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Wilson, M. (2021). *Activism, Feminism, Politics and Parliament*. Bridget Williams Books, 266 pages, ISBN 9781988587844

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Former Labour Party president and Member of Parliament Margaret Wilson has lived a ground-breaking life in New Zealand law and politics. Among her other significant achievements, she was the first woman dean of a law school (Te Piringa, University of Waikato), the only woman to serve as Attorney-General (Helen Clark's Fifth Labour Government), and the only woman to serve as Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives (2005–2008). Wilson curates the events of her life in the context of New Zealand's emergence from cultural and economic dependence on the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s and our subsequent grappling with how to decolonise the institutions of our public life, principally to convince women readers of the importance of working within feminism and within politics in order to bring about gender equality.

Wilson's memoir of her extraordinary life begins and ends with meditations on equality and difference. In between those two framing discussions—how she learned "the politics of difference" in her Waikato childhood (pp. 1–5) and what we must understand about difference in order to have equality before the law (pp. 244–245)—she reflects upon her public life spent working in law and politics to advance the cause of women's social equality with men. Working from diaries she has kept throughout her life, she reconstructs an account of her life that she freely acknowledges is selective, focusing on her public life and political achievements (p. 5). She makes some trenchant observations throughout her memoir about what it is like to live in the public eye with a disability and with chronic pain, and about the rigid inaccessibility of institutions like Parliament that confronts people with disabilities, but Wilson's primary focus as she sifts through her lifetime of achievement is always on the struggle that presented itself to her because of her gender.

In the opening chapters, Wilson writes of her early childhood as an education in learning to live a minority identity, by growing up Catholic in a town (Morrinsville) where religious affiliations mattered, and of learning to be a free-thinker in politics, thanks to her grandfather's influence. She writes also of learning, as a young woman, to live with disability and constant discomfort as a result of being diagnosed with a form of bone cancer and having her left leg amputated (p. 21). Recounting this period of her life, she reflects poignantly on her early decision to treat disability as a "secondary part" of her life. She tells us: "I do recall consciously deciding that being a woman in law and then in politics was a big enough disability; it seemed unproductive to focus also on the politics of disability" (p. 25). It is this reflective honesty and self-analysis that I find such a strength of Wilson's memoir. Being a woman interested in law and in politics in the late 1960s and 1970s *was* still a disadvantage, and women who are working in these spaces today are benefiting from the efforts that Wilson and her generational cohort have made towards gender equality. But even as we catalogue how much

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work remains in achieving that objective, it is also instructive to note how much has changed in, for instance, Parliament, as current members openly self-identifying as people with disabilities invite us all to think more inclusively about embodiment and inclusion in public life. As Wilson tells us, "An understanding of law requires an understanding of policy, and policy requires an understanding of the society within which the law is implemented" (p. 28).

Wilson locates her political awakening in her university years, as "a member of the post-war baby-boom generation that had the confidence to assert its identity as distinctly of New Zealand" (p. 2). It was in the heady, exciting era of student protest, the emerging gay rights and women's movements and counter-cultural possibility of the late 1960s and 1970s that Wilson learned the need to marry theory and practice. She was reading Marx and Mao and Gramsci, but she names as a singularly influential text Saul Alinsky's (1971/1989) *Rules for Radicals*, praising Alinsky's argument for redistributing power to the people for its "emphasis on practical organising rather than theory" (p. 31). She also read widely in feminist theory, again drawn to theory and activism that foregrounded women's realities—the idea propounded by radical feminism that the personal is political (pp. 32–34).

Describing her post-law-school shift out of university research and into politics—what she terms a "tentative foray"—Wilson recalls that it was obvious even then that women's ability to control our own lives requires that we have our own financial security (p. 39). This is what led her to become involved in the equal pay movement emerging in Aotearoa New Zealand at the end of the 1960s, the movement that would later, in its calls for equal pay for work of equal value, become known as pay equity (pp. 47–48). Reflecting on her early political organising—including a 1975 submission to the Select Committee on Women's Rights on the discrimination women faced in the workforce—she examines the possibility that her efforts could have been directed differently, to encourage women into leadership in business, for instance (p. 45). But her longstanding commitment to investigating the reasons for gender inequality led her to the conclusion that "women's inequality was embedded in the economic system" (p. 45) and efforts to change the political conditions of women's working lives would ultimately bear more fruit than trying to change business practices within unreformed policy frameworks. The work she did throughout the 1970s, attending United Women's Conventions (pp. 49–54) and contributing to the Working Women's Charter eventually adopted by the Labour Party (pp. 55–58), was all part of her ongoing effort to normalise women in the workforce, as she continued to debate to herself the merits of working within the political system and a Labour Party that she experienced as "male-centred, hierarchical and authoritarian" (pp. 60–67).

