

## *Their Ways: A Comparative Assessment of New Zealand Prime Ministers and the News Media*

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This chapter is different in approach from the ones that have preceded it. The previous chapters in this book have examined Robert Muldoon's character and political career largely in isolation from other New Zealand Prime Ministers – both those who preceded him and those who have come after him. This is reflected in the title of Barry Gustafson's acclaimed biography of Muldoon, which was *His Way*. The emphasis is, naturally, on Muldoon as an individual; the whole focus is on *his* background, personality, approach to politics and achievements, rather than on an assessment of Muldoon *vis-à-vis* other political leaders.

Studies of an individual event, nation or person are always – implicitly at least – comparative. The sentiment lying behind John Donne's aphorism – that 'No man is an island' – is as true for political science as it is for poetry. Accordingly, this study takes a slightly different tack, looking at Muldoon's 'way' set explicitly against a broader thematic background.

Muldoon is of interest because he dominated New Zealand's politics for nine years as Prime Minister and had been a central figure on the country's political stage for at least eight years prior to that. There can be no dispute about the proposition that he occupied a highly significant leadership role for a considerable period. One facet of leadership is an ability to communicate effectively with others, particularly the public.

A major study of presidential leadership, based on an analysis of the twelve most recent U.S. presidents (from Franklin D. Roosevelt to George W. Bush),

concludes by enumerating six 'qualities that bear on presidential performance', with the first one being 'effectiveness as a public communicator'.<sup>1</sup> What holds true for American leaders is also the case in New Zealand. Nearly two decades after ceasing to be Prime Minister, among the things that people most remember about Muldoon were his ways of dealing with the media. The ability to get his message across to the public – to 'his' public – and to convey complicated ideas in ways that generated headlines contributed significantly to his political success. At the same time, however, part of the fascination with Muldoon – and part of what has made him so memorable as one of this country's prime ministers – were images of Muldoon in conflict, displaying antagonism, even open hostility, towards the media (attitudes which were, at times, reciprocated).

Many of these images were conveyed over television, the medium that more than any other has come to shape the public's assessments of its political leaders.<sup>2</sup> With the coming of television, the demands on New Zealand's politicians increasingly changed the way that they communicated with the public and the way that the public judged them. Accordingly, this chapter offers a comparative assessment of New Zealand's prime ministers in terms of their media abilities and political skills. It encompasses all those to hold office during the television era – from Keith Holyoake through to Helen Clark, eleven in all.<sup>3</sup>

#### *News Media Abilities*

As already noted, Muldoon was in many respects a consummate politician – at his best, his mastery of the media was his ultimate weapon. Whether facing a currency crisis or a potential coup from his colleagues, he could speak over the media and over his adversaries to mobilise support among those who were known as 'Rob's Mob' or New Zealand's 'silent majority' – 'ordinary blokes'. As noted above, Muldoon had an ability to communicate complicated ideas through simple imagery – and particularly through the use of charts. Gustafson reproduces one in a group of photographs complementing his text.<sup>4</sup> We have sought to emulate Muldoon with our own chart, one ranking prime-ministerial media abilities on a scale that ranges from +10 to -10.

Table 1 provides an assessment of the media skills of the eleven people who have been Prime Minister since 1960 – the year that television was introduced to New Zealand.<sup>5</sup> It has already been pointed out that Robert Muldoon's long tenure as leader of the National Party and Prime Minister of New Zealand was made possible, at least in part, by a confident display of media skills. For this reason, he has received a ranking of +9, not far from the top of the scale. As Greenstein says, 'I have abstained from judging the ends that presidents pursue so as better to focus on their means'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the scale introduced here, and the assessments on which

**Table 1: New Zealand Prime Ministers' Abilities to Communicate via the News Media, 1961–2003**

<i>Prime Minister</i>	<i>Abilities Score</i>
David Lange	+9.5
Robert Muldoon	+9
Helen Clark	+9
Norman Kirk	+8
Mike Moore	-2
Jim Bolger	-3
Jenny Shipley	-5
Keith Holyoake	-7
Geoffrey Palmer	-7
Jack Marshall	-8
Bill Rowling	-8.5

it has been based, judges neither Prime Ministers' policies nor their overall impact on the country – whether, for instance, Muldoon was 'good' for New Zealand or not. This scale focuses simply on one leadership quality – the ability of Prime Ministers to utilise the news media for their own political purposes. There are two points to note in this regard: first, that the scale measures only *prime-ministerial* performance and excludes their handling of the media both before becoming Prime Minister and after leaving office;<sup>7</sup> and secondly, that the scale is an overall account of the media skills of Prime Ministers, of necessity smoothing out the inevitable highs and lows that take place during any leader's period in office.

