

Fitzsimons, Jeanette

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Valedictory Statement

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JEANETTE FITZSIMONS (Green) : I thank the Hon Bill English for his kind words a moment ago, and I thank the House for agreeing to postpone dinner. Unfortunately, as I did not know the House was going to do that, I am afraid I will not be speaking for more than a minute or so past 6 o'clock. So members can rest assured that dinner will still occur at a reasonable time.

It has been 13 years since I had the great privilege of giving the first Green speech in the New Zealand Parliament. I never set out to be an MP, or a Green Party leader. I was pushed into it under that maxim of John Lennon: "Life is what happens to you while you're making other plans." I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up, and I am not sure I have found the answer yet.

I was proud to be a member of an MMP Parliament with its much greater representation of women, Māori, and ethnic communities. I am still proud to have led the party that pioneered several new constitutional relationships with successive Governments and developed processes for the negotiations between parties, which now ensure that Governments have to think twice about policies and earn genuine majorities before they pass them. That is not the only change for the better that MMP has made.

I have been wondering whether any others from the 1996 intake—the intake that experienced the bizarre orientation session where we were taught by Parliamentary Service how to pack a suitcase—are here tonight. We were shown the correct size of suitcase to use if we wanted to put it in the overhead rack, and we were shown the compartments for our carefully ironed shirts on one side and the pockets for ties and socks on the other. The large new intake of women fell about laughing, and I suspect it was the last year that module was taught.

It was the year that Winston Peters kept the country waiting for 10 weeks before deciding which party to support, so there was no time for maiden speeches before Christmas. By the time February came, I was so impatient to get started that, on my first day, I leaped to my feet and blurted: "Supplementary Speaker, Mr Question!". Speaker Doug Kidd was kind enough not to laugh. There was also no time to wait for the niceties of a maiden speech before moving a resolution, supported 111 to 9, expressing the concern of the House about the nuclear waste ship that was passing through the Tasman Sea on that very day.

that first speech, I spoke of the birth of the Green movement internationally 25 years earlier, and of the vision of the first Values Party manifesto in 1972, heralding much that has since come to pass. Since that speech the Greens have become a parliamentary party in our own right, built our representation to nine MPs, and introduced and passed six members' bills, with another currently in a select committee and an eighth awaiting its first reading.

We have established the tradition that support parties under MMP can expect to negotiate Budget initiatives that advance their policies, and I was proud to pioneer those negotiations. Rather than threatening to withhold support, we expected, and got, recognition that relationships in here have to be reciprocal and based on trust. There are many laws that passed only because of our support, laws that are different because of our amendments, and potential laws that never made it because of our opposition. But most of all, the role of the Greens has been to set the agenda—to raise issues that had never been raised in this House before.

In 1996 many throughout the world were talking about climate change, sustainable energy policies, toxic chemicals, human rights, genetic engineering, and the failure of our current ways of measuring economic success. But this Parliament, mostly, was not. Those are the issues that I and my colleagues have brought here and that are becoming mainstream. The breathing space we created on genetic engineering, with the royal commission and the moratorium, although it did not result in the law becoming precautionary enough, did prevent the release of crops that could never have been contained and were imminent in 1999.

Transport policy refocused somewhat on public transport, cycling, walking, and rail, and even the current fixation on new roads has been unable to stop the momentum of the electrification of Auckland's rail system. The Energy Efficiency and Conservation Act, my first member's bill, has made energy standards part of mainstream energy policy, saving millions for consumers. Communities fighting major environmental battles are now better resourced, with legal aid at the Environment Court and the resourcing of local conservation initiatives.

Yet I have to say, with great sadness, that the big picture has not changed all that much. This place, on which we pin such hopes as the pinnacle of democracy, has proved itself incapable of responding to the crises that threaten to overwhelm us. As an institution it is asleep, often in denial, and often preoccupied with trivia.

