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## ***Leadership in the age of “crisis”***

Lezione magistrale

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Kia ora kotou katoa, nga mihi nui kia koutou

Buongiorno!

I begin my greeting you in the same way I would were I in my home country of Aotearoa New Zealand – with a word of welcome and gratitude for the opportunity to be with you here today, especially to the Rector, Giovanni Molari. I also acknowledge the Minister for Universities and Research, Anna Maria Bernini.

And before I begin, a word too for the many young people in this room.

Of the many things that I will say today, I hope you will remember this - for me, you have always been a source of both inspiration and hope. Please, never lose your curiosity, expectations, or your optimism.

It was with some surprise that I received the invitation to join you some months ago. After all, I am a former politician from the bottom of the world.

What wisdom could I possibly share with an institution that holds the honor of being the oldest university of continuous operation in the world - one that is marking today, its 936<sup>th</sup> academic year.

Just for a little perspective, the University I attended in New Zealand was founded in 1964. My parents are older than my alma mater.

I accept that age is not always the greatest marker of wisdom, but experience certainly counts for something. And perhaps it is in that vein, that I join you today.

First though, an introduction. My name is Jacinda Ardern, and up until the beginning of 2023, I was the Prime Minister of New Zealand. I had the privilege of leading this beautiful country of five million people for five years, and in total, I was a member of parliament for 15 years.

I became involved in politics when I was 17 years old – I am the daughter of a policeman, and a cafeteria worker. I had no ambition to lead, in fact, I never saw myself as a politician- I was instead what my father would call ‘a tree hugging leftie.’ Someone who saw issues in the world- unfairness, poverty, inequity, environmental degradation – and believed politics was the place where solutions could be found.

I joined the Labor Party for that reason, and initially changing the world looked more like delivering flyers and knocking on doors. Eventually, I found myself as a researcher in parliament, advisor in the Prime Minister’s office, a Member of Parliament and then leader of my party just six weeks out from an election when I became, much to my surprise, the Prime Minister. I think it was the political equivalent of being a frog in a boiling pot.

After more than 15 years in parliament, and five years as Prime Minister, you could easily lose your belief in politics as a place for positive change and optimism. But the truth is, I haven’t. I doubt I ever will. Instead, what I left believing is just how crucial political leadership is – especially in the age of ‘crisis.’

What exactly do I mean by crisis though, when literally, you could pick from a smorgasbord of dire situations.

There is climate change, inequality, massive technological disruption, global conflict, the resurgence of nuclear proliferation and the now very real threat of ongoing pandemics and the havoc they bring.

We face the fear of compounding existential threats, but also the anger that these threats are of our own making, and the frustration that any global solutions will either be delivered or derailed by those who choose to do the least.

But these problems do not sit in isolation, they exist in an environment where it feels as though we are straining against the seams of endless change and division, with the greatest levels of global connectivity that we have ever had, but what feels like the least unity of voice and of purpose. How then do we address global challenges when we struggle to even agree on the problem?

Over the course of the last five years, I have thought about this question almost endlessly, and I’d like to share a few insights.

The first place I come back to is the context in which we have any debate or take on any challenge. The foundations. And that surely must mean taking stock of the current status and well-being of our people.

In confronting any challenge, it's hard to start with an open mind and from a place of trust if you feel like you have been left behind, disenfranchised, or are simply struggling to survive. There's a reason when we look at the common features amongst those that have trust issues with government and public institutions and find that they are often in lower socio-economic brackets.

They are living proof of where policy and governments have failed. Our starting point for rebuilding trust, confidence, and healthy societies must surely start with the basics. And in my mind poverty is one of them.

While we don't have all of the answers in our corner of the world, in 2004 the then Labor Government introduced a tax credit regime called working for families. It was responsible for one of the biggest declines in poverty in New Zealand on record. It was so successful, that it has remained as a policy through successive governments, and we built on this approach when we came into Government by introducing a form of universal child benefit, substantially lifting benefit levels, extending paid parental leave to six months, increasing child care subsidies so almost every sole parent qualified, extending free primary health care to children aged 14 and under, putting free lunches into schools in lower socio economic areas, increasing the minimum wage, and even making period products universally available in all schools.

All of this contributed to sustained drops in child poverty, but coupled alongside policies like making the first year of post-secondary education and apprenticeships free - they focused on the overall well-being of communities.

A politician and Prime Minister in New Zealand from the 1970s named Norman Kirk once said "There are four things that matter to people: they have to have somewhere to live, they have to have food to eat, they have to have clothing to wear, and they have to have something to hope for."

People will always look for solutions to their problems and ways to resolve their needs. But more than that, they will also look for light, hope, a fulfillment of their own ambition. They will either find that in political leadership, or they will seek out reasons why they have been failed.

Everyone in this room will be able to recall times when they have seen both. I certainly have.

Let me take you back once more to New Zealand. It was the 1990s. For the decade prior, my small nation had gone through some of the most comprehensive economic reforms

of any OECD nation in recent history, moving it from a highly regulated economy, to one of the most open. The transition was rapid and bumpy. Unemployment reached as high as 10% and 21% for Maori - the indigenous people of New Zealand. Government debt levels were also diagnosed as unsustainable.

