

'You've got to give them hope': Grant Robertson's final message as he leaves politics



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Grant Robertson's final message to Parliament was to urge politicians to give hope to Kiwis that they will see a better tomorrow that will allow them to be who they are.

That was how Robertson signed off from a measured, humourous and emotional speech last night, which included teary acknowledgements of family and friends, passionate support for a wealth tax and the odd jibe directed at the Government, which he at one point described as a "convoy of stupidity".

Towards the end of his speech, the former Wellington Central MP noted how woven within it was his admiration of the strong women he had come to know through his life.

Strongest of all was his mother, Robertson said as the emotion caught in his throat. He said their weekly catch-ups might be a little different now but they could at least "both complain about the Government now".

Other women he applauded included a former Wellington Central MP, Marian Hobbs, who he described as a "tower of strength for the Labour movement". He said former Labour PM Helen Clark was "extraordinary" for the progressive change she achieved while being able to connect with voters across a wide spectrum.

As expected, Robertson included a special tribute to former PM and friend [Dame Jacinda Ardern](#). Working with Ardern had been his "greatest joy and privilege", Robertson said, as he noted his belief that Kiwis didn't understand how lucky they were to have Ardern leading them through major events such as Covid-19 and the Christchurch terror attack.

"I was so very honoured to serve alongside you my friend," Robertson said of Ardern, who could not attend the House in person.

He told an entertaining story of when he and Ardern were together when the decision was made to close the borders during the pandemic.

Both realising the enormity of the moment, Robertson said he tried to lighten the mood by saying he had thought working with New Zealand First would change the Government's immigration policy but not by so much.

"Jacinda didn't laugh," Robertson clarified to the amused audience.

Covid-19 was always going to feature in Robertson's final speech, given he was finance minister during the pandemic.

He spoke of how forecasts of 13.5 per cent unemployment and mass business failures were avoided through the Government's rapid implementation of the wage subsidy scheme, which eventually paid out \$19 billion and protected 1.8 million jobs.

While he cited several achievements of the Government during that time, Robertson said the number of lives saved was the only figure that mattered.

"On that measure, New Zealand stood head and shoulders above others."

Robertson considered his time as finance minister to be an "extraordinary privilege", cheekily celebrating how developing the annual Budget allowed him to be with his ministerial colleagues when they were at their most anxious.

"You'll know," Robertson said to current Finance Minister Nicola Willis, who laughed.

He endorsed the decision to view Budgets through a wellbeing lens, saying that the Government must show value for money but also recognise that people didn't care how they got their public services, as long as they received them.

Robertson bemoaned governments that were thrifty in their spending, claiming anything less than 30 per cent of GDP was "austerity" and historical under-investment had led to sewage down hospital walls and growing homelessness.

Abuse in state care was a topic close to his heart and he recalled how Labour fulfilled its promise to hold a Royal Commission of Inquiry into it.

Robertson encouraged every New Zealander to read the inquiry's report, which will soon be published.

"The abuse, bullying and cruelty experienced by young people who were supposed to be cared for... is horrific beyond any measure. It casts a dark shadow over our history."

A similarly important subject was LGBTQ rights. Robertson, an openly gay man, said one of the speeches he was most proud of was the one he gave advocating for marriage equality legislation.

He remained concerned about how New Zealand's trans community was subject to hatred and bigotry as part of "ongoing culture wars".

Robertson noted this was particularly relevant in sport, where he claimed people who had had no interest in women's sport had suddenly become vocal about trans people competing.

"We have to support people to live the lives they want to live."

As a former sport and recreation minister, Robertson confessed his love of sport while admitting he wasn't terribly skilled himself.

He painted an amusing mental image of himself as a ball boy during a sodden All Blacks game in Dunedin where, while wearing a parka, he looked like a "rotund, bespectacled, drenched Ewok".

Robertson lauded the work done by many to develop a comprehensive strategy for women and girls in sport, saying he was most proud of the increasing number of young girls becoming involved in a variety of sports.

Not one for regrets, Robertson did acknowledge what he hadn't been able to achieve while in government - adjusting the tax system to properly tax wealth.

Prior to the last election, Robertson and fellow Labour MP David Parker had worked up a wealth tax policy to campaign on, but it was shot down by leader Chris Hipkins.

His advocacy for further wealth taxes was not just a message for his own party, he said, as it was matter on which he believed "political consensus" was required.

Robertson urged young Māori to stay strong amid a climate where people used the journey of te ao Māori in New Zealand as a "political punching bag". He also paid testament to Te Tiriti o Waitangi as an "imperfect partnership" that set Aotearoa apart from other countries.

At several points throughout the speech, Robertson choked up - particularly when he was acknowledging certain people.

It happened when he spoke of his partner of 25 years, Alf, who Robertson credited for his active dislike of politics.

"I love you more every day."

A moment of levity came for many but not all in the House when he endorsed Hipkins' view that Oppositions should not bark at every passing car, while accepting that was difficult.

"It can be hard if there's a convoy of stupidity going by," he said of the Government.

Robertson ended with a message of motivation for politicians, urging them to continue working for people even when it felt as though they didn't care.

"You've got to give them hope."

The *Herald* has compiled a [summary of his more famous 'roasts'](#), in which he could be hard-hitting, sometimes brutal and cutting, and very often funny.

His general debate speeches began in August 2009 when he kicked off by describing his fellow first-term MP Simon Bridges as "modest" before saying it was believed Bridges sang Carly Simon's *You're so Vain* on the bus home every night.

His earlier speeches litigated the bad patches and scandals of the National Government from 2008 to 2017.

