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Jacinda Ardern

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Jacinda Ardern's valedictory speech in full

Outgoing New Zealand prime minister touches on the pandemic, the Christchurch massacre and what it means to be leader in final address



Jacinda Ardern

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Former New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern has [delivered her farewell speech to New Zealand parliament](#). In an emotional address, she talked about the challenges of her time in power - including Covid, March 15 and the climate crisis - as well as the progress she is proud of. This is her speech in full:

*Te whare e tu nei
Te marae e takoto ana
Tena korua
E nga mate maha
Haere, haere, haere*

Nga tangata whenua o tenei rohe, o Te Whanganui -a-tara, tena kotou

*Tatou nga kanohi ora e hui mai ana
Tena kotou tena kotou, tena kotou katoa*

Mr Speaker, when it came time to pen these words, my father suggested that I go back and look at the first ones I shared in this House.

I remember writing my maiden speech so well.

*I was 28 years old. My family were living overseas and I had only moved back to **New Zealand** a few months prior. If I'm honest, I was probably more than a little shocked to be here, a feeling that even after 15 years, never quite left me.*

But the reasons I came here never left me either.

They're all there in my maiden speech - climate change, child poverty, inequality. I am after all, a conviction based politician, and I've always believed this to be a place you came make a difference.

I leave, knowing that to be true.

But despite that, I have become used to my time as prime minister being distilled down into a different list. A domestic terror attack. A volcanic eruption. A pandemic.

A series of events where I found myself in people's lives during their most grief stricken or traumatic moments. Their stories and faces remain etched in my mind, and likely will forever. That is the responsibility and privilege of the role of prime minister.

A role, I never thought I was meant to have.

It's fair to say that 2017 involved a surprising chain of events.

At the beginning of the year David Shearer announced that he would be leaving the opposition benches and parliament for Sudan. It was remarked upon at the time that this was apparently a more appealing prospect than being in Opposition.

I found myself in a byelection for Mt Albert, and soon after that, as Deputy Leader of the Labour party. But that was just the half of it.

It was the first of August and we were a mere 7 weeks out from an election when Andrew Little stood down as leader of the Labour party, and nominated me to take his place.

I've always found it hard to explain what that period felt like. It was a cross between a sense of duty to steer a moving freight train, and being hit by one. And that's probably because my internal reluctance to lead was matched only by a huge sense of responsibility.

Andrew - I know you likewise made your decision with that same sense of responsibility, and while I have never known whether to curse you or thank you, I'm grateful for the faith you've always had in me.

The seven week campaign that followed was frenetic.

Mike Jaspers, my chief press secretary at the time, recently reminded me that a week into the job after a very long day I fell asleep on a plane, woke up with a start and asked him if I was still the leader of the Labour party.

But those short few weeks were also a blessing. There was no time to be anything but myself, and I also had the chance to be involved in everything. A real treat for a control freak.

I remember sitting at my desk in the home Clarke and I shared in Auckland, writing a campaign launch speech. I knew I wanted climate change to be front and centre because I believed it would define our generation of politicians.

I called it our nuclear free moment. I believed it then, and I believe it even more now.

When I came here 15 years ago we talked about climate change as if it was almost a hypothetical. Some didn't even give it that credit.

In 2008 I sat in that lobby as the ETS was weakened and the yo-yo of climate policy continued. But in the intervening years we have seen first-hand the reality of our changing environment, from Northland, to the Coromandel, Tokomaru Bay to Buller. And I have seen the people it's impacted, like the elderly couple on the West Coast who had lived in their home for their entire married lives.

They had only recently returned to it after a year's worth of post flooding repairs when it was flooded again. "We're too old to keep doing this," they told me. They have not returned to their home.

Now I know there is politics in almost everything. This chamber understands why more than anyone. But we also know when, and how to remove it. When crisis has landed in front of us, I have seen the best of this place. An absolute focus on the care of others, on preserving life and helping people when they need it most.

