

Book review: Margaret Wilson (2021) *Activism, Feminism, Politics and Parliament*.

Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, New Zealand. 320 pages, \$39.99

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Of George Orwell's four motivations to write, Wilson's autobiography falls firmly into two – the historical impulse: a desire “to see things as they are” for the sake of posterity, and the political: a desire “to alter other people's idea of the kind of society that they should strive after”. Wilson's account of her life, and, particularly, her journey from rural Waikato into the highest levels of political debate and authority, is precise and considered, reminiscent of Orwell's strictures on the writing of prose. It is also a sustained argument for the rights of working people, and, in particular, for women in all facets of life, and for a lasting settlement of colonisation's outstanding legacy.

It is also a book to be read at multiple levels. One reading, for example, is that of a life of service marked by a stoic commitment to public life whilst enduring constant physical disability, despite a personal belief that she “was not well suited to the representative political role”. Another reading addresses the technicalities of melding political wishes with a political and bureaucratic system in which radical ideas borne by women faced constant obstruction. A third confronts the politics of transformation – a leitmotif of our current government – in a system in which short-term political compromises dominate in a world in which radical alternatives to capitalism find little favour, even in the social-democratic tradition. Wilson, in the end, knows where she sits on this. Hers is a world in which strong principles drive political engagement, but in which political practicalities will often play their part in constraining those principles. She understands the long road, and the tribulations that one might face on its course. She notes the personal cost of that journey, alluded to her discussion of the 1990s, when she moved from the political world to become foundation Dean at Waikato's new law school.

Students of New Zealand politics will be interested in Wilson's commentary on the operation of the Labour Party. The role of Party President is challenging, especially when seeking to bridge the gap between a membership expecting a manifesto to be enacted, and a caucus, increasingly less a reflection of working people and their interests, more a collection of social identities, and naturally imbued with a sense of its own historical role. Bearing this responsibility during the intra-party conflict of the early to mid-1980s was challenging. Wilson is candid in her belief that, when in government, conflict should be minimised. And she is equally candid in her assessment of the Lange Government's programme as a whole: “well-meaning, necessary reforms that in some ways promoted justice and equality but that often had unintended consequences at a practical level. They also bequeathed a handy framework for further cuts and rationalisation to the governments that followed”.

A Catholic by birth, Wilson seems to have imbibed freely of the Protestant ethic. Her intellectual and organisational commitment to the struggle for women's rights in work and beyond stands out. Her trajectory from Kollontai, de Beauvoir and Lessing to the first woman

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Speaker of the House marks a history of women's activism and campaigns from the 1970s onwards. The energy and application required by women to sustain organisations, campaigns, policy development and politicking, and the many roles played by Wilson in such activities, are a testament to a lifetime's commitment to the women's movement. She displays great generosity of spirit in the recognition of the importance of a movement in which many played a part in different times and places. Many will agree with the implication permeating Wilson's analysis of the women's movement in New Zealand that, if it has come a long way, it has been a hard road, and there remains much still to do.

The contrast between the development and implementation of policy as a senior figure in party or government, on the one hand, and the continuing petty barbs aimed personally at a forward woman, on the other, are touched on. Notable is the story about gendered precedence in the Reserve Bank board's decision-making, in which a role traditionally given to the person with Wilson's seniority on the board was nearly usurped because she is a woman. Such easy assumptions marked much of the reform in which Wilson was involved. Businessmen were, on occasions, downright rude to her when she piloted into legislation, the Employment Relations Act 2000. Lawyers huffed and puffed about her impudence in championing the introduction of the Supreme Court. Being Speaker seemed to me, at least, a harder ride for Wilson than her uniformly male predecessors. There are glimpses in the book of a resolute inner core, which allowed Wilson to soldier on, a will supported by careful preparation and a grasp of political and organisational intrigue.

If measures to overcome prejudice and discrimination against women were always central to Wilson's politics, her interest in labour law, established in her legal education in Auckland, made her a resolute supporter of workers' rights. Formed in a pre-post modern world, Wilson espouses a socialist feminism with early deep roots and experience in worker organisation and voice.

In employment relations, her biggest challenge as Minister of Labour was the reform of the bargaining system. The introduction of the Employment Relations Act (ERA) in 2000 followed a gruelling process of development and introduction of the Bill, marked by major employer campaigns against new legislation and for the status quo under the Employment Contracts Act 1991 (which, as many will remember, was equalled in its neo-liberal purity only by Pinochet's *Plan Laboral* in 1975). The battle for the ERA – not just with employers' representatives – and its subsequent amendments led to Wilson leaving the Labour portfolio in 2004, a departure which, as she drily suggests "...would have been a relief to many, including my ministerial colleagues....".

It is tempting to "cherry pick" from an array of other initiatives with which Wilson was associated when in office. One is the enacting of legislation in 2002 on property within relationships, which *inter alia* offered protection of *de facto* and same-sex couples. Wilson's commentary on this measure notes her surprise that it succeeded, and the importance of careful political management in the parliamentary process if contentious measures are to succeed. A second is her role as Attorney-General in the appointment of judges, in which her belief that we needed more women and Maori judges led to accusations of bias. It is important to note that such accusations arose in the 2000s, not the 1900s. A third is treaty settlements, for which she sees the need for a cross-party accommodation, coupled with a greater emphasis on building public support for the Treaty relationship. She endorses Mason Durie's suggestion that Maori should, in the first instance, rather than debating issues with the Crown or the rest of New

Zealand, focus on the key components of modern Maori society and the relationship between them.

The politically-minded (and members of the legal profession) will be fascinated by Wilson's account of the creation of the Supreme Court. As she notes "Almost unprecedented hostility from the media and the Opposition Members of Parliament accompanied the final stages of the Bill", which was eventually enacted in October 2003. Readers may remember the shock amongst many of the legal community (and beyond), who expressed the view that New Zealand's jurists were of insufficient calibre to staff the various levels of court in the new structure. One might think the appointment of a woman to the role of Chief Justice added to the concerns of the legal fraternity. Wilson must look at the success of the new arrangements with some amusement (and pleasure).

It is a kind book. Wilson chooses to mention with gratitude many of the people who supported her in her various roles, taking care to recognise their contribution to her intellectual, political and institutional lives. She avoids with grace the gratuitous attack, instead preferring the oblique. The reader will notice here and there the description of a working relationship as "professional", a word with many possible connotations, with her most robust commentaries reserved for those who turned Labour on its head in the early 1980s. Even then, she discusses those difficult days, when, as Labour Party president, she sought to sustain the Labour Party as a single body, with a careful eye to fairness and accuracy. Some on the left will disagree with the path she chose, but her politics have long historical roots in the development of contemporary social democracy, and stood her well in opposition to neo-liberalism's thrall.

Summing up her life in politics, Wilson offers pithy observations about such things as MMP (a good thing), the continuing need for political disputes to be resolved "through a peaceful process of debate and discussion", and challenges to the democratic order. However, just as the book starts with an account of a bright young woman from rural Waikato overcoming physical adversity whilst grappling with, and rejecting, women's subordination, it ends, thus; "I know that difficult women often do not last long in politics but their ideas last much longer. In New Zealand's history there have been many difficult women who are no longer remembered or with us but who through their lives made an impact on the lives of many". Wilson's most readable account of her life suggests that some men may have found her difficult, but we are left in no doubt that she, with her monstrous regiment, has made an invaluable contribution, not just to the women's movement, but also to a fairer, more inclusive, better New Zealand.