

Sir Robert Muldoon

A contradictory political figure

BARRY GUSTAFSON

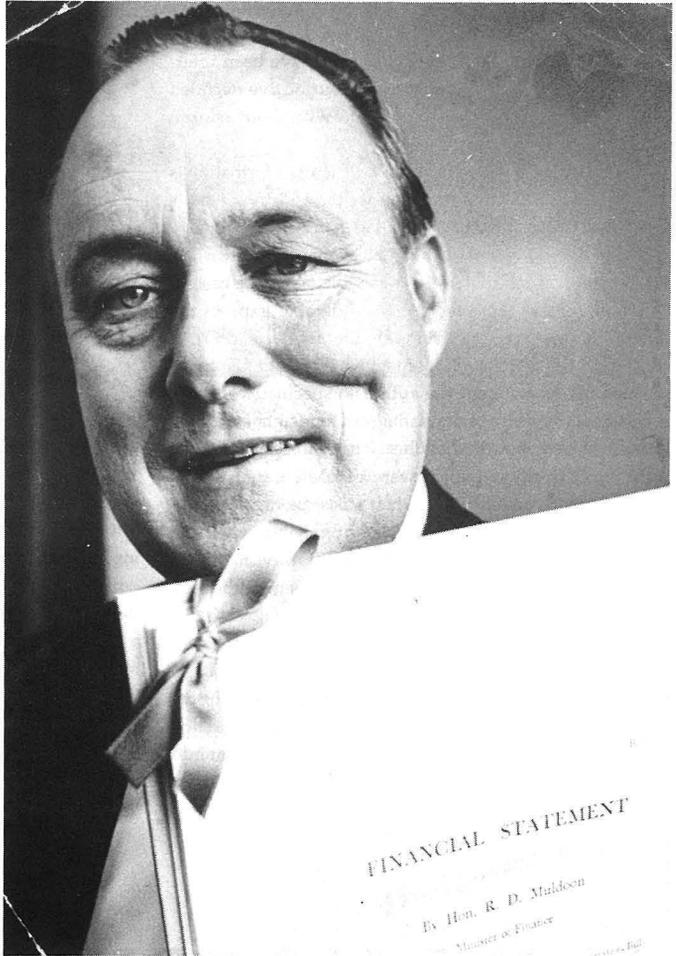
Dr Barry Gustafson, Professor of Politics, University of Auckland, Associate Dean of Arts and Head of the Arts Division on the Tamaki campus, is a well known commentator on New Zealand and East European politics. His biography of Michael Joseph Savage From the Cradle to the Grave was published in 1986. Professor Gustafson has completed most of his research for a biography of Sir Robert Muldoon.

Towards the end of 1988 Sir Robert Muldoon invited me, in my capacity as Chairman of the Auckland College of Education, to come onto his Radio Pacific talkback programme on a Sunday afternoon and discuss bicultural and bilingual education. During a news break he mentioned that he had just read for the second time my biography of Michael Joseph Savage, and had enjoyed it again. I replied that one day somebody would try to write a well researched biography of him and I hoped that whoever that person was he/she did not have the same trouble I had experienced in getting material on Savage's life. Muldoon said that was no problem as he had kept nearly everything in his archives. Almost as an afterthought I added that if he was prepared to be interviewed by me and to make his papers available I wouldn't mind attempting the task myself. His reply was to come round and talk with him at home the following morning.

Next day he met me at the door, ushered me into his lounge and after we had sat down and without any preamble said, 'Where do you wish to start?'. I replied that I thought we were going to discuss whether I would write the biography or not, but he had clearly made his mind up and simply said, 'Do you want to start interviewing me or do you want to know about my papers?'

Over the next few years I interviewed Sir Robert eight-

The young face of Muldoon, about to present the Budget as Minister of Finance. Dominion [24 June 1970].



een times for up to four hours on some occasions. While working chronologically we sometimes spent a whole session on a particular aspect of his philosophy, personality, policies or actions.

Sir Robert gave me the combination of a large safe and the keys to two large strong rooms in which he had deposited all his public and personal papers. The collection in quantity rivalled, and in quality probably surpassed, that of the fabled Nash papers. Muldoon also made available to me his parliamentary office, when he was not there, and the papers there and gave me free access to both his library and

the papers stored in his garage at home. I started work on the material early in 1989 and was able almost to complete the papers located in Wellington during a leave in early 1990. In 1991 and 1992 I worked on these in his home and also examined the papers of the National Party, the National Research Unit and various collections in the Turnbull Library.