When my grandchildren Jasper and Isabella, here in the gallery today, are struggling to bring up their children in 30 years' time, amidst the storms and instability of a changing climate, with little oil left—and that being unaffordable—what will they think of us at the turn of the millennium? What will they think of a Parliament more preoccupied with its own privileges than with the good of humanity? What will they think of a Parliament that spent far more passion and energy on where Bill English parked his car than on where to get oil to run it, on measures to reduce climate emissions, on how to reduce the pollution of our waterways, or on how to protect our unique ecosystems and species from extinction? What will they think of Governments that had all the information presented to them and could not claim to not know, but chose to do nothing?

I have sat here for 13 years weeping at the tragedy of so many people wasting the precious gift of life by chasing the mirage of a bigger GDP. What is stopping us as a species, and particularly as a Parliament, from seeing the truth that climate change, which has now entered the public consciousness, is only a symptom of a much greater issue? The planet is full. Its capacity to absorb our wastes and generate our resources is already overstretched, and even mining the last national park and Antarctica, and damming or draining the last river, will not allow us to continue using even more.

Our ancestors could be forgiven for thinking the planet was infinite, unmeasurable, and obviously flat. Their world was circumscribed by what could be walked, ridden, or sailed. Even when the world was proved to be round, it was still immense, and going around the world in 80 days was an amazing feat. Reducing 80 days to 2 still did not change the deep-seated certainty that there can be no limits. Despite the images from space, economics still takes it as a given that we live in an infinitely elastic universe.

For 30 years there have been many studies of how economic growth does not improve human well-being, even for the poorest, but the poor have always been an excuse for policies designed mainly to benefit the rich. The central message I came here with 13 years ago was that we need to find better ways of measuring our economic success, and that the aim should be a better economy, not just a bigger one. The aim should be an economy based on respect for people and for nature, not on dog-eat-dog competitiveness.

The futility of our current measures is shown by the Brash report on closing the income gap with Australia. Australians have bigger houses, so more housework; more cars per person, so higher greenhouse gases; more than one cellphone each; and they drink more alcohol, so more drunkenness and violence. And so we must catch up—what a goal to aim for!

Two very important and accessible books were published last year, and they sum up beautifully the Green message of hope for a better economy. The first was Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth*, which systematically examines the proposal that growth makes us better off, and finds it wanting. He then sets out the framework for an economics that genuinely makes people better off without growing output, and finds it entirely feasible.

The second book illustrates powerfully that social equity is better for everyone, not just for the poor. *The Spirit Level*, by Wilkinson and Pickett, brings together international data showing that nations with the greatest income equality also have the best health and mental health outcomes, the least crime and the lowest rate of imprisonment, the best educational outcomes, the lowest obesity and teenage pregnancy rates, and the lowest infant mortality rates. A highly stratified unequal society forces everyone to stress about keeping or improving their place on the social and economic ladder, and it damages the lives of the well-off as well as those of the poor.

New Zealand used to be near the top of that equality league table; now it is the fourth worst of 21, and heading down further. If anyone here wants to understand better the core Green message of the last 38 years, they should read those two books. They show why the twin Green goals of ecological sustainability and social justice are inseparable. It is not possible to nurture the environment without nurturing people, or the other way around.

I said in my maiden speech that Parliament was just a different way of working for the Green ideals that had driven my life for decades as a teacher, a writer, a researcher, and a community activist. I have enjoyed my time here, and I have found it satisfying as well as frustrating, especially when it was possible to achieve change for the better. I enjoyed my 6 years chairing the Local Government and Environment Committee, seeing my role neither as the Minister's vassal to expedite Government policy nor as the obstructionist to frustrate it. It was possible to work constructively with both sides of the committee table.