Climate change is a crisis. It is upon us. And so, one of the few things I will ask of this house on my departure - is that you please, take the politics out of climate change.

There will always be policy differences. But beneath that we have what we need to make the progress we must.

We have a not just credible but an ambitious NDC to reduce our net emissions by 50% by 2030. We have the Zero Carbon Act, carbon budgets, an emissions reduction plan, and a Climate Commission to guide us. We have business on board, and the primary sector working hard on a shared set of goals – and it's making a difference.

We're starting to see our emissions come down with total greenhouse gas emissions falling to their lowest levels in eight years. But New Zealand needs this place to provide them with certainty that we will keep going. So do.

We owe it to the next generation, but we also owe it to ourselves.

To the Green party, especially James and Marama. I've enjoyed working with you immensely and have seen how tireless you both are, even when you are thrown into your own party processes that from the outside look something akin to the squid games. Thank you for the personal support I felt from you both.

A friend of mine taught me early on in politics that there is no point looking back in anger. And I feel no need to, when there are so many things I feel proud of.

Things that I know are different or better because we had a Labour government.

Like our work to uphold the Treaty by crossing the bridge more often. The creation of the Māori Crown relations portfolio under the excellent leadership of Kelvin Davis and the stewardship of Te Arawhiti. The establishment of the Māori Health Authority, the growth of Te Reo Māori, the evolution of how we see ourselves as a nation through the teaching of New Zealand history in schools, and the creation of Matariki, our first indigenous public holiday.

The path we travel as a nation will not be linear, and it won't always be easy. But for the part of the trail that I had the privilege of leading, I'm proud we took on the hilly bits.

It's fair to say that all told, we had a few mountains to climb though.

I always wanted to be part of a government that had a focus on children. I can't exactly pinpoint the origins of that passion but I've talked many times though of the distinct memories I have of children in poverty during the 1980s.

And so it was with much excitement that that I was lucky enough to take on the role of children's spokesperson from Annette King while in Opposition. Annette had already done a huge amount of policy work – a trait of Annette's that she was well renowned for – almost as much as her relentless attempts to set single people up.

But there was still space for further child poverty initiatives, so we got to work, creating policy that was ready to be rolled out in the first 100 days of office, including the Child Poverty Reduction Act.

In 2017 when we first formed government, almost one in five children were living in poverty. Most child poverty measures in New Zealand were going backwards.

I am not here to say that everything is perfect now. It is not. But the Healthy Homes standards, the increases in benefits and their indexation to wages, the Winter Energy Payment, introduction of Best Start, and the creation of the Food in Schools programme mean that as I leave, despite the severe economic conditions, there are 77,000 fewer children living in low income households, all nine child poverty measures have reduced, and this winter a sole parent will receive \$212 more per week than when we came into office.

But now, you just need to keep going.

Someone asked me recently whether there were things I wished I had managed to finish. There are definitely projects I would have liked to have seen through. Projects like the restoration of the St James, or the beginning and completion of Tokelau's air strip - a project I felt strongly about after visiting this beautiful but remote realm country. I know if they had told me in advance that visiting Tokelau and the absence of a place to dock would instead mean climbing onto what looked like an IRB, whilst it is hanging over the side of a moving ship, and then being dropped into the ocean by a very qualified I am sure, but very young looking sailor, all while straddling what looks and feels like a unicycle seat in a pulele, I would have absolutely still gone, I just would have worn bike pants.

But aside from such projects, - there are very few things I aspired to do in politics that have a natural end point - poverty, inequality, ending environmental degradation - if you ever claim it's job done on those issues, you set the bar too low.

Politics has never been a tick list for me. It's always been about progress. Sometimes you can measure it, and sometimes you can't.

We won't ever know the long term benefits of banning conversion therapy, especially for our young people. Or what it means to our Pacific communities that we finally apologised for the dawn raids. There will be no list of the lives saved because of the banning of military style semi-automatic weapons. We won't know how we left women feeling about the ability to make their own choices when this parliament decriminalised abortion, or when we improved pay equity, put period products into schools, or reached 50% representation of women in parliament.