I prepared a list of about 140 people whom I intended to interview and gave this list to Sir Robert for additions. He suggested another 40 most of whom were connected with his early or private life. Nearly all these have been interviewed although for varying reasons four or five declined and I still have to arrange a suitable time with about a dozen other people.

The writing of biography is very difficult; information is always only partial and both the writer and the writer's sources see things often from value-laden perspectives. There is always the danger that the subject may be lost in the context if too much material is available, as in the case of Muldoon, or that there may be considerable gaps in the author's knowledge concerning the life, motives and relationships of his or her subject, gaps which either leave question marks or tempt the author to speculate. There is also a danger as well as an advantage in hindsight – and any author needs to consider how his or her subject saw things at the time; decisions which were defensible then sometimes are clearly indefensible when measured against subsequent outcomes or knowledge not available when the decision was made. The writer of a biography must also balance the public figure against an assessment of the subject's private life and inner personality. The subject's life and a good biography are more than just lists of achievements, failures, virtues and vices. People are complex and often contradictory and one should go beyond a descriptive narrative into some kind of analytical assessment of the whole person without necessarily trying to force them into some psycho- or socio-biographical model.

I want to read you a description of a politician and ask you to picture the man and perhaps name him:

He was a shy man, self conscious from childhood about his height and looks and especially about a distinctive facial characteristic.

He was a man intellectually bright; clumsy but dogged at physical sport.

A man little influenced by his father but greatly influenced by a strong-willed, devoted mother and by a church upbringing that emphasised individual effort, diligence, responsibility and sobriety.

A man driven by insecurity who immersed himself in matters at hand and worked hard for everything he got and who believed that one should never be discouraged and should never stop fighting.

A man who made his reputation by talking tough, using scare tactics, exploiting bogus and peripheral issues, and who assumed that people reacted negatively and from fear rather than positively and from love.

A man who did not seek just to defeat his enemies and rivals but sought to destroy them, sometimes personally as well as politically.

A man who was the public defender of individualism and capitalism but who was prepared to work with socialists and communists and had a soft spot for the underdog and a contempt for the establishment.

A man barely tolerated, disliked or held in contempt by many in his own political party.

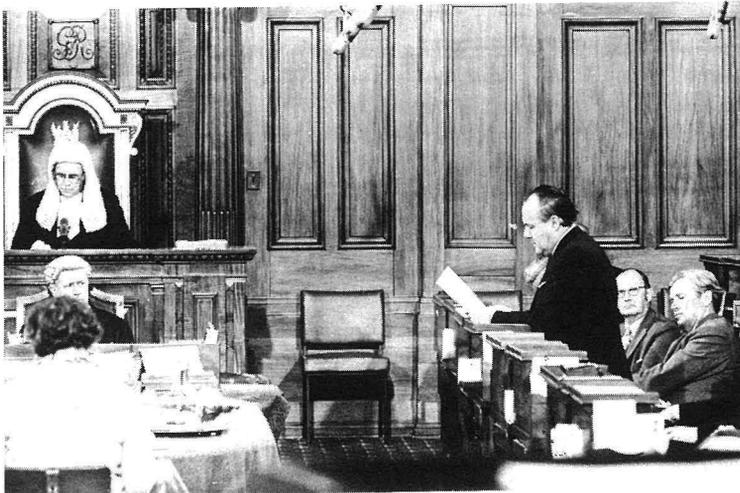
A man who trusted almost no-one, had few real friends, and was finally left to face his enemies alone.

The man I have just described was Richard Milhouse Nixon but I am sure that many of you thought that I was describing the subject of my biography Robert David Muldoon.

Rather than give a sequence of anecdotes about Muldoon I wish now to draw attention to just two questions of a more general nature. What is leadership and what is biography in particular political leadership and political biography?