A significant cut in government spending was announced, which particularly hit those on government support such as unemployment benefits or those who were solo parents. I was 11 when what was known as the mother of all budgets came out. It was so controversial, that I even recall seeing a cartoon as a child that depicted the then minister of finance standing over a large cauldron of soup with a child asking for more. One commentator at the time stated that the budget "formalized the stratification of New Zealand society."

Through such periods of political complexity, sometimes the lens of a child is telling. My recollection of this time is not of the political machinations, but the impact on people. I remember the children in my school without shoes as certain industries closed and unemployment grew. I recall the spread of illnesses that are associated with poverty. I remember a neighbor's son taking his life.

But I also remember what it felt like. The debate around those who were unemployed and on a Government benefit, or what was otherwise known as "on the dole", and the increasing use of the phrase 'dole bludger'. Changing immigration policy and the debate that followed with some political leaders horrifically using terms like 'Asian invasion.' Without perhaps being aware of it at the time, New Zealand was observing the deployment of one of the most effective tools available to a politician, should they choose to amplify and deploy it. Fear.

There have been many times in our history where fear has been present. The great depression, world wars, living through a pandemic. But there is a difference between a genuine threat, and politically motivated and generated one.

Fear can be used to excuse action or inaction. We see it used to motivate people to do things that usually, they wouldn't consider. Fear of migration, diversity, equality. Fear that someone is getting resources that you will be deprived of. Fear that your way of life is threatened.

Fear is one of the quickest and easiest pathways to blame. And why would a politician be enticed to use such a tool? Because by blaming others, you immediately remove the need to find solutions yourself. Ironically, the use of fear as a weapon also has the ability to almost unify people around hyper partisanship whilst simultaneously dividing.

I feel like this is a useful time to remind you once again that I am an optimist. I do not believe that people's natural instinct is to reach for fear and blame. In fact time and time again I encountered moments that demonstrated to me that for most people, what they seek is not blame, but hope.

To be hopeful, or optimistic as a leader, is to always believe that things should and can be better. To be ambitious. To believe for instance, as I did, that as a wealthy nation you should rid yourself of child poverty. Be the best place in the world to be a child. Have equal representation of men and women in leadership, or fair pay. To be ambitious in this way, is to set out the destination that you believe you can reach even if it may take some time to get there.

But to lead in this way, is to also lead with your chin. To take a risk. When you succeed, that victory is often banked and people quickly move on. When you fail, rightly or wrongly, you're criticized for your partially delivered goal and incentivized to shrink your target. To lose your ambition, and in doing so, to reduce the public's expectation. And so begins the spiral downwards, until the public expect nothing, let alone hope.

I grappled with this in office. And I don't believe I ever got the balance quite right. But I do know that I would rather have been accused of being too ambitious in what I believed we were capable of as a nation, than not ambitious at all. And I would rather the public expect us to do everything as leaders, than nothing.

Healthy democracies falter when hope dies.

That's why in a world of significant challenge, politicians need to make a choice. To park fear and blame, and instead, to take the risk of hope and ambition. But in turn, voters have a choice too - to not lose their sense of expectation.

And if there is a list of issues where we need to reach for ambition- then it's long term challenges like those impacting our environment.

When I first became Prime Minister in 2017, one of the biggest challenges we faced was climate change. Like every nation, New Zealand has been on a journey. When I worked as an advisor within parliament in the early 2000s, there was significant debate on how to deal with agricultural emissions. And for good reason. Almost half of New Zealand's emissions profile comes from agriculture - not to put too fine a point on it, but the digestion system of cows and to a lesser degree, sheep, produces a lot of gas. And we have plenty of both.

The debate some twenty years ago was heated. The proposed pricing mechanism was given a name by farmers -they called it a 'fart tax' denoting their argument that emissions produced by animals was beyond their control and therefore, wasn't something they should be asked to bear responsibility for. At the same time, the science of climate change was heavily questioned - both fear and blame caused heavy division. The policy was eventually abandoned in the wake of a protest where tractors were driven up the stairs of parliament.

Fast forward some twenty years and I found myself in the heart of this same debate. It had not gone away, nor had the animosity lessened. But some things had changed.

With the need to deliver the zero-carbon act, a law designed to get New Zealand to net zero by 2050, we had to address the issue of methane.

But this time we wanted to do things differently.

From the beginning, we brought in our agricultural community leaders with the determination that the need for change would not be accompanied by blame. I remember on day one, asking each leader to share with the twenty or so of us who were gathered, what they wanted New Zealand products to be known for. As each person shared their thoughts, you could see the themes emerging. These leaders cared about people's trust and confidence in New Zealand and what we produced. They also knew that if we didn't solve the issue of emissions and food production, consumers would make alternate choices and it would eventually impact on what was a key export market.

We may not have come at the problem from exactly the same angle, our motivations might have been different, but the foundation was there. What ensued was a long process. The Zero Carbon Act was passed and contained a backstop measure, which essentially said that unless collectively Government and the industry could find a better alternative, agriculture would move into the emissions trading scheme in 2025. The clock started ticking, and so we sat down together and focused on the thing that united us – the need for a better solution.