And while these things may not feature heavily in the history books when they write about the years 2017 to 2023, which will likely be a very heavy few chapters, they are still nonetheless things that I feel very proud of.

There are things that I feel confident will feature though.

A valedictory is not a place to summarise a pandemic. No one has the time for that kind of group therapy.

There is no question it was an incredibly tough experience for our nation at the bottom of the world, and I will concede, a tough experience personally.

I have spent the better part of my professional life anticipating risk, and worrying about it. The pandemic put that trait into over-drive. For roughly two years, there were certain people that when they called me, I would go into a cold sweat and have to sit down. If I was on the road and in a meeting and any of my staff had to leave the room, it would have the same effect. "Not a case," I would I quietly think.

I remember all too vividly a visit to Auckland University in August 2021 when then Minister Hipkins got one of the dreaded health calls, the one that led to the Delta outbreak and what was I believe the hardest part of our Covid journey.

I called Clarke and simply said "code red." He picked up Neve and we had 30 minutes to pack and get to the airport, not knowing it would be many months before we returned home as a family. So long in the life of a small child, in fact, that when we came back to our home in Auckland, Neve asked me where the toilet was.

I have often been asked what the hardest thing was about Covid. There were so many, but the unknowns was one of them. I had a call with my chief science adviser, Dame Juliet Gerrard, very early on. I had been thinking about how we manage the border in the future, and so asked how long she thought it would be before we would have a vaccine that might help us do that. "Well, if we're lucky," she said, "I'd say five years." I slumped into my chair. Covid made me sit down a lot it turned out.

Thankfully though, we had something better than luck on our side, we had science. And I remain forever grateful for that.

But that wasn't the only thing that got me through. Firstly, I always knew there were New Zealanders out there doing it tougher than whatever we were experiencing on any given day. And it was them we were there to serve.

Secondly, I was surrounded by wonderful smart, compassionate people trying to do the right thing. We didn't always get it right. I didn't always get it right. But we were always motivated by the right things. Thirdly and most importantly, we went in as a nation with a goal, to look after one another, and we did.

A few weeks ago to mark my departure, Dame Juliet gave me a mug. It had on it a graph depicting excess lives lost, lives saved, across developed nations. New Zealand had fared the best.

If it wasn't so unorthodox for a valedictory, I would probably hold it up for no other reason than I love a house prop, and to remind everyone what it was all for.

You saved people's lives. Was it hard, absolutely, but we'll never know who you kept on this earth to know how truly worth it it was.

To Dame Juliette, Sir Ashley Bloomfield, Dr Caroline McElnay, Dr Ian Town, Grant Robertson, Julia Haydon-Carr, Le Roy Taylor, Andrew Campbell, Holly Donald, Brook Barrington, Rob Fyfe, Raj Nahna - and later Chippy and Ayesha, you were part of a

core team of people I relied on through that period. You, and Alison Holst sausage rolls. Thank you.

We did lose other things along the way. One, in some ways, was a sense of security. That we can engage in good robust debates and land on our respective positions relatively respectfully. But for some, that didn't happen during the latter stages of Covid. And while there were a myriad of reasons, one was because so much of the information swirling around was false.

I could physically see how entrenched it was for some people. I was in Whanganui when a visit I was meant to make to a vaccine bus was called off because of protest. After a few hours, the protest passed and I went back, not wanting to let down the people we were due to visit.

There was one lone protester still in the vicinity, who as I left started shouting at me. They were mostly focused on a particular conspiracy that was completely false. So I stopped, doubled backed and told them that. I was idealistic enough to believe it would make a difference. But after many of these same experiences, and seeing the rage that often sat behind these conspiracies, I had to accept I was wrong. I could not single-handedly pull someone out of a rabbit hole. But perhaps collectively we all have a role to play in stopping people falling in in the first place.

