

On the resignation of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern: towards a politics of change

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Prime Minister Ardern resigned. Although it deals with what has been said about her time in office and her exit from it, the article that follows is neither valedictory nor a critique. I wanted to deal with what has not been said. I think her resignation speaks for itself but to get to what that is I think we have to go through the most obvious reason for it, the public animus towards her that has led to death threats, threats of physical and sexual violence. I do think gender politics are at work here however the article starts not from the political context but from the antipolitical.

I take this term from *The End of the End of History*, 2021, a book answering to Francis Fukuyama's declaration of the end of history when, with the fall of the Soviet bloc, there no longer seemed to be any opposition to capitalist western democracy in its global political reach. History had made it the winner, on the day, at least, because *The End of the End* is about historical and political forces that have made it appear this no longer to be the case. One of these new forces is antipolitical.

My use of this book comes from its urgency and cogency. With the qualifications that I make below, it is the best, although for the worse, diagnosis, of what I understand of this historical political moment. It is so for its diagnosis of antipolitics. Its urgency belongs to the problem of antipolitics for politics and I see this problem and part of its solution, that I deal with in the final part of the article, as being played out in Ardern's prime ministership and in the event her resignation.

The End of the End of History states the problem of politics in stark terms: the antipolitics of what are global anti-government movements, in New Zealand particularly in the wake of COVID, and the equally global populism after

Berlusconi in Italy, Trump in the USA, Bolsanaro in Brazil, and others, OR political leadership and the organisation the political realm requires. The writers define the political as the conflictual itself and describe any effort to avoid conflict, for example in the intersection, the *intersectionality*, of leftist programmes of reform, as being part of the problem. In addition, as well as efforts at change that attempt to avoid the political apparatus and its institutions, thinking them incorrigibly corrupted and compromised, included in antipolitics are *leaderless* popular movements, like Occupy. Political leadership and political organisation are requirements for meaningful political change.

The authors of *The End of the End of History*, Hochuli, Hoare and Cunliffe, make one more requirement visible, the support of the proletariat. Without the support of the working class, the precariat, all those engaged in the gig economy, the Left is an exercise in pointlessness. They accuse the Left of abandoning the proletariat and its interests. This, they make clear, insofar as populist leaders mobilise and capture *anti*-government sentiment, goes a long way to explaining the global reach of populism.

The global proletariat has united over the cause of—what else but?—liberty. The abandonment by the Left of its own traditions of taking its support from the proletariat also in large part explains the failure of extra-governmental popular movements like the Colour Revolutions, starting with the Arab Spring, in carrying through with the promise of political change. The status quo or worse returns after it *not* because it does not have the *people* behind it but for the inability of an anti-political movement to imagine a politics to come after it. As Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek has said, *It's not the revolution that I'm interested in, it's the day after the revolution and what happens the day after I worry about*. Liberty turns out as political irrelevance: it turns out as liberty from politics and from even the possibility of political liberation.

The End of the End of History's greatest virtue is the description of antipolitics, that and the definition of politics as conflict, the flight from either

politics or conflict turning up as antipolitics. The appeal of fascism joins in antipolitics with the cry of freedom and the appeal to a politics in despite of politics, like Trump's call to drain the swamp. In New Zealand this antipolitics reached apotheosis with the 2022 occupation of parliament grounds, where the messaging went Left and Right, with Freedom and MAGA placards and the backing of Destiny Church, and somewhere uncharted but unmistakably anti-government with the anti-colonial sentiment of Māori, white supremacism mixing it up with indigeneity.

The occupation was ostensibly to protest lockdowns and mandatory vaccination. As such, the fervour of its antipolitics ought to have died down to the usual smouldering resentment of the alienated, disenfranchised and quite literally dispossessed in the case of Māori. Without cohering into a political programme, it has if anything become more nuggety and metastasised as a strain of antipolitical thought directly in conflict with established political institutions. Or rather it is the entire political apparatus and its institutions that now placed in the context of antipolitics is seen as a singular blob, as no-longer living and intransigent, many-tentacled but dead, a Thing.

One of its tentacles is institutional colonialism. One is empty intellectualism and self-serving academicism and cultural elitism. Another is the Professional Managerial or Middle Class. Another is the arbitrary biopolitical controls of enforced vaccination. Another is the Man who is a woman who is Woke who tells us what to do.