Wilson's work both in the 1970s, doing political organising at the community level, and in the 1980s as she entered New Zealand politics on the threshold of neoliberalism's rise, are of interest for their detailed examination of entrenched attitudes about women's roles in society. Her determination to introduce a policy on women's equality to the Labour Party took shape in the early 1980s as a discussion paper that outlined a socialist-feminist programme for gender equality and which cemented her commitment to working within the system (p. 68). From the standpoint of Wilson's grounding in democratic socialism and feminism, the discussion paper urged "a rejection of patriarchal values of dominance, destructive competitiveness and authoritarianism, and an acceptance of the feminist values of cooperation, consensus and peace" (p. 69)—an analysis recognisable to those of us who work in critical areas of scholarship like feminist peace studies as the still un-met challenge of Second Wave feminism. Discussion of her steadfast commitment to socialist and feminist principles is woven throughout Wilson's recollections of her political life, identified at one point as her "primary reason for being in politics" (p. 119). Reflecting on the causes she contributed to in the 1970s and 1980s, Wilson is struck by how widely accepted arguments for pay and employment equity have become, and by how persistent problems such as the gender wage gap and sexual harassment remain, observing that "fundamentally, the labour market has not changed much for women since 1990" (pp. 156–157).

Another part of the appeal of this memoir is Wilson's first-hand accounts of the networks she was part of. Over successive chapters that chart an extraordinary life, Wilson recounts and analyses her early involvement in feminist activism and theorising during her university days, her initiation in the late 1970s as an institutional insider to party politics, through the Labour Party (including a two-term stint as party president), working relatively briefly outside government as the first woman dean of a law school (Te Piringa, at the University of Waikato), and finally entering Parliament by standing for Labour as a list MP in the 1999 election at Helen Clark's request (p. 111). Her life as a member of parliament began with her immediately entering Cabinet as Attorney-General, Minister of Labour, and Minister in Charge of Treaty of Waitangi Negotiations (p. 121), and finally put her in a position to implement gender equality measures she had championed since university. As she gives us this account of her record of public service and achievement, Wilson also walks us through a fascinating overview of her longstanding working relationships with some of the most high-profile women in New Zealand politics, Helen Clark among them. The memoir includes many photographs taken in Wilson's personal and public moments, but the one I am most struck by is a 2001 shot of Wilson during her time as Attorney-General, standing next to then-PM Helen Clark, Chief Justice Sian Elias and Dame Silvia Cartwright, who has just been sworn in as Governor-General. Wilson's caption of the photo observes that "for the first time, these four positions were held by women" (photo text, between pp. 224–225). This predominance of women in political leadership continued when Wilson took up the role of Speaker of the House in 2005, becoming New Zealand's first woman Speaker as Clark, Elias and Cartwright continued in their roles (p. 221).

Wilson's reminiscence of her time as Speaker is notable for being one of her most extended discussions of the adaptations she made in the course of a public life lived with a disability (pp. 220–221). "Living with a disability means you are outside 'normal' life", she had already observed earlier in her memoir (p. 24). "You become the exception and therefore must argue for accommodation within a system that is not designed to include you" (p. 24). But always, Wilson's account of working within a system designed not to include her returns to gender differences. She recalls her nine years in Parliament as years in which she tried to conform to what was 'normal', explaining in retrospect that she "was already somewhat used to this position, of course, because women frequently have to conform to norms of behaviour that are based on the male experience" (pp. 220–221). She notes that it is a common feature of many women's lives that we feel unheard. "As more women achieve positions of authority, our voices are heard more often," she acknowledges, "but whether what we are saying is understood is still a relevant question" (p. 124).

Exploring how patriarchal institutions and practices have shaped women's lives, and doing this exploration during the decades in which neoliberal policies were imposed and normalised in Aotearoa New Zealand, has led Wilson to the uncompromising conclusion that "if women are to achieve equality, neoliberal policies are definitely not the way to do it … It will require a fundamental change in the value system that underlies policy-making for women to obtain control over their lives" (p. 3). This, she says, is why "more than any other reason" she wrote her memoir: "to help other women understand the need to become engaged with feminism and politics if our society is to sustain the drive for equality for all peoples" (p. 245). In the scrupulous self-evaluation with which she concludes the memoir, Wilson identifies equality as "a main thread" running through her life. Making a point reminiscent of Catharine MacKinnon's (1987) analysis of equality and difference in *Feminism Unmodified*, Wilson notes that much of the progress made towards gender equality has been because we (women) have adapted ourselves to the system not designed for us. "There is still no fundamental recognition that equality means respecting difference and not expecting women to be like men," she observes, declaring that "this will be the next major challenge" (p. 238).

References

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