One of Robert Muldoon's distinctive traits was to communicate with television audiences by speaking directly to the camera (rather than to the interviewer). The eye contact that he was seeking to make with New Zealanders in their homes reflected the type of personal relationship that he believed he had with the 'ordinary' person. As Gustafson has noted:

Muldoon always enjoyed performing on television current affairs or talkback radio programmes. He was confident of his grasp of any subject on which he agreed to be interviewed and of his ability to think and answer clearly even in an interview in which he was under attack. Indeed he relished the cut and thrust of a tough debate or interview on television. ... His comments were easy for press, television and radio journalists to edit and report. They were

simple, short, precise, sometimes humorous, sometimes cynical, and usually very effective statements. He also used rhetorical questions well and on television would look not at the interviewer but straight at the viewers inviting them to agree with him. He recalled that in the early days he used to watch playbacks of his television performances to perfect his straight-at-the-camera technique.<sup>8</sup>

Muldoon was not the only New Zealand politician, of course, who at the height of his powers exhibited considerable confidence in communicating with New Zealanders through the media. His successor, David Lange, could also convey clear messages with at times remarkable grace and skill. As one senior parliamentary press gallery journalist and newspaper editor has noted,

In Lange's time, the [press] conferences were a clash of wits, with his quick mind and tongue easily deflecting the shafts. ... He was accessible and the font of regular copy. He was interesting and entertaining, he could be controversial and he had an ability to inject a sense of command and style into a public occasion.<sup>9</sup>

Lange's slightly higher rating (at +9.5) as a communicator is in some ways reflected in a comparison of the electoral performances of Muldoon and Lange as incumbent Prime Ministers. After winning the 1975 election Muldoon never again succeeded in leading his party to a popular-vote victory over Labour,<sup>10</sup> while Lange's colourful campaign victory in 1984 was followed in 1987 by a re-election triumph that saw both the majority and popular vote share of the party that he led rise – the first time this had happened for Labour since 1938.

This was to happen again for Labour in 2002 under the very changed circumstances of a new electoral system, MMP ('mixed member proportional' representation).<sup>11</sup> Despite problems with the campaign, Clark led Labour to a re-election triumph, increasing the Party's share of the vote and its seats in Parliament. Much of Labour's success in the election – and in the opinion polls that had preceded it, lending a certain air of inevitability to its triumph – was due to Clark herself.

The current [Clark] Labour Government has enjoyed a protracted honeymoon with the media despite the mini-scandals, largely because Prime Minister Helen Clark has elevated personal accessibility to a new art form and in so doing has redefined media politics.<sup>12</sup>

The only other New Zealand Prime Minister to be given a positive ranking for media skills while in office was Norman Kirk – Muldoon's nemesis. Like Muldoon,

he was for a time a colossus on the New Zealand stage and, as Leader of the third Labour Government after six years as Opposition Leader, he had his own way of communicating via the media with the New Zealand electorate.

His weapons in television debate are an unrivalled command of the facts, an almost photographic memory, superb dialectical skill, simple eloquence, a delightful but devastating irony, humour and sweet reasonableness. He is a master of the put-down and an expert in defusing his interviewers by giving the impression that he knows more about you than you know about yourself.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from these four Prime Ministers – Lange, Muldoon, Clark and Kirk – the level of the media abilities of New Zealand's leaders has not been terribly impressive. If this sounds harsh, the same could be said – indeed, it *has* been said – of America's presidents, their staffs and advisors notwithstanding.