Those of you who have read my biography of Michael Joseph Savage will recollect my debt to James McGregor Burns' book *Leadership* published in 1978 which divides

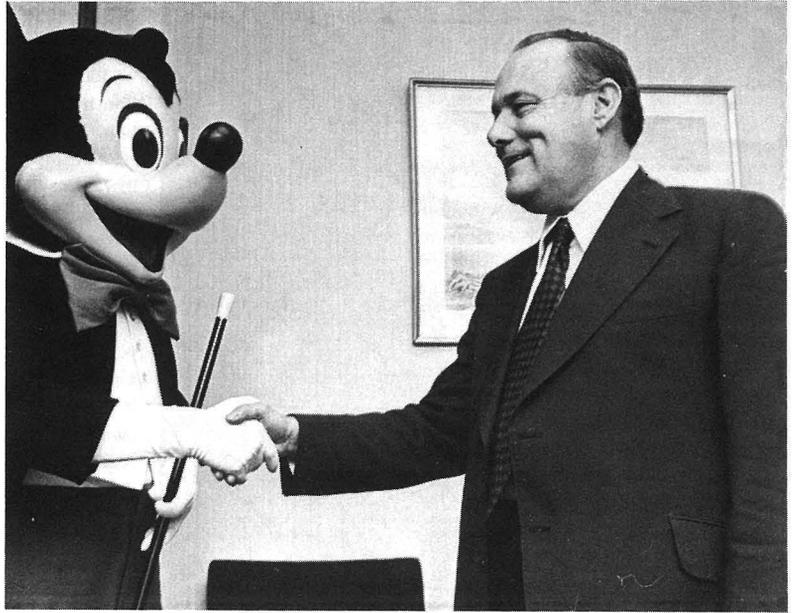
political leadership into two. On the one hand, you can have a high moral leadership which is rare and creative and goes beyond identifying and promising to meet the basic physiological leads of followers and potential followers for food, shelter, employment and security. On the other hand, there is a transac-



Left: Muldoon addresses Parliament. Dominion [date unknown].

Opposite: International diplomacy – Muldoon (right) meets Mickey Mouse. Dominion [date unknown].

tional leadership in which a politician bargains for votes by offering jobs, houses, pensions, and the satisfaction of the voters' short term needs, wants and emotions. The first kind of moral leader is one who seeks to inspire change; the second to manage the status quo. Moral leadership appeals to less selfish values and seeks to redefine people's legitimate personal aspirations and needs in such a way that, concurrently, the consciences of people are aroused and they are moved to righteous action. Needs become rights, rights become hopes, hopes become aspirations, and aspirations become expectations.



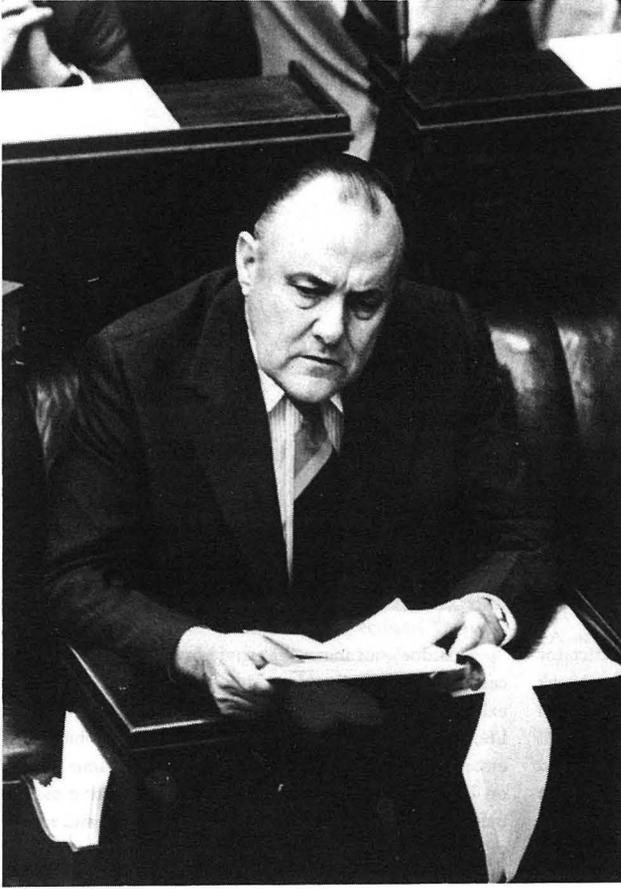
The transactional leader is not a dictator, for a dictator does not lead in the sense of having to persuade and seek assent from those who are governed. But the transactional leader does tend to ignore long-term strategy in favour of short-term tactics. The immediate goal and the detailed management become more important than any vision. Such a leader seeks not to turn a minority crusade into reality but to identify and cultivate a majority of voters in order to achieve power and remain in power.

