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New Zealand: Labour's #MeToo moment eats away at Ardern's most prized asset - trust

Tuesday 5 November 2019, by [MAU Alison](#) (Date first published: 13 September 2019).

New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern's credentials at home and abroad as a new kind of leader all hang on her next move

It's just shy of a year ago that Jacinda Ardern stood in the UN general assembly and spoke in support of the [#MeToo movement](#). There was spontaneous applause from the floor for that small part of a much longer speech - it felt like a significant moment.

The [New Zealand](#) leader's trip to New York attracted the usual grumbles here at home - those who could not quite get their head around the very idea of a 38-year-old unmarried woman as prime minister carped about her decision to take her three-month-old daughter along - but the result was the blossoming of an international media love affair. Baby Neve's appearance at the back of the UN chamber was just the icing on the cake.

At the podium, speaking on the subject of gender equality, Ardern pleaded for #MeToo to become #WeToo. "We are all in this together," she said.

Six months later the world watched her response to the 15 March [mosque attacks in Christchurch](#) and lauded her for it; another layer was added to her legend. Ardern's leadership has, all along, been about connection, equality, and justice by her own measurement. That entire fairytale now risks being brought down by a series of bungled attempts by her party apparatchiks to deal properly with examples of the very issue she so boldly addressed at the UN.

It's pertinent to remind ourselves that before Ardern took over the leadership of Labour just two months before the 2017 election, her party was polling a dismal 24%; an unwinnable position even with a couple of coalition partner opportunities. I remember a very experienced political reporter telling me more than a 10% bump would be unprecedented. After Ardern agreed to stand as leader, the party shot to 37%. Her ascent to the prime ministership prompted regular headlines using phrases like "Stardust victory" and "[Jacindamania](#)."

Since then domestic issues have rubbed away some of the gloss - for example, Labour's flagship response to a [chronic housing crisis](#) is widely regarded as a failure.

But these have been painted as blips by a still-popular government. The boldest of Labour's promises have always been its underlying strength and power - that this would be a caring and transparent government, the like of which had not been seen in several generations.

It's a very different Labour party we are seeing this week. The party wing has been exposed as anything but caring and transparent in the #MeToo space, and it's threatening to bring down not only a number of party officials, but the prime minister herself.

The backstory is only now coming out. As [I wrote yesterday, young women were concerned about harassment in the party](#) as far back as late 2017. One woman told the party's national council meeting [about a "troubling culture of bullying, and of sexual harassment and assault"](#). Nothing was done, and within months Labour was swept up in the [first of a series of damaging](#) sexual assault scandals.

Its handling of this first series of assaults, at a Young Labour summer camp event, was heavily criticised but Labour appeared to learn nothing from the experience. Another investigation into "predatory" and intimidating behaviour - by a different man - was launched in February, but not before a survivor group of at least 12 had made increasingly desperate attempts to get help from senior party figures over many months. They tell me one senior female party official even brushed off their concerns with this bit of classic gaslighting: "Oh, that's just [name withheld]."

The investigation and its aftermath have descended into something close to farce; instead of appointing experts with experience in taking sensitive disclosures, Labour put three of its council members on the panel. The terms of reference appear to have been impossibly narrow and unfavourable for the complainants, an issue acknowledged by Ardern. Several of the group say they gave the panel detailed account of sexual assaults by the man, but the panel members say they "can't remember" sexual misconduct being mentioned. The accused man brought his lawyer - the survivor group had only each other to lean on.

In June the panel reported back to Labour's council - no further action was to be taken. The witnesses and complainants never even had the chance to review their testimony. None of them were given a copy of the report. In July they sent their first email to media, naming the man and pleading for help. The email's second line reads:

"Each of us loyal Labour party members but we're scared of the political repercussions of what we're about to say."

That statement is what stands out today. Each of the young women I've spoken to in the months since that email landed, still feels the pull of loyalty to Labour. They talk about it as a family, how they saw the people who ultimately let them down as "mother and father" figures. One told me yesterday, while she's relieved to see someone held accountable, the resignation of the [party president Nigel Haworth](#) for his part in this fiasco was "like losing a member of the family".

They are also refusing to condemn Ardern. Her offer to meet with them has left some of these young women "speechless" to think they'll be given an audience with the leader they view as inspirational.

The group now sees Ardern as the only person who can achieve the change they're demanding.

But if the past 18 months of full-time work researching and reporting #MeToo issues has taught me anything, it's that investigations into reports of sexual harassment are routinely bungled.

The fact that this happens everywhere does not excuse Labour. As many have pointed out, our country's leaders must be held to even higher standards than the rest of us.

Now, we're all holding our breath to see what Ardern will do. She claims her officials did not tell her of the serious sexual nature of the complaints - fewer and fewer New Zealanders are ready to believe that this week - but whether true or not, this is her mess to clean up.

Her credentials at home and abroad as a new kind of leader - kind, caring, compassionate and honest - all hang on her next move.

- *Alison Mau is the editor of #MeTooNZ, an investigative reporting team she set up with Stuff.co.nz in February 2018. The team was contacted by hundreds of New Zealanders within days of its launch; it continues to regularly publish on #MeToo issues*
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