And here lies the next challenge we all face - how to motivate people towards solutions when change is always hard and fraught. It's a massive generalization, but human nature often has us resist change, or at least change that represents uncertainty and loss of control. And we've had a recent lesson in that.

The pandemic was without a doubt one of the hardest experiences I've faced in the five years I had the privilege of being Prime Minister. There were many twists and turns, highs and lows. I remember during the height of the pandemic, calling any other leader for a bi-lateral would inevitably turn into a covid support group. You would trade key stats, and then talk about the difficulty in leading through so many unknowns. Everyone sounded exhausted because they were.

In New Zealand, there were almost two distinct COVID periods. We adopted an elimination strategy, and the first part of our journey was notable for its unity.

There were a number of precursors that made that possible. The first was transparency. Right from the start, being open about what we knew, and what we didn't. That in itself may seem obvious, but in politics it can be rare.

There is often an assumption in leadership, that to create a sense of confidence in those we are called upon to lead, we must demonstrate absolute knowledge absolutely. That

is to say, when asked a question, any question, we cannot reply under any circumstances with "I don't know."

I hold a strong view, that in times of uncertainty, we must be willing to talk about the information and data we have, but also what we don't have. After all, confidence is built as much around trust as it is competency. The public were very aware that we didn't know everything about covid. They could see the world was learning in real time as they watched lives being lost. Conceding that we had knowledge gaps wasn't just the truth, it was a critical part of building trust.

During COVID, what became more important than having all the answers, was having a plan in the absence of them. It's ok to say I don't know. It's not ok to say "I don't know what to do."

And so in the face of imperfect knowledge, we learned together. And the result of that process, was that the public could see the rationale behind decisions, they made sense. And so when it came time to propose something that may have otherwise be seen as radical such as staying at home for more than four weeks straight, was not. It was instead the next natural step. We became, quite literally a team of 5 million. And that team across the course of two years had on average fewer weeks under what we could call stay at home rules than many other countries, eliminated covid multiple times, managed to save several thousand lives, and perhaps most surprising of all lengthened the overall life expectancy for kiwis during COVID.

Building consensus - be it around problem definition or the solutions that might follow - requires us as leaders to humble ourselves to what lies in front of us. To be willing to show enough humility that we are able to learn collectively, but enough decisiveness and strength to take decisions in that same imperfect environment.

But this COVID period in time also gave us an insight into the power of collectivism, or as some might call it - tribes.

I have no doubt we could all point to examples of where building a sense of commonality amongst otherwise disparate groups of people has been effective in guiding people through change, and other occasions when it has done the opposite. During covid, we saw both. A period in New Zealand where the nation was unified around a common cause, and the second phase of the pandemic where people became fatigued and craved normality. The pathway to that normality was of course vaccines, but that opened up fractures, people who disagreed with the roll out, and others who became susceptible to conspiracy.

There is no question that disinformation played a role, but what leads someone to be susceptible to disinformation in the first place?

Is it in fact the case, that the same thing that led to our successful response to covid, is the same factor that led to a fracturing? That coupled with some people's distrust of the

state, and the media, is our constant search as humans for a sense of both simplicity and belonging. Our almost unwavering pursuit of a tribe, and in turn, tribalism Perhaps. Research has shown that humans are so inclined to form natural tribes that if you put a completely unconnected diverse group of people into a room and flip a coin for each, those two groups will automatically form a suspicion of one another based on nothing more than heads vs tails.

Scientist Robert Sapolsky's writing reminds us that humans organize. Whether it's class, race, religion, country, conspiracy or coin flipping- there has always been a tendency to form us vs other. In recent times, we have seen the acceleration of tribe building heighten. The depth of feeling amongst them grow, and the chasm between them deepen. It isn't just our democracy that feels under threat, it's the health and well-being of our communities, and even our families.

Once again though, my optimism tells me that if creating a sense of tribalism can be used negatively, it can be used for good too. And I saw that first hand in 2020 in New Zealand when five million people united around the common cause of saving one another's lives.

Sapolsky asks this same question - what if we simply change what 'us' means?

What if instead of fierce nationalism or self-interest, or coalescing around disinformation, we seek to form our tribes based on concepts or even solutions to problems.

What if we no longer see ourselves based on who we are opposed to, but by what we value. The things we teach our kids.

Fairness, kindness, empathy, curiosity and bravery. And perhaps we should start, by asking that of our leaders first.

That they're fearless in speaking to the challenges we face, but without deploying fear.

That they model the values that allow difference to respectfully flourish again; have the empathy to see issues from others perspectives and seek consensus when they disagree.

That they possess the curiosity and humility to keep learning, the bravery to change their minds, and the ambition not to govern - but to lead. This in my mind what leadership in the 21st century can and must model.



For my part, I was not a perfect leader. Not at all. And we certainly navigated some difficult times. I am determined that the challenges and lessons from those times aren't relegated to history. I want to share our mistakes so that they are not repeated, celebrate our small victories so they might be shared, but perhaps most of all, spread some hope.

Afterall, we can all be better, if that is the leadership we expect.