

Helen Clark

Biography

1999

McLean, 2014c

Jenny Shipley may have been our first female PM, but Helen Clark was the first elected one. In 2008 she became our fifth longest-serving PM and the first Labour leader to win three consecutive elections.

Clark came from a National-leaning rural family but developed her politics while studying and lecturing in political science at the University of Auckland. She won the Mount Albert seat in 1981. Clark served as a minister during Labour's second term from 1987 and became deputy PM two years later, but she also benefited from working smoothly with the party machinery. In 1996, three years after ousting Mike Moore, she polled so badly that a coup was attempted, but she stayed, survived, succeeded. Labour won handsomely in 1999.

Underpinned by her deputy, Michael Cullen, and chief-of-staff, Heather Simpson, Clark re-centred policy, softening but not overturning the fundamentals of 'Rogernomics' (neo-liberal economics). Labour made some trade union and civil rights reforms, dropped titular honours and established a new Supreme Court. Clark, who climbed mountains on holiday, softened her austere style and even modelled a costume in the Wearable Arts Awards.

Helped by a strong economy and a weak opposition, Labour was initially competent and disciplined. It crushed National in 2002, but the opposition recovered and ran the government close in 2005. Although Clark still rated highly, public impatience with some domestic policies, minor crises and natural voter attrition denied her a fourth term. She resigned as leader on election night 2008 and early in 2009 left for New York to head the United Nations Development Programme.

Clark, sometimes compared to Peter Fraser, shared his mastery of international relations and his belief that culture shapes national identity. As minister of arts, culture and heritage, she increased arts funding and raised the profile of our military heritage.

By Gavin McLean

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