

PROMISE AND PRAGMATISM: ON JACINDA ARDERN'S TERM AS NEW ZEALAND PM

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Jacinda Ardern's time in office as New Zealand's Prime Minister was rattled by several successive challenges. At 37, the Labour leader came to power in 2017, promising a "transformational change". Nearly six years later when she leaves office, she would be better remembered for her handling of crises such as the coronavirus pandemic, the far-right terror attacks on mosques in Christchurch and volcanic eruptions. Ms. Ardern offered a leadership model rooted in empathy and moral values — the way she handled the Christchurch shootings is a case in point. Her approach towards the pandemic was initially popular, which helped Labour sweep the 2020 legislative elections. New Zealand's per capita death rate from COVID-19 is among the lowest in the developed world. The way she announced her resignation also won her praise — that there is "not enough in the tank" for her to continue in the top office — which made her stand out in a world where not many leaders relinquish power easily. Chris Hipkins, a former Minister for COVID response in Ms. Ardern's Cabinet and a troubleshooter for the Prime Minister, will succeed her and lead Labour in the 2023 election.

While her leadership style is widely praised, particularly among liberal sections across the world, there are also questions on whether Ms. Ardern made good on the promises she made to the electorate. New Zealand is one of the most expensive countries to live in. In 2017, Ms. Ardern vowed to tackle the country's housing crisis by constructing 1,00,000 homes, but only a fraction has been built in the past five years. Housing prices remain extensively high, while high inflation has left a hole in household budgets. Her promises to address child poverty (New Zealand has one of the worst rates of child poverty in the developed world) and tackle inequality (the top 10% control nearly half of the country's household net worth) have fallen flat. Besides, continued lockdowns and COVID measures even when neighbouring Australia opened up turned a chunk of Ms. Ardern's early admirers away from her. The slide in her popularity hit Labour's election prospects which prompted many within the party to question her leadership. According to a December poll, Labour's support stood at 33%, while 38% backed the centre-right National Party, the main opposition. It was against this background that Ms. Ardern announced her resignation. Mr. Hipkins now has only eight months to steady the ship and reverse the public mood, a tall ask. He should blend Ms. Ardern's empathetic politics with a strong economic vision that would address New Zealand's structural economic problems while keeping its social harmony intact.

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