Since each infects the others, all are hateful. For example, government is itself seen to be a colonial institution and the wokeness of the Prime Minister who is a woman is not a sign of moral superiority but of political domination. All are hateful and all is one. Furthermore, as a dead Thing, the Establishment cannot change or be changed. It must—what else?—be hated on, since what this verdict does is leave to antipolitics no political recourse, no recourse to the existing political apparatus and its institutions. Like the Colour Revolutions, a

change of regime, as is likely in the next New Zealand election, is sure to lead to the same or something worse.

Where *The End of the End of History* has a blindspot is where the real impasse is. Antipolitics as a politics that excludes political change, whether for the sake of ruling out conflict or for the reason it cannot by its nature imagine an alternative, exists to hide the fact that neoliberalism is also a politics that excludes the power, the strictly political power, of change. Neoliberalism, by excluding its own political potential, excludes even its possibility.

There is no alternative. Within this purview, of the diagnosis of antipolitics being symptomatic of neoliberalism, seeking support in the proletariat is stonecold cynicism: it is the cancer asking support of its metastases. The winner of the next New Zealand election will do this.

For abrogating that power neoliberalism is a politics without power. Neoliberalism occurs in multiple initiatives practically in all areas of human affairs, from economics to science, cultural management to therapy. Those initiatives are to transfer master slave relations onto a network of governance and interconnected cliency. They are driven, what the economic historian Philip Mirowski calls the Neoliberal Thought Collective is driven, by a fear of totalitarianism along with the insight that the open market, for being a collector and distributor of brain-power, also offers the best to-hand protection against it, against communisation and against fascism. In practice what this has meant is that power is evolved to the technical apparatus running the global financial market. In action what it means is the dark fears around the development of AI and humans becoming both mirror-struck by their own technical accomplishment, as well as politically and economically enslaved by it.

Human conflict is settled by the technical apparatus where the Thought Collective of Neoliberalism, since its thought to avert totalitarianism and the repeat of the catastrophes of the 20th century, is determined to hide and bury

human agency. The truth of this is double. The Collective seeks to see it done as well as to hide the fact that it is doing it.

Human actions and agency, at all levels, from science and the workings of reason, to welfare and education, to monetary controls and financial products themselves, are then *financialised* in order to be put at the disposal of the technical apparatus running the global financial market *as far as possible*. Here human decisions can be taken out of human hands. Thinking that neoliberalism has failed, national programmes to roll back globalisation, do not restore human agency. Neither do they restore the political.

A small but significant part of this evolution of the human to the technical, of the human conflict that defines the political to the interconnectedness of marketplaces, can be seen in the success, during the last two years of worldwide pandemic achieved of migrating services, again at all levels, education, participation in decision-making, meetings of scientists and of friends, to digitality. The idealism media are witness to with AI, for and against, is reflected in the passage to digitality, as if it had come to save us and by preying on our emotional lives destroy us. This is also seen in academics' favouring of a post-humanism, the non-human or the more than human. Meanwhile the Superman has arrived and is living in Unreal Engine.

There is also enormous vanity and idealism around the intersecting political interests centred on the ecological movement that want change, appeals to feeling, demagoguery and an old definition of politics revised by intersectionality to be inclusive and non-conflictual. So that it is not really a politics at all. The reason for this is not so much a blindness to what has happened to politics as an antipolitical distrust of a political realm that can effect change, a distrust that is symptomatic and that speaks the truth for the diagnosis of neoliberalism.

Even if the book doesn't link neoliberalism and antipolitics as I have done, this is *The End of the End of History's* verdict. The question it raises is, once antipolitics is taken into account, and politics is seen to require organisation,

political leadership and is understood to be the conflictual itself, not what is to be done but what can be done anymore that can be called politics?

The definition of the conflictual being of politics throws up the background, that is antipolitics, and the attempt by political interests to assuage it, answer it, is one that continually gets caught up in it. I would say it cannot get free of it, as if politics had been usurped by a double that is its negation. The third requirement, if there is hope, it lies with the proletariat, then makes sense. There is more heat, more energy, more conflict and more money, as media organisations are aware and try to capture it, in antipolitics. The path to where the money is at is paved with resentment and it is here that the best intentions lead.

