

Yes Prime minister

At a time of heightened cross-Tasman tensions, she is a politician who breaks the mould. Helen Clark, New Zealand's PM, is a woman who knows where she and her nation are going – and it's not following Australia's lead. **By David**

There is a place across the sea, often the butt of our jokes, certainly within full range of our condescension, where the impossible seems to have occurred, or be in the process of occurring. It is a place where nuclear ships have been banned and where desperate boat people are given safe harbour. It is a place where apologies are made to indigenous people, and compensation paid in full, many times over. It is a place where social objectives are back in vogue and are being embodied in a range of government policies.

And, of course, it is a place run by women, not for reasons of cheap tokenism, but because, by and large, they are the best people for the jobs.

In this country, New Zealand, which we think we have the measure of in so many ways, the prime minister is a woman, as are nine of her ministers, her cabinet secretary and her chief of staff. The Opposition leader is a woman – or was until last month – so too the governor-general, the chief justice of the High Court, the head of Telecom and the head of the country's most important museum.

All in all, 30 percent of the nation's parliament is female, including the first democratically elected transsexual in the Western world. In the space of just under two years, New Zealand has become a showcase for the progressive society – a sort of social-democratic Shangri-la where not only are women calling the shots, but Maori are being heard, and others at the bottom of

the socio-economic ladder are beginning to feel, at last, that someone in power is listening.

And at the apex of all this stands Helen Clark, a woman whose approval rating was once so disastrously low – between 2 and 6 per cent – that it probably qualified her for the tag of "most disliked political leader in the Western world". Today, Ms Clark is arguably the most popular prime minister in New Zealand's modern era, more popular than the legendary Robert Muldoon or David Lange in their heyday, which is saying something, given how indomitable both were in different ways.

And it is also saying something, given that Ms Clark in no way fits the mould of what might be expected of a woman in public life. For starters, she's childless – by choice. "I've had a happy, fulfilling life and career," she once said. "There just hasn't been the time in my life to have kids." Besides, her husband, medical sociologist Dr Peter Davis, is a "workaholic" who, Ms Clark says, could also not make the necessary allowances for children. Secondly, Ms Clark is a left-wing former academic with a passion for theatre and opera, in a country mad about sport. Thirdly, her looks and body language leave some people, particularly those older and more conservative, singularly unimpressed.

For many years she was seen as too austere, too icy, too remote. As a minister in previous Labour governments she was criticised because her hairstyle was too "severe", her teeth too crooked. In 1993, when she ousted Mike Moore as Labour leader – thus becoming the first woman to head a major political party

in New Zealand – her opponents cast her as the head of a cabal of "lesbians, husbandless women and feminist extremists".

"It's Mike versus the Dyke," read a placard brandished by Moore supporters at the time. Ms Clark was deeply offended, as you'd expect. "We'd just been through a suffrage centennial year," she said, "where there'd been a great deal of congratulation about New Zealand being the first country to give women the vote [in 1893]. At the end of the year, to have a woman leader who is credible painted as emerging because she is a member of some sort of sect is really quite appalling."

For the next few years, she fought off insurrection within her own party, deep enmity from the business community and outright hostility from sections of the media. Her poll ratings sunk below the Plimsoll Line, inspiring sardonic local headlines such as: "Helen Clark and the Dead Cat Effect".

In response, she reportedly hired an image consultant (she cut her fringe, started wearing lipstick and bought new designer clothes) and she deliberately set out to court or neutralise her enemies. She also began to grow in confidence.

"All our training was aimed at letting people see the real Helen Clark," observed Brian Edwards, a broadcaster who gave Ms Clark media advice during the late 1990s and is now writing an official biography of her. "[That] Helen Clark ... was funny and gentle and warm and enormously intelligent." As well as possessed of a steely resolve. Three years ago, Ms Clark spent four days braving ▶

Once unpopular, now lauded ... New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, 51, is a woman who speaks her mind and believes "Kiwi bashing" has to stop.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MONTY ADAMS

freezing temperatures, altitude sickness and limited water supplies to climb to the top of Mt Kilimanjaro, Africa's highest mountain.

"You're conscious you're not getting any younger," she said after completing the journey. "Most people I know did Kilimanjaro when they were in their 20s. I'm a month off my 49th birthday. If you're going to do these things, you've got to get on with it." By the end of that year, she'd become New Zealand's first elected woman prime minister. It was the most stunning political transformation in living memory.

HELEN CLARK IS SITTING AT A table in her office on the ninth floor of the executive wing of Parliament House, in a building known colloquially as the Beehive. Outside, the sky over Wellington harbour has turned a gun-metal grey.

The 51-year-old Prime Minister strikes the visitor just as reports have indicated. Firm handshake. Deep voice. Trademark red suit. Bob of hair. Hunched shoulders. No-nonsense manner.

Ms Clark is well aware that *The Weekly* is interested in getting her thoughts on the three issues which have gripped Australia-New Zealand relations of late, namely the Tampa affair, the international war on terrorism and Air New Zealand's role in the collapse of Ansett. Not surprisingly, this political scientist and fierce patriot also has her own agenda – to address head-on what she believes to be the time-honoured practice of Kiwi-bashing in Australia.