This is not a single issue problem. I have seen the same fractured debates based on distorted half-truths and complete falsehoods, emerging on a range of different subjects.

This is not a question of free speech. Free speech is a right this House is united in defending. Those who try to dress up the issue of dis-information as being an attempt to silence people are ironically themselves shutting down a discussion that must be had.

Debate is critical to a healthy democracy. But conspiracy is its nemesis. The answers aren't easy, but having witnessed what it can do to corners of my own beloved country, when perhaps we considered ourselves immune, I can tell you they are answers I will keep looking for.

There were many moments that have left me bereft though.

I still struggle to talk about March 15. There is an image from the day after the attack that was taken of me through a window. And I don't believe I have mentioned what was happening in the moments it was taken. We had brought together a group of politicians to travel to Christchurch and the Defence Force carried us. On the way down I had seen the front page of the paper and the image of a member of the Muslim community covered in blood in the aftermath of the attack. It was a devastating picture. As we arrived at the meeting venue in Christchurch we were greeted by a range of community members.

Sitting in the front row, was the same person who only hours before had been photographed. As he stood to speak, I did not know what to expect, but what came next

was one of the most profound memories I have of that period. He thanked us. Here was someone who had been through the most horrific experience I could imagine, and he thanked New Zealand and expressed gratitude for his home.

There is much we all must continue to do in the aftermath of March 15, I consider the work of the Christchurch call to action amongst them and I feel honoured and grateful to continue work on the issue of radicalisation and violent extremism online. But the most significant task for all of us as a nation is to live up to the expectations that those who experienced it have of us. To deserve their thanks.

To the Muslim community of Aotearoa New Zealand, you have humbled me beyond words. Assalaam Alaikum.

Mr Speaker, having sadly seen our nation in horrific moments of grief, I've concluded that countries don't move on from tragedy, rather they become part of your psyche. But the way these moments weave themselves into our being, will be determined by how we confront them.

We have never lost more lives in New Zealand in a single tragedy than we did in Erebus. Time may have passed, but the deep loss from that event has not. Apologising for what happened was the right thing to do. Now the least we owe families is a memorial.

As for the Pike River families, it was an honour to see through the promise we made to you, but an even greater honour to get to know incredible people like Anna Osborne and Sonya Rockhouse. Thank you for what you have done to try and help us all learn from your experience. May it never happen again.

Mr Speaker, I have often said that whatever I did here, I was never alone.

That's quite a literal statement. One of the massive adjustments when you take on this job, is you have a new shadow in the form of the diplomatic protection. While I never used to try and purposefully lose them like some past PMs, it was an adjustment, especially when there were some things I didn't think needed to change. Like the fact I still liked to make the odd Trade Me purchase. I still remember them looking a bit shocked when I told them we were off to pick up a chair from a random stranger in West Auckland. They weren't quite as shocked as said random stranger.

To all of the DPS team, thank you for everything. And to the VIP drivers - thank you for your company, and your kindness. I'd like to think of your newfound practise of keeping a car sick clean up kit in your vehicles as a homage to my family.

To the Labour party, who have been like family, especially the Presidents I had the privilege of working with - Nigel, Claire and Jill. Thank you. My nana joined the Labour Party in 1949. My Auntie Marie was the next to take up the baton. She never passed it to me as such, more like she whittled a second baton and told me to run with her, whilst yelling instructions along the way. I have long said that I started in the Labour Party as a volunteer delivering flyers, and that's where I will return. Happily.

To the Mount Albert Team, and prior to that, Auckland Central. Gosh you were patient. Thank you.

To Therese Colgan, who has served multiple Prime Ministers but most importantly, has served thousands of people, you are one in a million. Barbara Ward - who has been by my side through every major political event but much more importantly, for every major life event, thank you for being my friend.

To those who went before me and taught me much. Helen Clark, Phil Goff, Marian Hobbs, Trevor Mallard, Darren Hughes and of course, Annette King who has become my mentor, friend, and one of Neve's favourite aunties. Thank you.