The End of the End of History wants to tell us what is to be done but I think it states the problem more powerfully than it gives the solution. The solution it gives is, like George Orwell wrote, If there is hope, it lies in the proles. The proles in my view are the living symptoms of political neoliberalism. Neither they, because of antipolitics, nor the political apparatus and its institutions, because of neoliberalism, can be captured and mobilised to effect change.

Political change has to come from politics. How can there be politics on top of antipolitics? That, in the second part of this article, is what I want to address.

What struck me first was the metaphor Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern used to announce her stepping down from office: the tank is empty. Others, on only the strength of the news of her resignation, usually accompanied by the soundbite, went directly to her personal life. She must be exhausted. She has had to deal with an earthquake, a massacre, a pandemic and its economic fallout.

The personal fallout is intense on the public figure at the best of times. At the worst it's almost unthinkable. Then, because *politically*, as traditionally defined, she, unlike Johnson, has been unchallenged, there is the political fallout of antipolitics. There that conflict has been hottest, where the media

have often led, of the death threats, pornographic and misogynist insults, and to repeat Žižek on her behalf, With supporters like these who needs detractors?

Her supporters have not meant to insult but to express their Kiwi familiarity by using the first name while with a male automatically they would use the surname. So, introducing nuance into the valedictory outpouring of opinion, Key's resignation was compared by one supporter with Jacinda's. The similarity was that both resignations were timely. In order to protect the brand, Labour like National earlier had given a push. What the brand was being protected from, because without their support the brand would suffer, was the potential of corporate interests to be looking elsewhere, on the basis, indicating that her personal political star had fallen, of the antipolitical storm.

That this storm, although media tried to peddle it to a global audience, was local occurred to some. They wrote that New Zealand had been the envy of the world. Prime Minister Ardern, despite the efforts of media to supplant her locally with sports' stars, was a star of the world stage. The world's press, apart from Fox, were largely in agreement with this.

Politics, political commentary, for trying to appeal to a mass audience and to capture its heat, energy, popularity, tends to fall back into antipolitics. Politics, neoliberalism, and its negative, antipolitics, can however be said to characterise the division in opinion, and the divisiveness with which the Rt. Hon. Ardern has been labelled. One side goes to her political legacy, while the other is either loudly or softly cynical.

Her legacy will stand. It will be stronger for her not having led her government to defeat. This is where cynicism creeps in, rather than face defeat, she ran. Or she was pushed.

The pro-political side of the team goes back to her achievements. The less pro, to the many obstacles she faced. The anti says that she achieved nothing, and as I've tried to say, given we are under neoliberalism, there's truth to this. She

came in on a platform of change, particularly social change and nothing changed.

The pro allows itself to be swept up by her personal qualities as these were published to the world, her kindness, as well as her statesmanlike endurance under fire. In the eyes of the pro-political, her kindness becomes a political act. Through it she procures political change ruffling the Angry online Birds' feathers as little as possible. It's the most sensible of middle ways.

For the anti-political, her kindness is a liability, her smile a taunt. Her retreat from politics is evidence she was never cut out for it. Her hugging of Muslim women after the Christchurch shooting was proof of a mindless pusillanimity. The image, replayed on the big screen in Times Square, proves the world is taking refuge in emotionalism. Mawkish sentimentality, it is further proof of the feminisation, a dangerous feminisation, of a sphere defined by conflict, the political. Again she was not, she is not cut out for it.

That smile is like daggers into the heart of a certain pro-political type. This type sees the whole act, seeing through the whole act, to the reality. It is a publicity stunt, PR. Politics cannot now be distinguished from antipolitics.

The type allows she knows what she's doing. She's smart. They sit with the antipolitical as well, since they consider her smile to be her hanging on to power by her teeth.

When it came to the resignation, they didn't change their mind. They said, You did nothing. Get out! Unlike the extremist from the other side, the anti-political, they didn't say, We'll shoot or rape you.

What this pro-political type intended by saying, You did nothing, is, You did nothing in political terms. No listing of her political achievements will dissuade them. Politics is for them free from window-dressing, and the Rt. Hon. Ardern was simply a mannequin. She was dressed up in the shop window, for the Instagram, to sell this season's fashion in corporatist apologism.