For an office that places so great a premium on the presidential pulpit, the modern presidency has been surprisingly lacking in effective public communicators. Most presidents have not addressed the public with anything approximating the professionalism of countless educators, members of the clergy, and radio and television broadcasters. Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Reagan – and Clinton at his best – are the shining exceptions.<sup>14</sup>

Among the less able media performers there are, of course, gradations. Mike Moore's enthusiastic speaking style had its positive qualities, but these were at times overshadowed by a lack of focus and coherence. One of Moore's own colleagues summed him up this way:

The guy is very, very bright, but totally unfocused. He's very creative, very lateral thinking and he has got the ability to cut through a lot of crap. But he is not easy to work with. He talks in code.<sup>15</sup>

Moore left office following Labour's defeat in 1990. He was succeeded as Prime Minister by Jim Bolger, who had become Leader of the National Party after Muldoon's immediate successor in that position, Jim McLay, had been removed by his colleagues after failing to cope either with Labour or with Muldoon. Bolger's media abilities evolved over four years as Opposition Leader and seven years as Prime Minister. He moved from being seen 'as something of a buffoon' to being regarded 'as almost an elder statesman: the Great Helmsman ...'.<sup>16</sup> Although he survived the 1993 and 1996 elections, the latter campaign – and in particular a televised leaders' debate in which his communication skills let him down – nearly proved his undoing:

... that debate [the Holmes leaders' debate of 25 September 1996] ... humbled Jim Bolger. He no longer came across as the Prime Minister, a role of relaxed authority which had given him an advantage in the opening days of the campaign. The debate turned him into just another contender and not a very polished one at that.<sup>17</sup>

In late 1997 Bolger was also removed by colleagues anxious about his performance. He was replaced as National Leader and Prime Minister by Jenny Shipley. Despite being perceived as an able Cabinet Minister and valued Caucus colleague, she had never particularly distinguished herself in respect of media skills. This weakness was also a crucial feature of her two years as leader of the country:

Mrs Shipley's tongue is prone to wag before her brain engages, causing her to make comments she quickly regrets. Like most politicians, she is also unable to back down gracefully, instead keeping the hyped headlines going for days as she tries to squirm out of the unquirmable.<sup>18</sup>

There is still less ambiguity about the final four, the poorer media performers of the eleven Prime Ministers since the 1960 election. While Keith Holyoake was adjudged an exceptionally astute politician for his time and is among New Zealand's longest-serving Prime Ministers, he was also in office during what could be described as a transitional period in terms of the media.<sup>19</sup> He held office at the time that television was introduced, and the challenge of adapting to its demands or requirements was not easily met. Even his supporters were unable to hide their misgivings about the way he came across on the new medium. A caucus colleague has recalled:

After 1960 Holyoake had to adapt to television. On the screen he looked uncomfortable and his voice sounded pompous and plummy. A loyal National supporter, with parliamentary lineage, complained ...: "I can't bear Keith's affected voice". ... [This magnificent speaking voice, as (Alister) McIntosh called it] failed the test on television. It sounded false and failed to convince.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, Holyoake's biographer has noted:

Much of Holyoake's talent as a speaker is lost on television. The concentration on close-ups may show his facial nuances but the broad dramatic gestures are lost. So too is much of the interchange between speaker and audience, especially the eye contact.<sup>21</sup>

Although – like Shipley – Geoffrey Palmer was also respected as a hard-working and able minister and colleague, his media skills left a lot to be desired. Indeed, like Jim McLay he was removed from the leadership before having a chance to fight an election.

He was certainly not a natural television performer, though that did not dampen his enthusiasm to appear regularly in the media for the Six O'clock News or on Holmes as a means of reaching as many people as quickly as possible ... a mistake many politicians tend to make. Where Muldoon could dominate and Lange could amuse and defuse, Palmer tended to lecture. It was unkindly said of him once that he had a great face for radio.<sup>22</sup>

Holyoake's successor, Jack Marshall, failed to prevent a Labour victory in 1972 and was replaced in 1974 by Muldoon. The latter was rightly seen as likely to provide a more assertive style of leadership in Parliament, in the media and on the hustings. Marshall's pleasant demeanour and civilised aspect did not lend itself to stirring television performances, as the following commentary written while he was Prime Minister shows:

Sometimes more gently described as "statesmanlike" or "low-key", Jack Marshall is probably the most soporific member of the parliamentary television team. The *eminence grise* of the National Party, Marshall's almost sinister greyness of personality and appearance seem to suffuse the screen whenever he appears. His performance is lawyerlike, bureaucratically correct, lifeless, anaemic. He talks like a man with ink in his veins—quietly, reasonably, but without any trace of emotion or animation. On television he is the ultimate political cardboard cut-out.<sup>23</sup>

Muldoon's regular sparring partner and immediate predecessor was Bill Rowling, who as Prime Minister was squeezed between two of New Zealand's most media-savvy leaders – Norman Kirk (+8) and Robert Muldoon (+9). Although overshadowed by these two personalities, Rowling's rating in terms of media skills while serving as Prime Minister (1974–75) is as low as it is (-8.5) in part because (according to his biographer, John Henderson) he found "television a difficult and unsatisfactory medium". Henderson adds:

As one Labour M.P. observed, Bill Rowling is a politician whose abilities would have been more widely appreciated in a pre-television age. "He is a naturally shy and, at times, withdrawn man. He finds it difficult to talk about himself – to reveal his inner strengths. He seems almost to hold himself back".<sup>24</sup>

### Attitudes Towards the Media

Looking at New Zealand Prime Ministers and the media in terms of their skills and abilities is only part of the story. As noted at the outset, Muldoon's relationship with the media, irrespective of his skills in using them for his own purposes, was at times a stormy one. Some of the incidents for which he is most remembered featured confrontations with individual journalists and commentators such as Simon Walker, Ian Fraser and Tom Scott.

Muldoon more than any other Prime Minister highlights the need for a second yardstick for measuring relations between leaders and the news media. Attitudes by politicians, especially by party leaders and Prime Ministers, towards the news media need to be scrutinised and assessed as carefully as their abilities to use the media. Table 2 provides a ranking of the same eleven Prime Ministers – from Holyoake to Clark – using the same simple scale (from +10 to -10), only this time based on their *attitudes* (rather than abilities) towards the media.

**Table 2: New Zealand Prime Ministers' Attitudes Towards the News Media, 1961–2003**

Prime Minister	Attitudes Score
Helen Clark	+8
David Lange	+6
Mike Moore	+6
Jack Marshall	+5
Jim Bolger	+1
Norman Kirk	-2
Bill Rowling	-2
Keith Holyoake	-3
Jenny Shipley	-6
Geoffrey Palmer	-7
Robert Muldoon	-9

In this table (unlike Table 1) Muldoon comes right at the bottom. He may have used the media well – indeed, for a long while he wrote a column for a weekly newspaper – but no one would say that he could be counted among their admirers. As Gustafson has noted, Muldoon regarded

... many journalists with reciprocated hostility and contempt. Muldoon banned Tom Scott of the *Listener* from his press conferences and refused to be interviewed on television by Simon Walker or Ian Fraser. He ordered a *NZ Herald* journalist out of his office after alleging bias by that newspaper, and complained to the Speaker of Parliament that a private radio reporter, Barry Soper, had been persistent to the point of rudeness at one press conference. The Prime Minister's most serious breach with the press occurred in September 1983 when he and cabinet decided that ministers would refuse to give interviews or official government material to Wellington's *Dominion* newspaper.<sup>25</sup>

Muldoon had for a long time regarded the media as adversaries and had made many enemies of interviewers, producers, reporters, editors and commentators. By 1984 the press was almost universally anti-Muldoon and highlighted his policy failures and the less likable aspects of his personality. Muldoon was not alone in believing that in 1984, as far as the majority of the media was concerned, he and National could do no right and Lange, [Bob] Jones, Labour and the New Zealand Party could do no wrong.<sup>26</sup>

Muldoon stands tall (which he never did in real life) as something of an 'ideal type' in a negative sense when it comes to antagonistic attitudes towards the news media. The New Zealand setting and political culture does not permit Prime Ministers who distrust or indeed loathe the media simply to avoid them (unlike in the United States, where presidents uncomfortable with press conferences can stop having them). If Muldoon's at times belligerent relationship with the media sets the standard, other Prime Ministers have also evinced highly negative attitudes towards those with what could be described as almost a constitutional obligation to cover them. Looking back on his political career, Geoffrey Palmer has observed:

My experience in politics has altered my attitude to the media. ... Reflecting on the experience has led me to the conclusion that the media is part of New Zealand's constitutional problem. When I was in a position to know what was actually going on, it too often seemed to me that the media was an 'ever-bubbling spring of endless lies', misrepresentations and distortions.<sup>27</sup>

Palmer's self-confessed attitudes towards the media were in some ways surprising. As Keith Eunson has noted:

Certainly, he seemed to have a mindset about journalists, a strange thing in view of the fact that his father was a journalist and had been editor of the *Nelson Evening Mail*. I do not believe he liked or really respected journalists, with perhaps an occasional exception.<sup>28</sup>