In my view, select committees are Parliament's opportunity to scrutinise the executive, and to knock the silly corners off raw legislation. They are a place to listen to the people, who have a lot of wisdom about the laws they want, if we would only listen to them. They are a place where we can challenge officials to prove their case for the legislation they have put forward to Governments. Perhaps select committees should be chaired more often by third parties. I particularly enjoyed my 3 years as a quasi-Minister, leading the work of the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Authority on energy efficiency and the solar water heating programme.

Probably my greatest concrete achievement has been to persuade two successive Governments, Labour and National, that it is worthwhile investing in home insulation on a large scale, combining benefits to health, family well-being, employment, energy demand, and carbon emissions.

Now the time has come to move on to the next phase of my life. Retirement is not really a concept I can imagine, but I do intend to take the gap year I never had after school—or maybe a gap 6 months—while the head clears and the future takes shape. I am looking forward to a lot of work on our farm, where Harry has held the fort for too long on his own. I am looking forward to more family time, more music, films, and theatre, and to 3 months in Europe visiting my son and old friends. After that, the work will continue. In what form I do not know yet, but the goals of protecting people and planet will be the same.

There are many people I want to thank for their help along the road of the last 13 years. First must be Harry, my rock, who has supported my work, run the farm and the household, and put up with my absences, constant exhaustion, and hours on the telephone. Thirteen years ago he was here in the gallery with my father Jack and my son Mark. Today Jack is with us only in spirit, but Harry is joined by the new generation: my grandchildren Jasper and Isabella and their parents.

Jeremy and Sarah, you have been an oasis I have escaped to on an occasional Wednesday. You have listened to my frustrations and elations, fed me after playtime with the kids, and sent me back for an evening's work. My grandchildren have been the touchstone of much of my work, and I remember that Jasper was once the subject of a whole Budget speech, because it is he and his friends who will live with the consequences of the decisions we make here.

None of us here could do the work we do without a host of people who make it possible. I have been blessed with some amazing executive assistants: Judith, who knew the parliamentary system so well and guided me into it; Katya, who came straight from uni and then went on to lead our research team; Tania, unflappable and organised, with a passion for conservation; Helen, who loved administration and looked after me like a mother; Hina, who has got inside my head and my work, and who may one day do my job; and Rosalie, Sandra, and Moira, who ran my office in Thames. I thank all of you for going well beyond the call of duty.

There have been so many Green Party staff over the years that I cannot name you all, but I will miss you all as my friends and colleagues. I would particularly mention my heads of staff Deb Moran and Ken Spagnolo, who took the weight of managing the office off my shoulders. It has been, and is, a great team with a huge commitment to people and planet.

I thank the librarians for the information they have dug out for me, always on time. I thank the Clerk's Office for their help in select committees and their advice on procedure. I thank Bellamy's staff, security staff, messengers, cleaners, and building staff—it is humbling to think how many of you all it takes to keep one of us going. May we never take you for granted, and may we use the time and resources that you give us to maximum effect.

Fellow MPs, we have argued, joked, fought, and strategised over years, and to all of you who are working your hearts out for something you truly believe in, I say kia ora. Mr Speaker, thank you for your efforts to get Ministers to at least address the questions. To the people of New Zealand who put their trust in a new political party and allowed us to represent you, I say thank you. It has been a privilege. And to all the Green Party members and activists, I say that we could not do it without you.

The lowest point of the last 13 years was, of course, the death of my beloved co-leader, colleague, and friend, Rod Donald. It is rare to have a working relationship blessed with such mutual trust and friendship. He did a lot for this country, and I am particularly pleased that Nicola and Holly have been able to come tonight. Sadly, his departure was not planned, but mine has been, and I know I leave the parliamentary Green Party in the excellent hands of Metiria and Russel and the team. We are in a transition to a younger generation with new energy and faces but the same values and commitment. You are my other family and I shall miss you, but we will keep in touch. The green movement is growing stronger worldwide. Kia kaha—you are the hope of the future. Haere ra.

- Sitting suspended from 6.03 p.m. to 7.30 p.m.