It would be easy to say that Sir Robert Muldoon was simply and clearly a transactional leader, a political manager and manipulator of public opinion, but I am not yet prepared to do so. He has proved somewhat more difficult for me to categorise than Savage but I do not believe as most of his critics argue that he was interested solely in office and power for its own sake and not as a means to a higher end, even if that end was only to achieve what his detractors ridicule, leaving New Zealand no worse than he found it and striving to defend a Keynesian Welfare State which he believed had served New Zealand well throughout much of his lifetime.

Another question concerning leadership is whether leaders are born or made, whether genetics or socialisation are the dominant causal factors. Intelligence and physical energy are clearly characteristics of most successful politicians but on their own are not enough. What distinguishes the successful politician is not his or her intelligence or physical energy, characteristics which many others have, but the compulsive, sometimes obsessive, ambition and personal desire and willingness to lead which, coupled with the luck of being in the right place at the right time, allows a few to emerge from the many.

This does not mean that some leading politicians, because of their childhood or adolescent experiences, do not exhibit a greater need for self esteem, authority over their life, and willingness to take risks than others. John Henderson, for example, in 1982 used the work of James Barber on US Presidential character to make a tentative assessment of New Zealand Prime Ministers. Barber and Henderson categorised New Zealand Prime Ministers into active and passive and positive and negative personalities. Muldoon, like Kirk, Seddon, Massey, Savage and Fraser, was clearly an active rather than a passive politician. He enjoyed rather than endured political life and had few other satisfactions apart from politics. According to Henderson's analysis, however, Muldoon exhibited active-negative characteristics in that he tended to distrust colleagues, was consumed by compulsive ambition, sought power almost to the exclusion of other objectives and hid his insecurity beneath a very aggressive front. He was certainly not an example of two of Henderson's other categories, the passive-negative category of reluctant politician or the passive-positive category of non-aggressive consensus-seekers. The fourth category, active-positive, are often the achievers who are free from self-centred inner demands which prevent rational decisions and who make choices that can be altruistic and not limited by personal needs. While some would argue that a case could be made for putting Muldoon in this category he does appear on the surface to fit more clearly with most of New Zealand's great politicians in the active-negative category.

This brings me to my second question of what is biography, particularly political biography. In July 1984 the inaugural conference of the Stout Research Centre for the



Study of New Zealand Society, History and Culture was held. The conference theme was 'Biography in New Zealand' and the papers were subsequently edited by Jock Phillips and published in 1985. At that conference Colin Davis questioned whether biography was important at all, arguing that 'politics is essentially a social activity; to individualise from one perspective is to distort and misunderstand it'. I cannot agree. A Lenin or a Stalin; a Gorbachev or a Yeltsin; a Hitler or a Mussolini; a Churchill or a Thatcher; a Savage or a Muldoon; A Roger Douglas or a Ruth Richardson may be to a large extent the products of 'social activity' but it is a symbiotic relationship and individuals do react to and to varying extents influence their social and political environments. I am not a Marxist determinist who believes that individuals have no significant impact on their own life, their environment and history, although it would be foolish to deny that factors outside one's own control provide both opportunities and limitations to what any individual or indeed group of people achieve. Individuals do make a difference. They cannot be separated from their context but nor should they be regarded as passive irrelevancies in a detailed

analysis of that context or buried in some collective mass.

Jock Phillips asked a slightly different question in 1984 though related to Davis' assertion. Phillips, who unlike Davis accepted a relationship but was not certain exactly what it was or whether it could ever be accurately defined, asked, 'Can a biographer ever penetrate to the inner reality of another person's life? What is the relationship between the individual life and the social context?' My response is that a biography is one person's version of another person's life. Of course it is a presumption to write about someone else for no-one completely understands his or her own complex motivations and inconsistent life cycle, let alone know or understand another's. But that should not prevent the attempt being made.

In my preface to the biography of Savage I argued that as a biographer I see a person as essentially what he or she does, when and where and, in so far as I can ascertain, why. My biography of Savage was, and my biography of Muldoon will be, basically a historical narrative with only passing attention to psycho-biography or psycho-history. Readers will discern in my attempt to analyse Sir Robert Muldoon elements of psychology, sociology, political science, public administration, economics and philosophy as well as history but all are incidental to my prime purpose of following Muldoon as I tried to follow Savage

through his life and describe it as accurately as I can. Contemporary events which do not directly concern that life I largely ignore but many other incidents are selected, described and analysed in some detail, not only because of their importance as events in the life of Muldoon but also because of the light they throw on his character and motivation.