At one end of the continuum of the cynical, although it might not go as far as using the neoliberalism word, she was a front for the interests of private corporations that constitutes the Party line. The attitude is softer, only just, of those who see in her a mascot, and softer altogether of those who say, Can you blame her? For them, the party line is the family, private life and the freedom to have one that holding public office takes away.

Sometimes people take the nearest to hand, the opinions of their friends, their families, their self-regard. Whether on the side of the anti- or pro-political, that neither altogether coincides with being anti-government, is rather anti big government or governmentality, nor matches, but rather tends to cut through these lines, Left or Right, they react out of reflex. They say, You know, Neve, her 4 year-old, could also have been targeted, and Clarke. He's stood by her. He's been amazing. I say, Good for her!

In the contemporary context, taking what is nearest to hand includes online interlocutors and these include virtually everybody who has an opinion, whether journalist or bot, critic or fanatic. Anybody who potentially has an influence is near at hand. Lovers the same as strangers are in the positions of intimacy granted by our personal devices.

A lot has been made of how we edit them. We should not, for example, listen to Russian bots. However convincing their brand of propaganda may be, our friends and well-meaning strangers will warn us off. Not a lot has been made however of how inclusive this circle of influence is. We are intimate with the textual services of hundreds, of thousands and virtually of billions (4.74 billion in 2022, Kepios).

The resignation caused an online cull, in my limited view of what was happening online. By the day after 19 January 2023 profile pictures were being swapped out for postage stamp presskit photos of the Rt. Hon. On the Thursday itself, challenges were put up, by that side I've called the pro-political, demanding that followers and friends who are anti out themselves.

They meant anti the PM, but they also meant to call out those *responsible* for the resignation.

The strategy was to out themselves as being sad at Prime Minister Ardern's resignation, gutted that it had come to this, and to see who responded, who was for, who against, who were the haters, the misogynist and resentful. By their misogyny and resentment, amounting to the same thing, would they be known. Once known, they would be cut from the circle of intimacy, unfollowed, unfriended.

Once named, they would be hated on, shat on, sworn at. It seemed like it wasn't sadness driving this cull but anger at a portion of the local population who were blamed. Her accessibility, her Kiwi accessibility, become a liability, it was to blame for having made the PM a prisoner of her press. Subject to threats of physical and sexual violence, it had forced her out. The tank was empty to deal with it and, the cynical response came back, to deal with her bad press.

The cynical, as I've said, need not be anti. They might simply hold their political standards to be higher, but, all down the line, the pro-political line that tends to be leftist, the higher-ups were calling those below them stupid. The haters, the anti, were stupid and did not deserve her. The pro, that type I talked about before, called those who loved her stupid.

The Left finds it hard to acknowledge antipolitics. This is a large part of its ineffectuality today, that it cannot acknowledge either its own as being antipolitics or that the very group it needs to be politically effective and to effect change is today antipolitical. The Left finds it hard to acknowledge its own antipolitics because it tends to neoliberalism, while the Right's tendency is to antipolitics.

The Left's difficulty in acknowledging the antipolitics of the working class, and Labour in New Zealand Aotearoa has its roots in the labour movement, that is due to a sense of betrayal, a betrayal that has played out over the decades

since 1984 and repeated itself over the shorter timescale of Ardern's tenure as prime minister, is itself due to two factors. One of them is simple. It links to kindness and the idea of a new kind of leadership to hold up against counter-examples, like Trump, throughout the world.

The simple reason is that Labour sees itself as a benefactor to the poor and downtrodden, the disenfranchised, disenchanting, dispossessed, the working class in short. It doesn't represent in the conflictual realm of politics them but is their advocate, and this also provides the reason for there being a sense of betrayal, accelerated during the Ardern government. The Rt. Hon. Ardern came to power on a moral mission not a political one.

Politically, what needed to be addressed was neoliberalism and the way it needed to be addressed was and is by taking antipolitics into consideration. This moralism has been part of Labour's political appeal. However it is felt politically to have failed locally, however Prime Minister Ardern is felt politically to have failed locally, globally she is an example and can be held up against other world leaders for her personal example.