There were the heartfelt speeches: after earthquakes and disasters, after the mosque attacks. He spoke about Covid-19 and the Parliament protests - the period he has described as the hardest in his career. He often referred to his own upbringing in Dunedin.

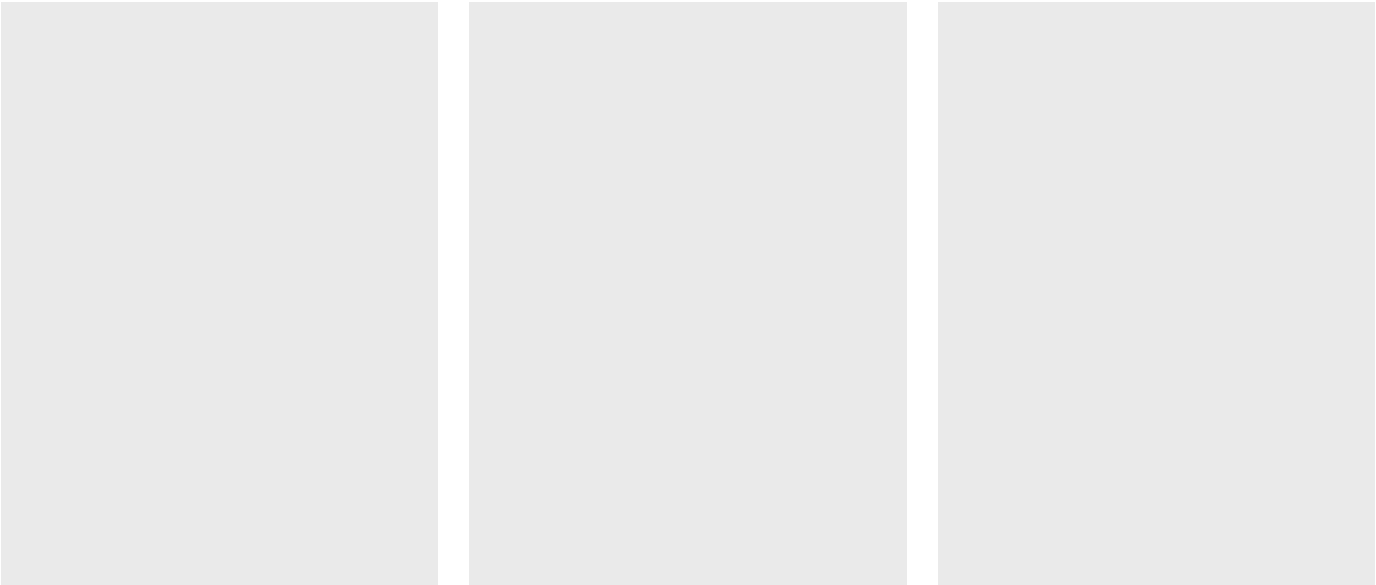
However, he was at his best when he reached for the tool of humour to pillory and dramatically re-tell the various woes of National in its years in Opposition. On one occasion, that included holding up artworks to represent their state, including the

Assassination of Julius Caesar as a depiction of caucus meetings.

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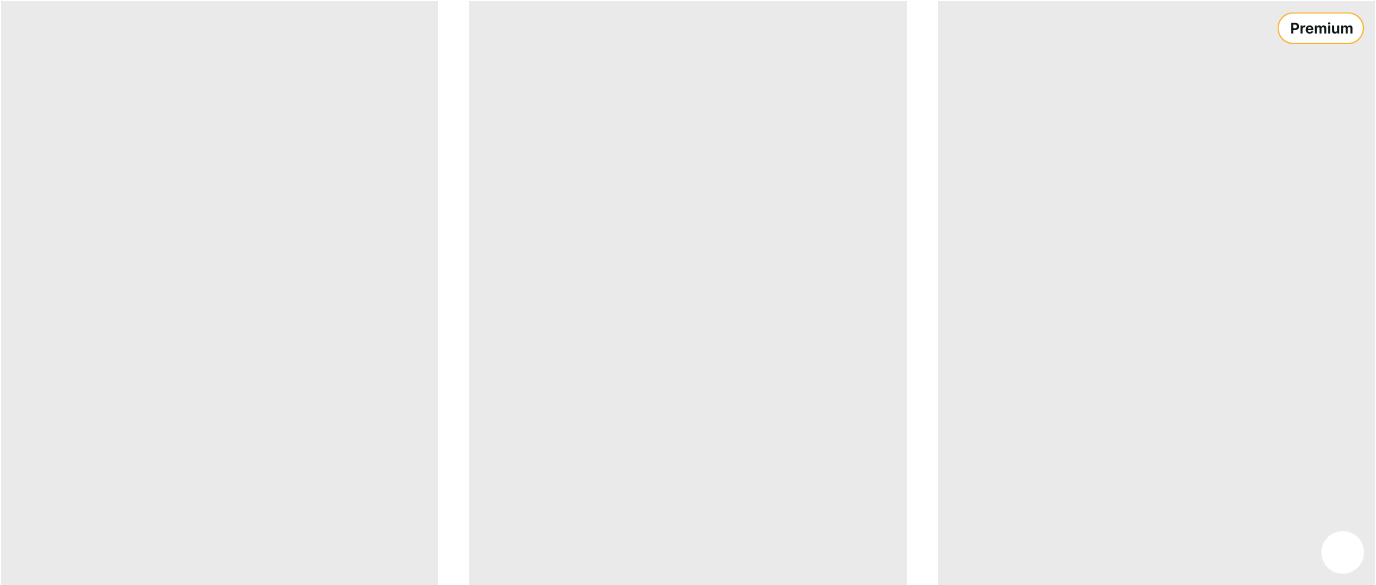
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