

own skills, but by the abilities and attitudes of their advisors – particularly those staff with responsibilities for media relationships. The Bolger prime-ministership bridged two electoral systems – first-past-the-post and MMP – and two types of government – single-party rule by National and a variety of coalition arrangements. Bolger's period at the helm also encompassed relations with the media under two very different press secretaries, Mike Wall and Richard Griffin, and the differences in Bolger's apparent stance towards the media was at times striking. With Wall all was not well. Significantly, an article summing up Bolger's first two years as Prime Minister was entitled 'Media clobbering machine'.³⁸ In turn, Bolger's resentment over media treatment spilled over at one stage:

During the course of a 30-minute interview he referred disparagingly to the Parliamentary Press Gallery three times.

'Why do you think some people think you are heartless?'

'You should look in the mirror. I suggest you look in the mirror collectively,' he replied.³⁹

Bolger's isolation from the media seems to have contributed to 'a contempt and hatred of the Gallery that emanated from the Beehive'.⁴⁰ The relationship became more positive – as did Bolger's attitudes – with the arrival of Griffin.

Along came Griffin, whose wheeling and dealing with the media warmed relations and also gave the former Radio New Zealand political editor his own profile. There was the additional flipside in that although Griffin smoothed media relationships for Bolger, he was not always briefing him adequately on what else was going down.⁴¹

Bolger's own memoir acknowledges the difference between the two advisors. 'Michael [Wall] had a rather testy relationship with many in the Press Gallery – he didn't operate on their wavelength but he did operate on mine, which was much more important to me.' Griffin, by contrast, was 'an acknowledged expert on the game of politics [with] a very wide and interesting circle of contacts which sometimes meant he was late back from lunch'.⁴²

Bolger's own annoyance with the media was most evident when reflecting on 'the worm' and the role of television interviewer Paul Holmes in the 1996 debate. Bolger's (and National's) difficulties at the 1996 election – which saw the party returned to office only following Bolger's agreement to enter into a coalition with Winston Peters and his New Zealand First party – stemmed initially, and perhaps largely, from his poor showing in that first debate. For Bolger, looking back, that

debate – and the media's treatment of it – seemed to represent a good deal of what was wrong with the New Zealand media and its coverage of politics (and, as well, of him):

The worm is a kind of parlour game in which a group of supposedly independent voters get to give their views instantaneously on a politician's performance by switching a hand-held dial backwards or forwards.

TVNZ had first tried the worm trick on us three years before, but my then Chief Press Secretary, Michael Wall, had told them that they could have the Prime Minister or they could have the worm. But they weren't going to get both and that went for all subsequent elections. This time around they didn't tell me ...

I don't get angry very often but after that first debate I came back to my Beehive office and expressed my displeasure at being set up and then rang Holmes and told him exactly what I thought of him, his worm and TVNZ bias in general.⁴³

Jack Marshall – widely known as 'Gentleman Jack' (a rare tribute) while still in politics – was not seen as exhibiting antagonistic attitudes towards the news media despite an at times wooden performance. As was noted by a media commentator at the time:

Marshall is the absolute in niceness. Whether niceness is enough, remains to be seen.⁴⁴

His fair-mindedness towards the media is reflected in the following comment taken from his memoirs. Commenting on the dismissal in 1972 of the then editor of the *Listener*, Marshall wrote:

Alexander McLeod ... was a brilliant journalist with a penetrating insight into people and politics, but he was extremely independent and very arrogant. His editorials in the *Listener* covered a wide range of subjects, including politics. He did not hesitate to direct his critical mind to the actions of the Government. This was nothing new. Editors had been doing that since newspapers first appeared. I have always responded that, 'I don't agree with what you write but I defend your right to say it.' In a press conference at the time I referred to the *Listener's* editorials as 'good stimulating intellectual argument'.⁴⁵

Mike Moore's enthusiasm for the media extended to having a broadcasting studio built in his own home. His gregarious approach as well as a penchant for moving from one topic to the next with at times breathtaking speed seems to have left him

with little time to nurture grievances against the media. As he himself noted not long after leaving office,