I have already touched on the more complicated reason for the Left being ill-equipped to deal with antipolitics. Labour in NZ has failed to consider or to imagine that politically it represents neoliberalism. There is the historical circumstance of an earlier political formation, liberalism, identified with the Left. But also there is the pressing problem of the present: the political courage to undertake economic change.

Mark Blythe, critic of austerity, co-author of *Angrynomics*, makes the point that, during the COVID pandemic, the political courage to undertake economic change showed itself as it rarely has done. Even though at the macro level the wheels kept turning, governments, through city-wide and nation-wide lockdowns, turned local economies off. This courage was not however lauded but vilified, as populist antipolitical movements are testament. It was called authoritarian, to set us on the road to totalitarianism.

We have then the fear that inspired neoliberalism and its answer to it, free markets. We also have the Left's inability to shift itself out of its moral rut, which acknowledging antipolitics would entail. This includes its own antipolitics, dividing the Left, that is the result of neoliberalism.

Left antipolitics like any antipolitics is against politics because it considers it essentially corrupt, so displacing politics onto the market to settle conflict. In the void left, instead of politics, there is morality. There is kindness, doing good, benevolence and advocacy for those labouring underneath but no political representation of them.

The representation the working class, the proletariat, precariat, gig workers, get is moral. It consists in advocacy for rights and whatever economic measures the system can afford. The system itself cannot *afford* to change, so there is no political courage.

In its way, the Right has taken a similar turn and replaced politics with morality. This stands to reason when we understand neoliberalism is about and came about to settle political conflict, outside of politics, through economic means. The difference between Right and Left is that the Right has no qualms about using the energy of antipolitics to drive its own ends. At least, dissent is present in the GOP but legal recourse is made before political recourse to deal with conflict.

Turning this theme on its head, it could be said that the political system itself or, as some have said already, democracy is incapable of surviving under neoliberalism. The political realm, or democracy, is redundant. All that is needed is economies and the controls that are immanent to them and that by no means should be put upon them. To do so, from either Left or Right, is political overstepping, a step on the path of the authoritarianism that Ardern was accused of by Fox News and that Trump was accused of also, that in fact any leader is who threatens the gentle organism conceived by the Neoliberal Thought Collective.

Sometimes we want to repeat what we want to believe is true. Before the public autopsies of her political leadership that have occurred since the Rt. Hon. Ardern's resignation, an exhaustive list of her government's achievements while in office circulated for a short time on Facebook. It came up in answer to critics who, sensing a change of mood, felt it safe to come out and say whatever was near at hand that they had on their minds.

Dating from and covering the 4 years before March 2022, it was a long list: letting fees banned, mental health initiatives implemented in schools, rent increases limited to once a year, zero fees for the first year of study at university, re-institution of apprenticeships, Healthy Homes Guarantee instituted, lifting of restriction and legalisation of abortion, minimum wage increases, as well as benefits' increases, annually, more state houses built than any government since 1975, UK free trade deal signed, referenda on marijuana and euthanasia laws, veto on new drilling contracts, Carbon Neutral Act put in force, removal of many welfare sanctions, decades' highest investment in rail, health and education, ban on property purchases by non-residents, Family Tax Credit raised, bright-line property tax raised (concerning the time between purchase and sale), free lunches and free sanitary products in schools, school fees banned, child poverty reduced, gun law reform, highest ever investment in conservation, sick leave doubled, enrollment to vote on election day enabled, parental leave extended, new public holiday, overseas political donation banned, conversion therapy banned, regional development fund instituted, increased investment in public transport, Ministry of Disabled People established, ACC special claims reinstated, hardship grants doubled, investment in infrastructure increased, all while dealing on a *daily* basis with a global pandemic. Paul Taylor is credited for the list. I shared it from Patrick Waller.

It may be said that the list is of whatever measures the system can afford, that it does not address underlying inequality and the unfairness of the system. It may be said that, rather than representing the needs and wishes of society at large or of those the system discriminates against, it is a list of measures in

advocacy, and that it uses the law and legislature as a form of advocacy. This is what the National Party, in its already stated intention to roll back some of these measures, would probably believe and have the electorate believe, that it is Woke advocacy making bad use of the legal and political apparatus. All this may be said, but it is not nothing.