No biographer can be completely sure that he or she has captured the whole truth. Indeed I believe no-one can. But without descending to either hagiography or a desire to sensationalise or discredit it is possible to tell a story presenting as accurately and as honestly as a writer can the public and private life; the relationships and achievements; the successes and failures; the joys and sorrows; the process of socialisation, particularly in the critical early years, that formulated character, personality, perspectives, expectations, goals, inhibitions, identity, the stock of ideas, values, influences and where they came from; and, most tentatively of all, inner motivation and self-image. Where possible I let the events and the person speak for themselves without the embellishment of superfluous interpretation.

Keith Sinclair in his address to the 1984 conference strongly attacked a 'life and times' approach to biography. He argued that a writer should be very selective so that the person does not disappear behind masses of detail about the politics, society or economy in which the person lived and operated. 'In a biography, events revolve around the person, and not vice-versa'. The revelation and exploration of character must be accorded the highest priority and indeed Sinclair went as far as to argue that there is no such thing as 'political biography'. He asserted that 'Biography is biography ... Its ultimate aim is to present a personality, to reveal the inner man, "the dialogue of self with soul"'.¹

As I have suggested earlier in this paper I tend to agree with Sinclair's warning that a biography should not also be the history of a nation or a government or of a political party. But it seems to me to be impossible to ignore the times – the environment – with which and in which the subject of the biography interacted and which provided him or her with socialisation, opportunities, challenges, limits, tasks, alliances, opponents, and so on. There is clearly an inextricable inter-relationship between a politician such as Muldoon and the world about him. One must discuss the social, economic, cultural, political, intellectual and administrative context that helped make him what he was and to which he responded. Only by examining many episodes, many layers, many relationships, many incidents, many aspects of a person's life, some better documented than others, can one approach the essential core of one's subject and see patterns emerge.

I certainly agree with another of Sinclair's assertions that 'while history aspires to be a social science; biography aspires to be literature. In many ways the biography resembles the novel'. Indeed, I would take it further. In research I am very much a historian and social scientist leaving no stone unturned, examining evidence, seeking insights from models and paradigms, and suspending judgement until all the evidence is in – or as much as I am able to find. One of the reasons why my biography of Savage took six years to research and write was that I had to search assiduously both in

New Zealand and Australia for little known, fragmentary, long lost snippets of evidence. In the case of Muldoon it also will take me six years simply because the evidence and the material and the number of people with insights and information and opinions provide such a vast resource. One is also worried about overlooking a major piece of evidence or not considering someone else's informed judgement either on Muldoon the man or some incident with which one of the numerous people I have interviewed was associated.

But when I come to write, to compress the evidence and generalise from the mountain of evidence, when I start to make judgements without necessarily passing judgement and seek to tie together my research into – hopefully – a sophisticated whole, then I do resemble a novelist developing the structure of the book, the plot, the context, the inter-relationship among characters and above all the characterisation of my central figure to portray the essence of that person's life.

In his contribution in 1984, Katherine Mansfield's biographer Anthony Alpers referred to 'primary biography' – a process which presents information and a viewpoint but from which later analytical works will follow, drawing on the basic facts established in the primary biography but often arguing a revisionist interpretation. Muldoon wrote half a dozen books on his life, views and achievements. Others, such as Spiro Zavos, have attempted biographies. Indeed the recent two part television documentary was an attempt at a revisionist interpretation. My biography of Muldoon will be different to all of these but it will not be, I suspect, the last word. The detailed research that I have done and which I am summarising in the biography will undoubtedly provide many pegs on which differing interpretations of Muldoon will emerge in the future. I doubt whether many people, either those who uncritically supported him such as Rob's Mob or those who totally de-

Opposite: A more careworn Muldoon reading another Budget. Dominion [date unknown].

Right: From high finance to high camp – Muldoon in the chorus line in the final act of The Rocky Horror Show, His Majesty's Theatre, Auckland. New Zealand Herald [20 July 1986].



nounced and condemned him, will agree with my overall assessment, which neither praises nor condemns but seeks to portray and understand a man of many strengths and certainly some equally great weaknesses.

