹ In seeking to answer that question, Brett delves into her subjects' inner-lives to understand what motivated their early political ambitions. In the case of Robert Menzies, it was a childhood longing to be one of the great men in British history. For Alfred Deakin, it was Victorian spiritualism and a mystical belief that his destiny was interwoven with that of the fledgling Australian nation. Such grandiosity is not unusual in individuals who aspire to high office. Beginning with Harold Lasswell's 1930 classic *Psychopathology and Politics*, there is a voluminous literature on the application of psychological concepts to political leadership. Read in this context, Ardern's memoir is remarkable for the depth of self-analysis and humility.

Beginning with an evocative account of her formative years in the impoverished North Island town of Murupara, where Ardern's father served as police officer, most of the 352-page book is devoted to life before she became prime minister. Ardern tells us that she was 'four years old and unwell with the flu' (p. 6) when the family arrived in Murupara. The year was 1985 and the Fourth Labour Government, through a programme of financial deregulation and economic restructuring, had fully unleashed the forces of global capitalism on the New Zealand economy. Provincial towns such as Murupara that had relied on state-protected industries, such as agriculture and forestry, were soon devastated by job losses. Ardern writes: 'Businesses shuttered, and many families fell further into poverty' (p. 22). The memories of Murupara still haunt her. As a five year old she recalls seeing a small boy in distress, barefoot and 'carrying a giant backpack that dwarfed him completely'. She writes: 'I was still so young, but I was old enough to have a persistent thought. *He shouldn't be alone ... Please. Someone come and find him*' (p. 13). That persistent thought was the formation of a social conscience that would, one day, lead Ardern to politics.

Ardern's adult preoccupation with children and social justice comes into sharp focus here. From what we are told, Ardern herself never experienced material hardship. But life was not easy for the

Ardern family in Murupara. Her father Ross appears to have, on at least one occasion, been physically assaulted in the line of duty; and Ardern describes in some detail witnessing her mother Laurell suffer a breakdown. Later, after moving to Morrinsville, the family was also struck by tragedy when Ardern's maternal uncle was involved in a serious motor accident resulting in significant brain damage. The episode appears to have affected the seven-year-old Ardern so badly that she recalls being taken to see a doctor. Ardern writes: 'It would be years before my mother told me what the doctor actually said: that persistent stomach-aches are a common way that children manifest stress' (p. 34).

These poignant childhood memories have shaped Ardern's political outlook and reveal the source of her empathy; particularly when it comes to children. In a 2019 speech entitled 'Wellbeing a cure for inequality' the then-prime minister explained: 'I never viewed the world through the lens of politics then, and in many ways still don't. Instead I try to view it through the lens of children, people and the most basic concept of fairness.'² In her book, Ardern further expounds on her 'children first' philosophy: 'I was convinced that addressing policy challenges – justice issues, mental health, addiction and corrections – required focusing on children first' (p. 159). Yet, as Peter Skilling has argued, the Ardern Government's programme to end child poverty suffered from an unwillingness to acknowledge any causal link between extreme wealth concentration and deprivation.³ Her decision to rule out a capital gains tax and substantial increases in welfare payments appear to have been based not just on a political calculation, but a sincere belief that the problem of child poverty could be solved by incremental changes within the existing neoliberal paradigm.

Interestingly, there are no references in the book to intellectual influences that one may expect to have been shared with Labour peers. For example, former Cabinet minister and colleague David Parker has cited Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* as influential on his policy thinking.⁴ Chris Hipkins, Ardern's successor, has previously spoken of Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's book *The Spirit Level*.⁵ Nor does Ardern appear to idealise past prime ministers. The historical figure she most admires is the Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, identifying him with the values of 'courage, endurance, and survival' (p. 319). Ardern's idealisation of Shackleton may reflect a cultural belief of Pākehā New Zealanders, first observed by the French writer André Siegfried in the 1900s, that theory and ideas have no practical use in politics. Hers is a politics grounded in real human experience and pragmatism.

Of all the adults in her early life, three stand out as having the most political significance. They are Ardern's paternal grandmother, Gwaldys, her paternal aunt Marie, and her high school history teacher Mr Fountain. Gwaldys, we are told, joined the Labour Party of Michael Joseph Savage in 1938 and had been chair of the local party. 'She believed in looking after those who worked hard and had less, and wasn't shy about taking on those who didn't' (p. 35). But it is Aunt Marie, a Labour activist in New Plymouth, who is responsible for recruiting Ardern to join Harry Duynhoven's campaign team for the 1999 general election; a fateful act that would set Ardern on a path to parliament. Ardern writes: 'During the 1990s, either the politics of the time intensified, or I just became more politically aware' (p. 67). Enter Mr Fountain, 'the best teacher I'd ever had' (p. 69), who deepened Ardern's understanding of social justice. Mr Fountain also introduced Ardern to public speaking, thus providing the teenager with 'a more practical outlet' for her nascent political ambition. The influences of Marie and Mr Fountain appear to have counteracted the young

Ardern's self-doubt and a belief, encouraged by her father's career advice, that 'politics was a passion, not a profession' (p. 77). In the end, politics won out, and the rest is history.

A subtext of the book is Ardern's tortuous relationship with Mormonism. At times she writes fondly of attending Sunday school with her sister, her role as a youth leader, and the deep sense of community within the church. Early doubts about her faith were sown in childhood, following the tragic death of a family friend. But Ardern's first major crisis of faith appears to have occurred in her final year of university while on exchange at Arizona State University. Ardern writes: 'I'd come here thinking that Arizona would help me reconcile the increasing gap between my values and my religion. But it hadn't; if anything, that gap had started to feel more pronounced' (p. 103). Disturbed by American jingoism and racial prejudice in the aftermath of 9/11, Ardern's progressive liberal worldview only became more entrenched. But it was not until Ardern had established herself as a political staffer in Wellington that she resolved the cognitive dissonance of holding a liberal political identity and remaining with the church. The civil union debate of the early 2000s proved to be the final straw for Ardern. 'I finally accepted consciously what had been happening unconsciously for a long, long time' (p. 121).

Despite leaving the church, it is clear that Ardern still holds a place in her heart for the community that helped shape her early life. In recounting a meeting with the Mormon prophet, Russell M. Nelson, a few months after the Christchurch mosque shootings, Ardern describes the ultraconservative Nelson as 'kind' and 'non-judgemental'. 'Just as the church members I'd grown up with, and the missionaries I'd known, had been' (p. 268). Returning to the central question of political biography posited by Brett, why did this young Mormon woman from Morrinsville pursue a career in the Labour Party? Ardern's burning political ambition, motivated by a desire to help others and unite people, cannot be separated from her Christian upbringing. Indeed, it is a combination of religious and secular influences that made Jacinda Kate Laurell Ardern one of the most consequential leaders in New Zealand history.

¹ Judith Brett, *The Enigmatic Mr Deakin* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017), 8.

² Jacinda Ardern, "Wellbeing a Cure for Inequality," 25 September 2019. Available at <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/wellbeing-cure-inequality>.

³ Peter Skilling, "The sixth labour government on poverty and inequality: policy action and political language," *Political Science* 77, no. 1 (2024): 1–17.

⁴ David Parker, "Piketty, Inequality and Climate Change," speech delivered at *Juncture: Dialogues on Inclusive Capitalism*, University of Auckland, 30 September 2024.

⁵ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, Vol.660 (25 February 2010), 9369.