This reached a crescendo, of course, in the middle of September when Air New Zealand's subsidiary, Ansett, collapsed in spectacular fashion, leaving a trail of debt, half a billion dollars worth of unmet staff entitlements and a rollcall of Australian towns without air transport.

Ms Clark happened to be returning home

trying to travel home on their designated national airline ... and it was then taken too far in that not only was I prevented from leaving on the Air New Zealand plane ... but when my baggage and bookings were transferred to Qantas, they wouldn't let the Qantas plane leave while I was on it.

"That's where it tipped completely over the edge. Now, you know, let's call a spade a spade here. I am a friendly Labour prime minister. I've been pro-trade union all my life. I've worked very closely with the trade union movement in New Zealand. New Zealand is Australia's longest and closest friend. That should not have happened at all. And what I think all New Zealanders take exception to is that their prime minister was targeted, New Zealand as a country, New Zealand as a people, was targeted by this outburst, when it affected the actions of a company which had very little New Zealand ownership in it, which is controlled out of Singapore and had three Australian directors on the board. There's been a lot of general Kiwi bashing ... and I'm sick of it."

(On the day of our meeting, Ms Clark's government was clearing the way to nationalise the airline with a \$727million rescue package. Ms Clark will not comment on the bail-out.)

LONG BEFORE HELEN CLARK BEGAN munching on political theory for breakfast, she was the eldest of four daughters growing up on a sheep and cattle farm in the North Island's Waikato district. Her parents, George and Margaret Clark, were staunch supporters of the conservative National Party.

As a young girl, Ms Clark suffered from asthma and was hospitalised with pneumonia and a collapsed lung. "I was the weak one who stayed at home while others rode horses," she has said. She was shy, but bright and determined, and



Helen Clark at her Auckland home with husband, Dr Peter Davis.

was the same year she married the man whom

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My husband does the cooking, but I go in and make sure everything's right."

from Europe at the time, after aborting a business and investment mission following the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington D.C. She flew straight into the biggest trans-Tasman brouhaha since Trevor Chappell's notorious under-arm bowling incident two decades ago. Touching down at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport, Ms Clark's Air New Zealand plane was immediately picketed by angry Ansett workers and prevented from leaving. She only managed to get home after a helicopter transferred her to an RAAF base in Victoria, where she was picked up by a NZ Orion military aircraft.

On this cool, Wellington evening, the Prime Minister is still seething about the incident. "There was abuse of ordinary New Zealanders

her forced convalescence helped instil in her an abiding love of books.

As a teenager, she boarded at Epsom Girls Grammar in Auckland, before going to Auckland University, where she completed a Master of Arts degree in political science. It was during these years that she became active in the great political causes of the day: opposition to the Vietnam War, apartheid in South Africa, French nuclear testing in the Pacific and the woeful treatment of New Zealand's indigenous population. She became a postgraduate scholar and lecturer, as well as a textbook radical.

Ms Clark had joined the Labour Party in 1971. A decade later, she became the first woman MP elected in Auckland for 40 years. It

she'd been living with, Peter Davis, currently a professor of public health in Christchurch. Ms Clark was to freely admit later that the two only married in order to avoid the inevitable political gossip. Today, their work lives keep them in separate cities until Thursday evening when they return to their renovated Auckland villa. Ms Clark describes her husband's role in her life as "very supportive".

"I mean, I really need a support partner who can make [his] way around the house, do the shopping, do the cooking," she tells me. Ms Clark reveals she hasn't cooked for years. "My husband actually does the cooking, but I go in and make sure everything's right. I make sure he doesn't burn the chops and sometimes I say, 'That's not how you do it,' but he takes

the initiative."

By 1989, Ms Clark became the first woman deputy prime minister in New Zealand, albeit of a deeply unpopular government. Throughout the '80s and '90s, New Zealand, first under Labour, then under consecutive conservative governments, had been transformed from a virtual welfare state into a free-market nirvana. Never a supporter of the radical economic reforms, Ms Clark now says they left the country deeply traumatised. "It did tremendous damage to the fabric of the community and shattered a lot of people's lives," she says.

"You've got to remember that when agricultural subsidies were withdrawn virtually overnight [in 1984-85], we had a lot of suicides in farming communities, a lot of

distress."

Since coming to office two years ago, Helen Clark's government has set about dressing the wounds. Pensions are up, state housing rents are down, paid paternity leave is on the way, workers' rights have been restored in certain areas, spending on health and education has been increased, as have income tax rates for those in the highest bracket, tertiary fees have been capped and tariff cuts have been frozen for five years.

In addition, the government has put the brakes on the rampant corporatisation or privatisation of airlines, railways, banking and telecommunications. It has also launched an inquiry into genetically modified food – the first of its kind in the world; ordered the state-owned television channels to stop being

driven by commercial imperatives and drafted new legislation for another settlement with the Maori. "I think if New Zealand has anything to offer the world," Ms Clark says, "it may actually be in how the descendants of a settler population are dealing with reconciliation with the descendants of indigenous people."