Erik Olssen, in a commentary on Sinclair's paper in 1984, noted that politicians have a vested interest in projecting a public persona. Certainly that is true of Muldoon, who carefully cultivated his public image, an image incidentally which his opponents in the Labour Party were prepared to accept and to see consolidated. But was the public image the real person and did it truly reflect his self-view, philosophy of life, his conscious and subconscious motivation? Nearly everyone thinks they knew the real Muldoon. My research suggests that few if any knew the whole man. People saw one aspect of his life over a particular finite time and generalised from that. Many of those I have interviewed had a narrow or partial relationship with Muldoon. Some were strongly subjective, sometimes understandably so, in their assessment of him. Nearly all agreed that he was very intelligent; had an astonishing memory; was able quickly and accurately to comprehend briefings; was firm in making decisions though if time permitted he could defer them for further consideration; was willing to listen to other opinions even if he didn't accept them; was impeccably formal with his professional advisers; was totally loyal, indeed to a fault, to those who loyally supported him; was sympathetic and patient with the underdog; and was able to speak clearly, effectively and with authority. Most also commented on his commitment to an independent public service; the long hours of intense work he put in year after year; and his independence and toughness in resisting pressure from powerful vested interest groups. There was also general agreement that he could be extremely brutal verbally when dealing with other politicians in his own party as well as Labour and that he became increasingly preoccupied with the detailed management of government and short-term political tactics, neglecting the broader and long-term interests to the detriment of both his party and the country. The general picture of the public Muldoon, therefore, is reasonably well known and is not too difficult to portray in the biography albeit the details of numerous incidents does make writing it a technically difficult task.

More difficult, however, is determining the extent to which one discusses the private person in political biography. Olssen argued that 'it is the person as a politician you are interested in' not unconnected aspects of the person's private life. Certainly as a biographer I have no problem with discussing some aspects of the private Muldoon, a man shy and sensitive in some ways, brutal and insensitive in others. One has to point out the mischievous sense of humour and dry wit evident in the private man which sometimes misfired in public, and one cannot ignore assessing the influence or otherwise of alcohol as a factor in several major political incidents such as the calling of the

1984 election or the attack on Colin Moyle. Beyond that the biographer may well be inhibited by sensitivity to the feelings of one's subject or the subject's family and may have to make decisions on whether or not to include certain material. Indeed, the overall picture of the man may not be accurately reflected if undue attention is paid to one or two incidents of interest to muckrakers or sensation-seekers. Whether a politician has an affair with someone may be of general interest or of use in assessing him as a person but it may also be very peripheral to political biography.

Olssen argued that a biographer had to like someone before spending five or six years or more studying and reliving their life; I'm not certain that is necessarily true. Sinclair, I believe, was somewhat bored by and contemptuous of Nash but wrote an excellent biography of him. I liked Savage and enjoyed every moment I spent on that biography. Muldoon I found fascinating and the hours I spent interviewing him were among the most stimulating of my professional career. Although I passed much of my earlier years as one of his political opponents I do not believe that I will have trouble recreating his life and seeing his point of view, though not always agreeing with it. Certainly, had I been someone whom he had demolished in the past it would make it very difficult for me to be objective or to want to spend my time thinking or writing about him. There are those who came into conflict with Muldoon, some of whom I have interviewed, who are scarred emotionally for life. Many others became almost totally dominated by him. Some respected him. Others disliked him as much as he despised them.

Suffice it to say in conclusion that, in my opinion and taking into account the length of time and the extent to which they personally dominated the political agenda, there are eight great political figures in New Zealand history over the last 100 years: Seddon, Massey, Savage, Fraser, Sidney Holland, Holyoake, Muldoon and Roger Douglas, the latter the only non-Prime Minister in my list. Only two of those men were in my opinion really radicals who changed the shape of our economy and our society – Savage and Douglas. Muldoon was a reactionary conservative who sought, by and large, to defend by centralised interventionist regulation the political, economic and social values and systems that the Liberals and the Savage Labour Government established. In the end he failed and the ultra-conservative Muldoon was replaced by a radical Labour politician who quickly, systematically and probably irreversibly demolished the first Labour Government's heritage while Muldoon fulminated impotently from the side line against the destruction of a Labour-created New Zealand way of life that he as National's leader had devoted his life to preserving. That I see as one of the great ironies of New Zealand political history.

We are grateful to the Dominion Picture Library who generously made their photographic archive available to us.