Perhaps if the achievements of the government with Ardern leading it were widely promulgated the mood would change back. Those against her would change their minds. The cynical might say, You'd be wasting your breath.

You'd be wasting your breath, wasting airtime, wasting money. Time and money are wasted thinking the facts speak for themselves or making an appeal to reason. Saying, Look at all she did, and look at what she did for you, you who are not a part of the power elite, saying these things would only heighten the resentment.

She did nothing. Window dressing. The inequalities are if anything now worse than they were before. The cynic will agree, anti- and pro-political meeting at this impasse that is an impasse of the political itself.

Where anti-political and pro meet is at a place that neither reason nor science can touch. It is at emotion. Emotion drives the sense of curtailed freedoms. Emotion drives the anarchic nihilism of leaderless popular movements that are categorically incapable of imagining a political alternative once they have destroyed the existing political structure. They are anti politics and yet there are no alternatives to the conflictual apart from the use of force, the use of police and army, to reinstate what was, but worse.

The question here has been, can there be a politics on top of antipolitics? Given its requirements, how can there be? If however we place the conflict in emotion we can ask, What is the emotion capable of leadership?

It is not pity, it's conviction. The belief that the COVID vaccines were an attempt by the government at mass sterilisation may be absurd but it is belief.

Antipolitics is most often invoked as being a loss of faith in the political system. The question is then how to be believed?

When Jacinda Ardern resigned what struck me was the metaphor, an irony now considering the tank is overflowing, Auckland floods and people have lost their lives and, in view of his measly response, a petition has been raised to oust the mayor. Kindness and pity, conviction in the political act being absent, whatever it might be, in response to this calamity or the ongoing catastrophe of ecological breakdown, would be welcome now. Jacinda has however resigned.

What struck me next about the resignation and that I wanted to avoid was attributing a cause. Some, I've said, grabbed what was close at hand. Some, I've said, took comfort in repeating either what others had said, finding emotional solidarity that way or in repeating what it was they wanted to believe, either the list of achievements, the legacy of leadership or its absence and insignificance. It held the emotional appeal of its moralism but it was all puff.

Even if you believed it was nothing really, you believed something and gave your reasons. You believed she was getting out and would leave her legacy. You believed she was getting out before she was voted out or because she was pushed.

I considered privately she had been pushed, pushed by those inside the party, not the government. The Labour Party leadership had lost faith in her brand. They no longer believed.

I looked beyond the soundbite and its emotional appeal, the excitement of whatever emotion you felt hearing and seeing her choke up. I think it came as a surprise. I think she was telling the truth. She had not told Neve because four-year olds are like small public address systems.

This is not the conviction I was talking about earlier as being the emotion of leadership but the ability to convince of a conviction. The decision to resign

came both out of the blue and from deep personal conviction. Making reasons for it, explaining and mansplaining it, takes away its freedom. Binding it to psychological and political motivations, it does away with it being an act of free will and does away with the conviction behind it, a free political act.

In the act of leaving power, the Rt. Hon. Ardern showed me what being in power might be if to be in power was to act freely and out of deep personal conviction. Both are necessary. Both are necessary for a politics on top of antipolitics, that takes it into consideration as the negative double of neoliberalism. Imagine what defines politics to be the free act based on deep personal conviction. Imagine this to define the political act. Imagine if there were no other political act than the one defined like this and there was no compromise.

A free political act is unconstrained by expectation, by the expectation that seems to be there instantaneously online. The act of a free will announces itself out of the blue. It is a political act for coming from deep personal conviction *into* the political realm of the conflictual, where, whatever emotionalism may be attributed to it after the fact, it is an event.

Since the claims of the antipolitical are not illegitimate, since its anger is not misplaced, the will to political change has first to go through antipolitics. It has first to take the leap and see in it no obstacle and no obstacle in the political institutions and apparatus where that change, most of all economic change, can be effected. Human agency can only be won back in governing human affairs by human political agents.

Power cannot belong to politics when all that governments can do is either to address themselves to a collective loss of faith in the political or to the technical apparatus that power has evolved to running world financial markets. Fears of AI taking over are like the return of the repressed fear that AI already has. The political act, politics if it is to be defined by the free will and courage to act based on deep personal conviction, can only ever have a human agency.