To the PMO team. My SPS Le Roy who flatted with me some 20 years ago. Never would I have dreamed when I used to cook you minute steak that one day we would find ourselves on the 9th floor, but I am glad we did.

Jo, my favourite Irish. Rachel, Bridie and Chrissy. Philippa and Ian who both led amazing teams. Dinah Okeby, who literally read every piece of correspondence that came our way and still maintained such a positive disposition. The wonderful adviser team I had in both PMO, but also in PAG - you were all exceptional.

The tireless, wonderful, tough and also randomly emotional Andrew Campbell and the press secs, who had the worst job in the world given my reluctance to be in the media. Holly. Who has the biggest heart, but sharpest mind. Your dad would be so proud. Same to Zoe and Amelia - to us, you are family. Clare-Louise for moving your entire life to support me for the better part of a decade. And finally, to my chiefs of staff. Mike Munro, GJ Thompson who provided the cover we needed, and finally, Raj Nahna.

It's hard to describe Raj. He likes it that way. He became known in various forums as the guy with the hair. And not just domestically. I recall with some fondness visiting Europe to further our FTA aspirations. We met with what, for the purposes of this story I will describe simply as a leader within the European Union. At the beginning of our meeting, he greeted Raj as the one whose hair he had admired in the bios he was given. Clearly admiration from afar was not enough, and by the end of the meeting he could no longer restrain himself. Rather than shake Raj's hand, he reached up and juzzed Raj's hair as if he was a hairdresser in a Pantene commercial.

I put at least some of our FTA success down to that head of hair.

Raj - I hand on heart believe you sacrificed as much as any of us for 5 years. You and your beautiful family, Jane, Magnolia and Saffron. You preferred to be behind the scenes, but I want it to be on record, that New Zealand owes you a debt of gratitude, you were there for March 15. For Whakaari, for the pandemic, and for me. Thank you.

To my family. People knew we were connected and you copped a lot of flak. My dad stopped watching the news for 5 years. Mind you, he comes from a long line of media protest. My nana used to turn the television off whenever Muldoon came on.

My mother took a different approach. During Covid she took up the practice of sending me her own personal thought for the day. They were so uplifting that on occasion I would read them out at our small staff meetings. That was with the exception of one, which I thought was a bit grandiose, even for a dedicated mother. It read “remember, even Jesus had people who didn’t like him.”

To my family, thank you all for your patience, your love and support. And that goes especially to my wonderful mother, father and sister Louise, but also the Gayfords, Dussans, Cowans and Frasers. I love you all.

To my darling girl Neve. Gosh I love how independent you are already. It means you won’t grow up being known as the ex-prime minister’s daughter, but rather, I will happily be known as Neve’s mum, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

And to my love Clarke. Not many politicians have a partner, that when they say “I’m thinking of leaving politics” reply “I think you should stay.” But that’s who you are. You are fiercely loyal and always had my back, but you are also a fighter. You believe in three things fiercely, social justice, protecting our oceans, and that a good tea should have decent brew time. Thanks for keeping my cup full, and for personally enduring so much rubbish. You’re a keeper.

And finally to this team of people around me. I have said it before and will say it again, I have never worked with better people. I know without a shadow of doubt that you are here for the right reasons. I saw it so regularly. Every Tuesday at the end of caucus, I would read a letter of the week. Something from the large correspondence files that captured what was going on in people’s lives and reminded us all why we were here. But you never really needed reminding.

I leave behind great friends among many of you. But I do want to pay special tribute to Grant Robertson. Grant has been both an office mate when I came to work in parliament, but then a bench mate.

He often credits himself with having taught me to swear. When it suits him. I recently had a wee slip of the tongue in the house when referring to David Seymour, and I didn’t see him take any ownership for that, despite, I should add, being caught on the mic agreeing with me rather profusely.

