

Fiords, feminism and successful nation-building

Wednesday, June 08, 2005

Moira Rayner

New Zealand is less Middle Earth than the Land that Slartibartfast built. The planet designer in Douglas Adam's Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy, a fiord specialist – 'I won an award for Norway,' he said - must have practised on NZ, where the organisers of the Women's Convention in Wellington of 3-6 June invited Norway's first woman Prime Minister, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, as their keynote speaker. I was the other 'overseas' presenter, from Australia, though I was born and schooled in the briar-patch, Dunedin: I've only lived in Australia four decades.

The world is full of nostalgic, expatriate Kiwis who take their character from that of the place: original, a little wild and surprising, New Zealand's pristine mountains, dramatic fiords and violent rivers, pure lakes, and unpredictable geophysical 'events' - eruptions, earthquakes, landslides and floods - are a constant reminder that Man is not in control. Maybe that's why it has always been politically adventurous, too.

New Zealand was the first English-speaking colony to negotiate a treaty with its original inhabitants, and honour it; to give women the vote; experiment with a 'welfare' state, then spectacularly abandon its managed economy in the painful, free-market Eighties. It was one of, if not the first, dominions to chuck its upper-house for a unicameral Parliament, and to become officially bi-cultural and bi-lingual - and, to the consternation of the USA and France, nuclear-free; to legislate a 'bill of human rights' and appoint a children's commissioner: a politically sophisticated society, if you discount the Muldoon years, as we do.

Today, a transsexual Pakeha represents a conservative, rural, Maori-dominated electorate; cautious Christchurch employs an official Wizard, and the mayor of Invercargill, owner of two left feet and no rhythm, is a popularly-elected finalist in the kiwi's version of Dancing With the Stars. NZ's MMP electoral system is designed to ensure that no one political party can ever have unfettered control of public policy: its people are disproportionately endowed with literary, poetic, scientific, art and crafty genius.

New Zealand is also a land of politically powerful women, including its Prime Minister, Speaker, Chief Justice and Governor; of extreme sports (bungee-jumping began from a bridge on the Kawarau), and peculiar indigenous fauna, from its official emblem, a small brown fowl that lays gigantic eggs in dark burrows, to the little-known bythitid, a nocturnal, crevice-dwelling fish with a secretive lifestyle, quite

recently discovered in the shallow sea beneath a thick layer of dark, tannic-stained freshwater in Milford Sound, a spectacular South Island fiord, of a marine family more usually found at depths of 100 metres or more. These shy creatures are officially allocated into one or two 'tribes' on the basis of the presence or absence of ossified parts in the penis: when two male specimens were found, and found to be new to science, New Zealand scientists called them *Fiordichthys slartibartfasti*: Fiord + *ichthys* (Greek for 'fish') and *slartibartfasti*, in honour of Adams's planet-designer. Style.

New Zealanders revel in humour. The opening of the Women's' Convention combined respect for tradition with an equally vibrant tradition of public impertinence. Maori culture, respected by law, requires that this important acknowledgement of the 1975 Convention, when 2,200 women met in a freezing hall to address injustice and transform their nation, begin with a formal welcome by the parties to the Treaty of Waitangi. A dignified Maori orator addressed, totally in Maori, 550 women including the great and the good - Governor, Dame Sylvia Cartwright, Wellington's woman Mayor; the former Attorney General, the first woman to be NZ's Governor, Dame Cath Tizard and a handful of other dames, and radical lesbian separatists, activists and Dr. Brundtland: then he leant on his *tokotoko*, and remarked, in English, that he felt like a bull in a paddock-full of cows. An old bull.

They laughed. Confident women don't take offence or themselves too seriously. The heating didn't work, so they laughed again, as did the Joyce Grenfill-look-alike MC as she merrily muddled up names, titles, times and 'housekeeping' messages. It flowed. As a prominent lesbian separatist spoke with passion of the past and present invisibility of gays and lesbians, three stilted 'storks' speechlessly stalked to the podium and peered at her and their audience, raising their little wings as guests snorted, and the speaker proceeded as though nothing untoward was afoot.