... after the dust has settled most politicians come to the realisation that journalists are only doing their job, which is a very important and vital one in our democratic process. For the smart politician there is also the realisation that grudges against journalists are not worth harbouring because the reality is that the relationship is symbiotic, one of mutual need.⁴⁶

During his early years as Prime Minister David Lange appeared to enjoy interacting with members of the press:

He gave the impression he would more likely surrender to fine words than cold logic, and both sides enjoyed the weekly occasion.⁴⁷

Subsequently, Lange's relations with the media – like those with Labour Caucus colleagues and Cabinet Ministers – changed over time. As one of his senior advisors has reported:

... over time the relationship soured. Confidences were broken. Off-the-record remarks were quoted. There were times when he prevaricated and, when accused of doing so, reacted strongly. ... Above all, the lack of physical proximity increased the alienation. Reporters who had listened appreciatively to his comments and roared with laughter at his jokes began to write critical articles.⁴⁸

Clark's years in politics have also seen her relationship with the media go through both bright and gloomy patches. Now so savvy with the media that she is the envy of others, Clark says that she did not really master the skill till the 1996 election campaign.

The first three years as Leader of the Opposition was pretty hard going. But you just learn as you go along, I guess.

What happened was that I'd been completely written off for the 1996 campaign and the truth was the campaign went well for me. That made a very big difference to how I was perceived. And that made media relations easier.

I've been through periods where I've had terrible media treatment but I've got to take some responsibility for that as well. In the end, there's no point blaming the media for how you're being treated. You've got to look in the mirror.⁴⁹

Clark's positive attitude – she characterised her relationship with the media as 'constructive' and based on a view that 'you just had to be accessible'⁵⁰ – would have been challenged by difficulties she experienced during the 2002 election campaign. Controversies over her own conduct (rather than policies) were elements both of 'paintergate' (over the signing for charitable purposes of a work that the Prime Minister had not actually painted) and of 'corngate' (relating to allegations about the possible release of genetically-modified seedcorn into New Zealand). These episodes involved on-air clashes with journalists, refusals to answer questions and a walk-out from an interview. It is clear that a leader's overall feelings about the media can and will be subject to considerable change according to circumstance, reflecting (among other things) their reactions to changes in the media's own presentations and portrayals.

Political and Media Skills – From the Inept to the Able

Thus far the abilities of New Zealand's eleven television-age Prime Ministers and their attitudes towards the media – the degree to which they worked with the media or saw the media as 'the enemy' – have been analysed separately from each other. However, the two traits need to be considered together and Figure 1 provides a visually clear and comprehensive comparative record of the relationship between them for each of the Prime Ministers.

Figure 1: New Zealand Prime Ministers and the News Media, 1961–2003

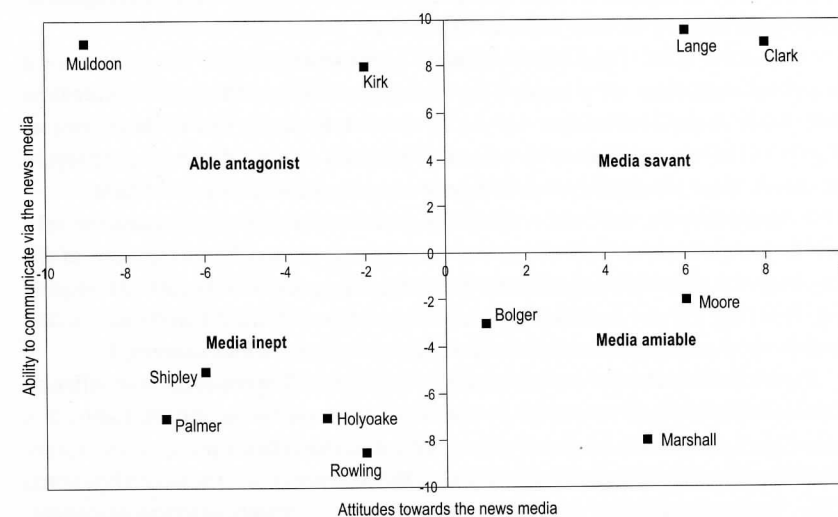


Figure 1 is a two-dimensional display in which positive or negative attitudes and abilities (or the lack thereof) result in the placement of each Prime Minister in one of four possible categories. The figure superimposes onto each other the data contained in Tables 1 and 2. The top right-hand cell contains Prime Ministers whose media skills and media attitudes were both positive. Diagonally opposite to these 'media savant' Prime Ministers, in the bottom left-hand cell of the figure, are those – the 'media inept' – whose affection for the media was low and whose performance was generally speaking unconvincing.