I ask Ms Clark whether she thinks New Zealand has become a fairer, more humane society because of the number of women occupying prominent roles. "I have no doubt," she replies, "that the significant numbers of women in the New Zealand parliament have had an impact on the priorities for governments, and on legislation."

Although drafted more than 15 years ago, NZ's overwhelmingly popular anti-nuclear legislation is a manifestation, she believes, ►

of this more feminised society. "There's huge support from women [for this position]," she says. New Zealand was, of course, suspended from the ANZUS treaty by America in 1986, after the Labour Government banned nuclear-armed and powered ships from visiting New Zealand ports. As chair of the Foreign Affairs and Defence Select Committee at the time, Ms Clark was a chief architect of the policy. It earned her a Danish peace prize that year. "We were ahead of our time," she says with obvious pride, "but perhaps that's our role."

As it would appear again today, with the world's (mainly male) political leaders attempting to assert their leadership credentials

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through a commitment to an international war on terrorism. Ms Clark's views on a whole range of security-related issues suggest a less muscular, more female approach. Since coming to power, she has emphasised New Zealand's peace-keeping missions rather than its war-fighting capabilities. She's also indicated it was "time to move on" from ANZUS.

"You've got to look at the context in which ANZUS was written," she says. "[The] aftermath of World War II, threat from Japan, start of the Cold War. These are different times." Did she not feel, though, that the world was a more perilous place after September 11? "The world is a perilous place," she replies, "but we don't happen to live in a perilous part of it." And it is this "benign strategic environment" which helps explain her country's gesture towards Australia during the recent refugee stand-off.

Less than two weeks before the Ansett collapse, Helen Clark's government came to Australia's assistance as it sought, in the face of international condemnation, to resolve the issue of the 433 asylum seekers aboard the Norwegian freighter, Tampa. New Zealand agreed to take 150 boat people and assess their claims for refugee status.

Ms Clark says now that, while she appreciates Australia's security concerns and is not prepared to publicly judge the Howard government's actions, the impasse highlighted a significant difference in attitude between the two countries.

"The last poll I saw we were up to 59 per cent of Kiwis saying they approved of the government's action. You would not get that result in Australia. If you look at the way it evolved ... after the people had scrambled onto the Tampa from a sinking boat, the New Zealand media came to me and said, 'What would the New Zealand government do if this was happening off our shore?'

"And I gave the only response I believe I could give, which was that if that boat had been sinking off New Zealand territory, we

would have escorted it in."

Ms Clark is keen to point out that while New Zealand has changed its defence priorities, this does not prevent it from still being a responsible international citizen. In fact, the country has 13 international deployments in peace-keeping roles, as well as a contingent of crack SAS troops bound for the Middle East.

"From the outset, New Zealand said it would help in any way it could [against the war on terrorism]," she says. "[In fact] it is one of the very few countries in the world to have offered a military contribution."

By comparison to Australia, however, New Zealand's involvement would be modest. "I

think we are less bellicose [than Australia]," she says. "It may have something to do with the difference in size, but if you are the size of New Zealand and as remote as New Zealand ... We are not even a small power. We're no power at all. That does influence your outlook on the world.

"Australia projects itself as a middle power and that leads it to think it has a certain role to play in world affairs."

For that reason, the PM says she could never imagine Australia adopting New Zealand's anti-nuclear stance. "I think you feel more insecure [even though] I think you should be secure and confident in what you are, and who you are. I think New Zealand often appears to the rest of the world to be more secure, confident and independent than Australia."

KIWI WOMEN HAVE ALWAYS been a force to be reckoned with. The Scottish matriarchs of the 19th century hewed wood and carried water alongside their husbands. By 1893, their successors established New Zealand as the first country in the world to give women the vote – 25 years before Britain, 27 before America, and 78 years before Switzerland.

In the lead-up to World War I, the Temperance Movement was in full cry, with women waging a vigorous campaign for reduced alcohol consumption because of the damage caused to families.

"It was a typical combination of politics and concern for society that drove that movement," says Governor-General Dame Sylvia Cartwright.

Yet, it was not until the '70s – during the so-called second wave of feminism – that women began to enter the corridors of power. "That's when women started to become much more active in the Labour Party," Helen Clark says now, "and [come] out of their traditional role, because the traditional role of women in political parties [had been] doing the tea

and catering. And new kinds of women came into the party ... [women] who wanted to be politically active and involved in feminism."

For so long the outsider, Helen Clark appears to be relishing the opportunity to re-fashion New Zealand in her own image. Asked how Kiwi men feel about all the changes taking place around them and New Zealand's Prime Minister erupts into deep and mischievous laughter. "Oh, totally brow-beaten and hen-pecked," she replies. "[But no] seriously, I think men are pretty positive [about what is happening]."

"People take a while to get used to your new roles – the different image of opposition leader, the different image of prime minister. But once you've established the precedent there's no looking back. I mean, the things that were said will never be said again.

"Someone's got to break the glass ceiling, and once it's broken everyone else comes clamouring up behind." W