As in any good Convention, there were arguments: women with causes who caucused and issued their own media statements and criticised; Maori and Pacific and disabled and migrant and religious women who pointed out the failings of seventies feminism and inadequate advancement on their issues. At the end, young women swarmed the stage and, as a group, voiced their own priorities and intention to hold their own conference – if we wouldn't mind getting out of the way, now. And a dumpy little heroine from Norway set the tone.

Dr Brundtland, the Convention's guest of honour – it was Margaret Mead, in 1975 – was a married doctor and mother who began her career specialising in children's health issues, then became Norway's Minister for the Environment in 1974, its first woman Prime Minister in 1981 (she led the country for more than ten years); established the World Commission on Environment and Development from 1983 whose 1987 report led to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; who 'retired' in 1996, then as Director-General of the World Health Organization coordinated the international response to the SARS crisis, so that there was no global pandemic.



Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland

She said that ensuring women's well being was critical to human development and preserving the environment. She had begun by making sure that women who worked could still breastfeed their children; looked further, to the way her own and other societies failed to support women during pregnancy, child birth, and in the early months and years of a new child's life, and to respect women's equal rights. She introduced paid pregnancy leave (by 1996, in Norway, a year's leave, at least four weeks of which had to be taken by fathers); public financing of childcare, and equal pay; set the standard, requiring at least 40 percent of either sex in all elected bodies of her party and, by 1996, on government boards – the Norwegian parliament is about to legislate the same requirement for the boards of private companies.

She said that there were, '[L]inks between people and the environment, between health and development, and there is no common future unless we invest in people, in all people, in their future health and well-being. Without it, there will be no hope of sustainable development, prosperity and peace. Empowerment of women, their role in societies is a crucial element in this struggle for a better future.'

She observed, too, that almost all successful women leaders had supportive, inspiring fathers. Her own had shown her what a true leader must own: respect for others; openness; a willingness to engage, including with his own children, in real dialogue, and to consider conflicting views. 'All fathers and future fathers, take note,' she said.

When she became Minister for the Environment her father advised her: (i) never forget that the people who work for you wait for your signals and instructions and become less effective if they don't get them; (ii) the piles on your desk must be kept low to keep their productivity high; (iii) you must build coalitions with others to succeed in promoting and implementing your ideas; (iv) it is better to keep quiet and not answer a question immediately rather than say more than what you feel certain about -

better to say, you don't know and, (iv) if you change your views, explain why; and (vi) that it is always important to inspire others to take initiatives; to ask, 'What do you suggest?' and to involve, encourage, create confidence and responsibility, for others to contribute. It was good advice: Kim Beazley, and others, take note.

Today, because of Dr Brundtland, and so her Dad, too, Norway has the top rate of breastfeeding in the world, is among the top seven world nations according to the UN's human development index, and leads on measures of equality between men and women. The relationship between these three, she said, is not coincidental.

Are there dark connections beneath fiords, feminism and the successful nation-building? Slartibartfast made them: can't we?

About the author

Moira Rayner a lawyer and a writer who has been a life-long advocate of the rights of children, and was the Director of the Office of the Children's Rights Commissioner for London.

Published Comments

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A really important reminder of the importance of fathers to girls. I was very disheartened a few months ago when I read a laudatory article about Macquarie Bank's father and son program for their executives. They gave them time off to attend special male bonding camps. What, I wondered as I read, about their executives who are fathers of daughters, and worse, how does a little girl feel when her Dad and brother set off for a few days of fun and she is left behind?

My Dad always thought (still thinks, I hope) that I could do or be anything, so thanks to him and to Moira and Dr Bruntland, for reminding me.

Jane Caro

Wednesday, June 08, 2005

Skol Moira! Lovely writing, powerful and sweet, and a great story. Even the clumsy speakers are

heroines. Winning an award for Norway is always a good idea in my book. I have absolutely no doubt there is a connection between fjords, feminism and successful nation building. Given we are a big dry island, we can probably skip the fjords, but not the other. Or we could field a Fjord of Feminists for the Future; very wet, not a dry amongst them. Now, there's a challenge.

Laila Fanebust

Thursday, June 09, 2005

Evocative writing...but didn't the Pennsylvanians negotiate a treaty with the native peoples, and honour it, before the New Zealanders? Is there a place we can look up such alternate history of Europeans?

Adrian Glamorgan

Tuesday, June 14, 2005