The Prime Ministers with mixed scores (good performers with negative attitudes, and weak performers with positive attitudes) fall between these two extremes. They are to be found in the top left-hand and bottom right-hand corners of Figure 1. These two 'types' of Prime Minister can be summed up as 'able antagonist' and 'media amiable' respectively.

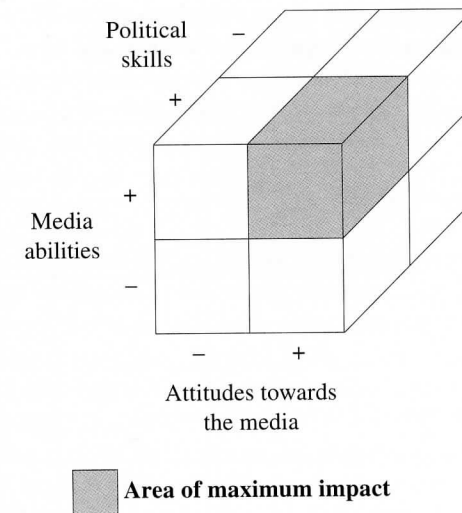
Few would quarrel with the placement of many of the Prime Ministers within these four categories. It is not surprising, for instance, to find three short-term Prime Ministers among the 'media inept'. Two of them (Rowling and Shipley) were defeated in the only election they contested as Prime Minister, while the third (Palmer) was never given the opportunity even to lead his party at a general election. Other placements – such as those of Kirk and Muldoon in the 'able antagonist' category – likewise seem intuitively right, even though the framework used thus far only draws upon one dimension of a Prime Minister's political life (namely, their relationship with the media). It does not include the many other elements in a politician's career, such as campaign skills, abilities in the House, relationships with Caucus colleagues and the wider party, policy formulation, relationships with the bureaucracy, diplomatic abilities and so on.

On the one hand, these other elements ought in some ways to be seen as the more important since they involve the capacities of Prime Ministers to carry out their duties as national leaders. On the other hand, however, few of these features of political life are unaffected by a Prime Minister's media abilities and the regard (or respect) that the media (both domestic and international) have for them.

Nevertheless the need for a model of prime-ministerial performance to take into account wider political skills is evident by the placement in Figure 1 of the very first of the television-age Prime Ministers. Seeing Keith Holyoake in company with Rowling, Palmer and Shipley leads to some sense of unease, and points to the need to view prime-ministerial media attributes within a wider context.

Figure 2 offers a visual representation of the relationship between three different variables. While Figure 1 was a two-dimensional presentation of data, Figure 2 is three-dimensional in character. It enlarges the analytic scheme presented in Tables 1 and 2 and in Figure 1, by incorporating a third dimension – the overall political skills of prime ministers – into the model. Just as assessments of Prime Ministers'

Figure 2: Leader's Political Skills, Media Abilities and Attitudes Towards the News Media



abilities to use the media and of their attitudes towards the media were made by way of positive and negative scores, so too broad judgements about their competence as national leaders can be made in positive or negative terms.

The 'eight-fold geometric figure'⁵¹ found in Figure 2 contains a schematic classification in which prime-ministerial political skills are added to the two media dimensions. As in the previous figure, here too there is one category ideally to be preferred over all the others. In this case, one of the eight cubes has been highlighted: it is the area where positive media abilities, positive media attitudes and positive leadership skills all coincide. This portion of the cube has been labelled the 'area of maximum impact' because Prime Ministers who attain superior scores on all three counts can be expected to enjoy what one well-known model of political leadership has described as the greatest 'success in relating to the [political] environment ... [with] an emphasis on rational mastery'.⁵²

Taking the much more complex model of political leadership presented in Figure 2 and applying it to New Zealand's political circumstances produces a new hierarchy (or ranking) among the eleven Prime Ministers considered in this chapter. Table 3 is a matrix that expands upon the data given earlier (especially in Figure 1) by providing a summary assessment of prime-ministerial political skills, based on patterns of political performance over the course of their tenure in office.