It’s fair to say I took the title of deputy prime minister very literally. For me, we were a team. And that is how I would like the history books to record the major milestones and challenges we faced. I did not take them on alone. I took them on with great people, and especially, with Grant. Thank you for the role you have played and will continue to play for New Zealand. You are a brilliant Finance Minister, and a brilliant friend.

I know I leave this place in good hands, especially with the leadership of deputy prime minister Carmel Sepuloni and prime minister Hipkins - or Chippy to me. I was thinking of ways that I could summarise who Chippy is. For me, it’s not just who he is in a crisis, it’s who he is in life. In the aftermath of Cyclone Gabrielle, I called Chippy to see how he

was. I could hear I was on speaker phone as he described another busy day. “What are you up to now,” I asked. “I’m making the kids’ lunches for tomorrow.” he said.

He then went onto describe in quite some detail what he was planning to put into each corner of their bento box.

It’s fair to say, he lunch box shamed me.

Chippy is thoughtful, focused, and importantly, he is caring. We’re all in good hands.

And now, it’s time for me to leave this place to the amazing people around me. But I want to spend the last few moments I have here, talking not about why I joined them, but why others should. And not just in parliament, but in leadership.

Most of you here know my story. I don’t consider myself to have had anything in my life that made me especially extraordinary. I was a child of the 80s, born to the son of a drainlayer and the daughter of a farmer. My parents worked hard, really hard. My father was a policeman, my mother ran the canteen at the local school. They also ran an orchard for a few years, all while working full-time. My sister and I were the first in our family to attend university. I was anxious about taking a student loan so I worked multiple jobs and entered speech competitions, or to be precise, my mother entered me into them, to try and earn a little extra money to put myself through university.

I was a worrier. I anticipated that everything that could go wrong, would. Some might say, the worst possible character trait to have as a politician. Or the best, depending on how you cut it.

While I convinced myself that you cannot be a worrier, and be in this place, you can.

You can be that person, and be here.

I am sensitive. Or as Maggie Barry once called me, “a precious petal.”

I remember in my early days being thrown by the odd nasty comment. Or negative commentary. I even went to Trevor Mallard for advice on how to harden up. I thought that I would need to change dramatically to survive.

I didn’t change. I leave this place as sensitive as I ever was. Prone to dwell on the negative. Hating Question Time so deeply that I would struggle most days to eat beforehand. And I am here to tell you, you can be that person, and be here.

I am a crier and a hugger. It’s instinctive to me. I remember going into the aftermath of Whakaari and seeing a comment about how I was just going in to hug people again. It stuck with me. So much so that when a first responder who was emotionally telling me about their experience, I had an internal argument with myself as to whether I should comfort them when I knew I would likely be criticised.

I would rather be criticised for being a hugger than being heartless, and so hug I did. A

lot.

You can be that person, and be here.

I am a mother. I obviously didn't start out that way. When I ran for parliament in my 20s I remember being afraid that I was choosing a path that meant I wouldn't get to have children. Because who has a personal life in parliament. I was lucky. The job brought me to Clarke, but having kids was a whole other challenge.

When I was 37 years old I was told there were a range of factors that meant I hadn't been able to get pregnant, and stress was probably one of them. We decided to use the help of science, but as so many couples experience, that wasn't straight forward. I had not long experienced a failed IVF round when I became leader of the Labour party. I thought I had found myself on a path that meant I wouldn't be a mother. Rather than process that, I campaigned to become prime minister. A rather good distraction as far as they go.

Imagine my surprise when a couple of months later, I discovered I was pregnant. There is no question I have had incredible support to be the mother I wanted to be. From the office team who tried to get me home for story time, and Neve's village who were there when I wasn't.

But I leave knowing I was the best mother I could be.

You can be that person, and be here.

I cannot determine what will define my time in this place. But I do hope I have demonstrated something else entirely. That you can be anxious, sensitive, kind and wear your heart on your sleeve. You can be a mother, or not, an ex-Mormon, or not, a nerd, a crier, a hugger - you can be all of these things, and not only can you be here - you can lead.

Just like me.

No reira tena kotou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.
