

Book review

FROM SUFFRAGE TO A SEAT IN THE HOUSE

Jenny Coleman

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In 2020, Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern posted an image of a white camelia brooch to her Facebook page. The brooch had been given to her on the 125th anniversary of women's suffrage in New Zealand and the post contained the following: 'it has the number 99. That's because I am the 99th woman to enter parliament since we have been able to run for office. I sometimes find that hard to fathom. Only 99? But at the same time, that's 98 women who worked so hard laying the path to make it easier for woman [sic] and for me to become a young activist, then an MP, a mother and a Prime Minister'. The echoes of this post are given substance in Jenny Coleman's important contribution to the history of women and politics in New Zealand – *From suffrage to a seat in the house*. This book, like the Prime Minister's musings, is an expression of pride in the intense and ongoing toil and commitment leading to the election of the women who preceded us, and a sense of poignancy that we have not come further. To begin with Coleman's concluding sentence, 'Inasmuch as the history of showing "my lady" to a seat reflects the entrenched conservatism of male politicians, it bears testimony to a history of women's persistence, perseverance, tenacity and resilience' (p.280).

Following on from Coleman's 2017 biography *Polly Plum, a firm and earnest woman's advocate, 1836-1885*, *From suffrage to a seat in the house* is an invaluable work for anyone interested in Aotearoa/New Zealand politics – and society – from 1893 right up to the present. This work provides a well-written and highly accessible account of the emergence of contemporary party politics – and the politics of personality – along with the quirks of New Zealand parliamentary protocol and the various different factions within never-homogeneous groups. A constant in the teaching and researching of women's history is the dilemma of whether to integrate the material through existing perspectives and the 'bigger picture' (and I use that phrase advisedly); or whether it is necessary and more important to deal with women's historical and political issues separately, so they do not disappear under what have traditionally been seen as weightier and more important perspectives. Coleman manages to do both – she succeeds in weaving the struggles of women's advocates and activists into the fabric of the broader evolution of the New Zealand parliament and politics while critically maintaining their centrality and interconnectedness.

The determination to effect change is reflected in the incremental subsections of each chapter. Bill after bill to remove the limitations on women's political participation is listed painstakingly, in chronological order, with discussions of supporters and detractors, and useful analysis of why these efforts failed – until they did not. Alongside this, Coleman traces the development of national women's groups, and local efforts, many of whom seemed to be at odds with one another. Coleman writes of heroism without succumbing to hagiography and

does not shy away from the importance of the tensions between the largely Pakeha and middle-class dominated organisations, and efforts by Māori women both in the Kotahitanga movement and more broadly.

There are constants in the debates around women's political participation, set out neatly by Coleman in relation to debates around women and the vote, and throughout the campaigns to eliminate the 'disabilities' of women being able to fully participate as members of the House. Did women really want the right to be involved in public politics? This refrain reverberated through debates on women's suffrage and continued through the rhetoric of male MPs and the media well into the 20th century. According to this logic, the long period of time between women gaining the right to sit in the House in 1919, and Elizabeth McCombs election in 1933, was due to a lack of desire by women to sit in Parliament and women's own resistance to the idea of being represented by other women. These ideas worked to reinforce gendered ideologies which built and fortified obstacles to women's participation. Similarly such notions allowed male politicians to ignore those very same institutional barriers to women's participation. Coleman's scrutiny brings into sharp relief just how hard women had to fight for every small concession and reminds us that some of these dilemmas persist right up to the present. The tension between 'women's issues' and other issues that were often deemed more important is another constant that is particularly prominent in the penultimate chapter: ricocheting from the walls of the House and the chambers of the National Council of Women was the question of whether a seat should go to a party candidate who happened to be woman, or should a woman candidate somehow be able to stand for all women? My heart broke for Ellen Melville, whose own party acted against her in matters of pre-selection, then blamed her for splitting the vote. She contested five general elections and one by-election between 1919 and 1933 and faced scapegoating and scandal when she dared to challenge the Reform Party's hierarchy. As a result of this, she was also castigated by her 'feminist sisters who accused her of bringing the women's movement into disrepute' (p. 236). And she still greeted Elizabeth McCombs' historic victory in the Lyttelton by-election in 1933 with grace and generosity. I wept again for Elizabeth McCombs who battled the stereotype of female fragility that threatened to shatter under the rigors of parliamentary life. Upon winning her seat, she continued to fight for her own community and only reluctantly relinquished other local roles, doing so much more than many of her male counterparts. Ultimately this was at the cost of her own health – and as a result, her life.

Coleman's book is both accessible and powerful, and speaks to the complexities of politics which are always gendered. It feels obvious that politics and people are inseparable – and yet politics is often written about as if divorced from the people who frame it, and more importantly from those people who are affected by those laws. *From Suffrage to a Seat in the House* is invaluable in the examination of how New Zealand's first wave of feminists ensured that women would have access to the framing of policies and laws that impacted them, their families, and their communities. Coleman weaves a narrative of struggle and strength, bringing to life the women who created a path for the 99th woman to take her Seat in the House, and ultimately to become our Prime Minister.

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References

Coleman, J. (2017). *Polly Plum, a firm and earnest woman's advocate, 1836-1885*. University of Otago Press.