

## *'Relentlessly Positive'*

### Ruminations of a Sister of Saint Joseph, as Aotearoa New Zealand's MMP (Mixed Member Proportional) Government Comes to Life

---

Given half a chance this cobbled together MMP Government, led by a first time mother, might very well be an antidote of hope to bring good news to the poor, give sight to the blind and set captives free.

Prime Minister Right Hon Jacinda Ardern, in her first interview returning from her maternity leave, stated one of her aims as bringing more kindness into Government, a very noble aim in an arena more often characterised by derision and acrimony.

In the weeks since, her hold on that aim has been tested as she faced into a number of difficult situations within the ranks of her Government and a grumpy business community crying economic downturn.



After listening to the concerns, Ardern announced on Tuesday 28 August the creation of the Prime Minister's Business Advisory Council, providing high-level free and frank advice on key economic issues. It immediately attracted criticism by some political commentators as just another working group, but Brian Fallow, a former economics editor of the NZ Herald, goes against the grain and supports the Government's initiative around working groups to tackle the big issues head on. In an article posted online for NZ Herald on Thursday 30 August, he sees this as, *"the price for consultative processes intended to mitigate the risk of unintended consequences."* Asking also, *"Would heedless haste be better? Would business prefer not to be at the table?"* Ardern expressed her genuine desire for advice stating, *"I want to work closely with, and be advised by, senior business leaders who take a helicopter view of our economy, who are long term strategic thinkers who have the time and energy to lead key aspects of our economic agenda."*

She also sensed, given that economic indicators were actually solid, the issue around business confidence was more about certainty. She saw it as she, *"travelled around the country talking to social services, health organisations and small business, knowing what a new government has planned is critical to everyone's eco system."* She went on to say however, that *'certainty shouldn't be confused with stasis and complacency, which are the enemy of progress, and for that matter the enemy of innovation.'* In a Radio NZ interview on 28 August, Ardern told Kathryn Ryan, *"Sometimes we might just disagree. We fundamentally believe we need to progressively keep lifting the wages of New Zealanders and make sure we are not a low-wage economy. That might be something that some businesses just disagree with. For example, on raising the minimum wage."*



A nod to kindness is coming up in the most surprising of places. Delivering the 2018 budget Finance Minister, Hon Grant Robertson, *"wanted a New Zealand where everyone gets a fair go and where we show kindness and understanding to one another."* He added it would be the last time the budget would be delivered using GDP as sole indicator of economic success. The budget to be delivered in 2019 will be the beginning of a new era, where the four capitals – economic, natural, human and social will be used

to gauge the material wellbeing of our country - the environment we inhabit and all who live here. All budget bids will be assessed against the four capitals, measuring financial wellbeing more broadly.

Hon Phil Twyford, Minister for Housing, was unapologetic at the end of August introducing a discussion document on targeted reform of the Residential Tenancies Act 1986. The plan is to modernise the law to ensure rental houses are warm and dry, and to make renting more stable and secure. The plan is to balance the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords to promote good faith tenancy relationships and help renters feel more at home. This is a kindness returning to one of our most basic of needs, reflecting the reality that more New Zealanders are living in rental homes and for longer periods of time. Twyford stated bluntly at the end of the announcement that landlords not prepared to do this *“should look to invest elsewhere.”*



I sense a touch of kindness from the Hon Kris Faafoi, Minister for Commerce, advocating for the rights of borrowers, as I do in my ministry. His clarion call for a robust review of the Credit Contracts and Consumer Finance Act is being heeded by this Government and will ultimately lead to legislative reform in 2019. The finance industry is unbridled and creating havoc in our communities through usurious interest rates and fees, irresponsible lending, weak affordability assessments, the pitfalls of online lending and a ‘wild west’ mentality in the debt collection. These unjust and immoral practices are also being revealed as major contributors to child poverty and obstacles to building financial capability in the lives of ordinary New Zealanders.



Families presenting to budgeting/financial mentoring services are on average juggling five or six debt repayments. Creditors include Government Departments, Banks through credit card and personal loans, Finance Companies, store cards and short-term, high-interest lenders. Money allocated to food purchases, utility expenses and rent is often redirected to debt repayment and in some cases short term high cost lending is used to meet these most basic of living expenses.

Affecting the most vulnerable in low socio-economic areas, the debt spiral is also evidenced across all income streams and all geographic locations. Expensive finance is simply too easy to acquire and the subsequent debt takes years to pay off. The Government review, focussing more intentionally on the poor behaviour exhibited by many lenders, will bring about greater gains to well-being than the traditional approach of blaming the borrower, who remain very much David, in this David and Goliath relationship. As a Sister of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart I work towards integrating one of our mantras, *never see a need without doing something about it*, as I respond with kindness to those affected by this injustice.

Kindness made an appearance again on Sunday 2 September, in a regular current affairs program when Political Scientist, Professor Jennifer Curtin was asked what she thought of the Government’s performance this week, particularly in regard to wayward Ministers, the loud rhetoric of coalition Ministers and the lack of business confidence. Her response was both simple and sensible. She suggested *“we cut them some slack...They are a first term Government, in opposition for nine years and they are learning on the job.”* In the same program, former Prime Minister Helen Clarke offered three words in respect of the relationship between business and government – *“engage, engage, and engage.”*

I repeat that from my perspective, given half a chance this cobbled together MMP Government, led by a first time mother, might very well be an antidote of hope to bring good

news to the poor, give sight to the blind and set captives free. It emerges at this time, to chart a different course in politics, taking us beyond individual concerns and profit at all costs, honouring diversity and celebrating communion within every aspect of life.

Adrienne Gallie rsj