Clearly a low opinion of the media is not something on which Labour and National Prime Ministers are necessarily going to disagree. Jenny Shipley was already 'very wary of the [press] gallery' when she became Prime Minister,<sup>29</sup> and her attitudes towards the media did not improve during her tenure in office. As an editorial in the *Waikato Times* noted halfway through her premiership:

If Mrs Shipley is to climb out of the deep, dark bunker in which she now finds herself, she must ... persuade [middle New Zealand] National's course is better. It may be a lost cause. It will certainly not be helped if she indulges in stunts and persists in casting the media as the enemy. She must rise above that.<sup>30</sup>

Shipley took time out during her valedictory address in Parliament to direct a few words towards the Parliamentary Press Gallery looking on from above. This – in her retirement speech, the closing words of the 2002 Parliament (which was being adjourned for the early election) – summed up her view of the media:

To the media, what can I say? Will I miss them? Some, but not all ... There are many things that are required of the media. I put on the record today that, just as politicians in this Parliament have to go to voters and try to convince them of the quality of their ideas, I long for the day when journalists treat their viewers and readers intelligently enough to put the case before them and allow the reader and the viewer to decide, rather than dishing them up a ready-made meal. If we could achieve that, New Zealand politics and New Zealand life will be much the better for it. But we need each other, and I would be the first to acknowledge that this Parliament and politicians in the future will need to work with, and for, you.<sup>31</sup>

Shipley's criticism of the media was well received by MPs, who interrupted her speech with applause after hearing her 'long for the day when journalists ... allow the reader and the viewer to decide'. Complaint about their treatment by the media – and by the press gallery (who were, for the moment, a captive audience) – was a point on which virtually all MPs, irrespective of party, were able to agree. Perhaps all political leaders at times think of the media as 'the enemy'. By its nature the relationship between politicians and representatives of the news media is a symbiotic one: they depend on each other for their mutual survival, yet must remain suspicious of one another's intentions. Some politicians become embittered by the experience of having their every action scrutinised and questioned; others manage somehow to retain a more positive view. The challenge is somehow to maintain a proper balance.

Even though one of Holyoake's own caucus colleagues has referred to the Prime Minister's 'distaste, if not contempt for journalists',<sup>32</sup> a television journalist noted Holyoake's willingness to reassess his attitude and approach.

... we told Sir Keith that we felt his television image in the past had been unfortunate and had done him less than justice. He agreed. It was, we said, less a question of technical presentation than of attitude. ... It was essential to be relaxed, at ease, yourself. ... Would he try to tone it down tonight, would he try in the studio to discuss his life as informally as he had discussed his image in the green room? He said that he would. ... As we walked into the studio, he seemed relaxed and at ease. He was good-humoured and joked with me and the studio crew. There was not a trace of pomposity about him.<sup>33</sup>

Some political figures displayed attitudes that were negative not towards those working in the media, but towards aspects of the media itself. Rowling felt that television 'makes it difficult to be sincere', and he

hated the need to perform: "I prefer the flesh". He was unwilling to change to meet the demands of the television: "I don't intend taking on acting so that I can project myself as something false."<sup>34</sup>

Rowling's predecessor, Norman Kirk, was also ambivalent towards the media. Despite his own considerable media skills, even at his most successful he remained suspicious of the press. This appeared to intensify as his term as Prime Minister progressed. His private secretary's diary contains many examples of Kirk fulminating about the media:

Mr K grew heated at his press conference last evening ... Mr K phoned [television producer] Rod Vaughan, seeking an apology. ... I can see why Mr K does this, as he has so frequently over the years. ... but when it comes to matters like phone calls to news media I wish he wasn't quite so quick off the mark ... he also rang Broadcasting's head of current affairs.<sup>35</sup>

In late June 1974, Kirk's habit of ringing the news media when he objected to something that had been said or written about him or his government led the Opposition to table a motion in Parliament referring to the 'sorry spectacle of the Prime Minister ... involved in an undignified and intemperate argument [on talkback radio] ... demeaning the office of prime minister'.<sup>36</sup> A mere eight days before his death, Kirk was concerned about the possibility that the country's sole television network was 'proposing to hire two talkback radio men' who had been critical of Kirk, and his secretary noted in her diary that Mr Kirk had indicated 'that Gordon Dryden, Brian Edwards [the two proposed appointees] and the Broadcasting Board are mistaken if they think it's all cut and dried'.<sup>37</sup>

With Jim Bolger matters become somewhat more complicated. Prime Ministers do not govern on their own; increasingly their fortunes are shaped not only by their