

*Reform: A Memoir*

By Geoffrey Palmer

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Reviewed by Jack Vowles

A reading of Geoffrey Palmer's *Reform: A Memoir* leaves one with two distinct impressions: the richness of its content, and its length (800 pages!). Only someone of the stature of Geoffrey Palmer could hope to publish anything like this book in New Zealand's contemporary publishing market, even taking into account the assistance of the Law Foundation. The book's main readers will be legal professionals, but the book will be of significant interest to those interested in recent New Zealand political history and international relations.

The account of the ANZUS dispute is valuable, putting into print Palmer's response to Gerald Hensley's recent book, *Friendly Fire*, and in particular its interpretation of what happened when the U.S.S. Buchanan was refused entry to New Zealand ports in 1985 because it could have been carrying nuclear weapons. Attempting to put pressure on the New Zealand government to agree to the visit, Australian sources had leaked news of the request prior to it being considered by the New Zealand Cabinet. The strategy was counterproductive, stirring up opposition, and at a time when Lange was inaccessible on a visit to the Tokelau Islands. Lange had not briefed Palmer or other members of the Cabinet prior to his departure, but Palmer makes the point that, because Lange did not anticipate the leaks, there was no reason why he should have done. The key players in the decision were Palmer, and Minister of Defence Frank O'Flynn, who both found the potential basis for agreement negotiated by officials too ambiguous to satisfy New Zealand public opinion. Palmer discusses in depth a series of subsequent meetings in the United States when it became clear that no compromise was possible, as the United States would not accept a legislative framework giving the New Zealand government the ability to refuse a ship visit on the basis of its own assessment of its nuclear weapon capability. He also questions the accuracy of some of the diplomatic record. Those wishing to make their own judgments can find the text of two of the key documents published in full: Palmer's memorandum to Lange sent to Tokelau, and his presentation to American officials in September 1985.

As Deputy Prime Minister during the Fourth Labour Government, Palmer took on far more of the coordination of government policy that is normally the case in that role. As is widely understood, David Lange had neither the patience nor the skills to take on those aspects of his job as Prime Minister. Palmer had no aspiration to be Prime Minister, and took the job in 1989 only because he felt obliged to do so. When he was challenged only weeks away from the 1990 election, he resigned rather than resisted, although he might have had the votes to continue. Palmer's sense of relief at stepping down and his greatly diminished confidence in his parliamentary colleagues comes through clearly in this section of the book.

The book also confirms, again, what many already understand: without Palmer, there would have been no shift to the Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) electoral system. His role was crucial in ensuring that the membership of the Royal Commission was not stacked in favour of the status quo: with some difficulty, perhaps not hitherto so publicly acknowledged, he reports that he resisted strong pressure to appoint retired National and Labour politicians who could have been depended on to resist change: as he puts it, 'it was a close-run thing'.

Readers will find many different points of interest in the book. Palmer's research into his family history in colonial Nelson provides insights into the nature of nineteenth century New Zealand society. Miles Fairburn's claim of low social cohesion and atomization is called into question. Palmer's description of his education in political science at Victoria University in the late 1960s will be of interest to political scientists, but probably few others. Those with an interest in international affairs will find discussion of his role in negotiating the aftermath of the Rainbow Warrior incident, his diplomatic efforts to reform the International Whaling Commission, and his involvement in mediating the Gaza flotilla incident. There is even more of likely interest to lawyers, of course: the establishment of Chen-Palmer, New Zealand's first specialist public law firm; and Palmer's role as President of the Law Commission. There is much material on his legal education, and touching on legal scholarship, including a somewhat arcane discussion of the origins of property law in the English tradition. Palmer's judgments on the declining quality of the public service, and the transformation of the practice of law from a profession to a business are also worth attention. His call for a Royal Commission into the public service makes a strong case that such an inquiry is overdue.

The title of the book conveys its main theme: reforming political and legal processes in New Zealand. Again, one is reminded of Palmer's importance in affecting change across many policy areas, most of great significance: Accident Compensation, the Resource Management Act, the Bill of Rights, and the Treaty of Waitangi, to name the most salient. This book documents a truly remarkable career of public service and will be a useful source of reference for political historians. Of even more significance, the book not only documents the reforms that have already been made: it outlines a manifesto for further change that is well worthy of attention.