Table 3: The Political Skills, the News Media Abilities and Attitudes Towards the News Media of Eleven New Zealand Prime Ministers

	Political Skills	Media Abilities	Media Attitudes	Prime Ministers
1	+	+	+	Helen Clark
2	+	+	—	Norman Kirk Robert Muldoon
3	+	—	+	Mike Moore Jim Bolger
4	+	—	—	Keith Holyoake
5	—	+	+	David Lange
6	—	+	—	
7	—	—	+	Jack Marshall
8	—	—	—	Bill Rowling Geoffrey Palmer Jenny Shipley

Table 3 allows for eight possible combinations of attributes, corresponding to the number of permutations illustrated in Figure 2. The first thing to note from the table is that six of the eleven Prime Ministers were assessed positively with respect to their overall performance as political leaders. Three of the six were National Prime Ministers, each of them serving for a considerable length of time (Holyoake for 12 years, Muldoon for nine and Bolger for 'only' seven). The other three – Kirk, Moore and Clark – are Labour Prime Ministers.

The top row in Table 3 corresponds to the shaded part of Figure 2, the 'area of maximum impact' by Prime Ministers. Only one of New Zealand's last eleven Prime Ministers, Helen Clark, has the positive assessment in all three categories – political skills, media abilities, and attitudes towards the media – required to be in that row.⁵³ Two of the more dominant of New Zealand's recent Prime Ministers, Norman Kirk and Robert Muldoon, both score positively in two of the three columns in the table. So, too, do Mike Moore and Jim Bolger.

It was pointed out earlier in this chapter that bracketing Holyoake with Rowling, Palmer and Shipley seemed somewhat anomalous. Indeed, the more elaborate framework for comparative assessment given in Figure 2 and in Table 3 results in

a dramatic change in Holyoake's position *vis-à-vis* other New Zealand Prime Ministers. Despite his poor media ratings, his overall political skills rightly place him in the top half of the table.

The political skills of the other five prime ministers deserted them at key moments. David Lange left office after his Caucus colleagues openly defied his wishes by re-electing to Cabinet an arch-opponent, Roger Douglas. The remaining four – Marshall and Shipley (National) and Rowling and Palmer (Labour) – never succeeded in leading their party to victory at the polls.

Muldoon's Way

This comparative assessment of New Zealand Prime Ministers' experiences with regard to the news media, and particularly television, although inspired by a biography of Robert Muldoon, has led towards consideration of wider issues impinging on political leadership. Modern political leaders can ill afford to be indifferent or unskilled when it comes to the media. The relationship between politicians and the media in a democratic society will always be fragile. Politicians irritated by the way they or their policies are depicted can scarcely give in to petulance; while it is possible to succeed in the short term by attacking the press, in the end there are costs to that strategy that affect a leader's ability to govern. What is true of New Zealand Prime Ministers, of course, is true for politicians elsewhere. A successful political leader needs to develop a wide range of political skills, including a basic repertoire of communications strategies to deal with different elements of the media. A 'thick skin' seems also to be an asset in politics; politicians too easily angered by criticism will be distracted from the important tasks of government. It would, at the very least, be self-indulgent and possibly even self-destructive for a politician to quote too frequently Thomas Jefferson's candid outburst in a moment of frustration 'that the man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.'⁵⁴

Muldoon's relationship with the media – both print and electronic – became part of his political style and served as a backdrop to his efforts both in office and while campaigning. Yet its mix of self-confident defiance and deep-seated annoyance seemed to go deeper than politics. In one of his biographical memoirs, entitled *My Way*, which was the inspiration, of course, for the title of Gustafson's biography, *His Way*, Muldoon devoted an entire chapter to the news media. He entitled it, 'The media: arrogance v. accuracy'.⁵⁵ On the media's arrogance, he had this to say:

I have always maintained that New Zealand newspapers may compare favourably with those of any other country that I visit, but at all levels, from