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HER WORSHIP THE MAYOR:
Women's leadership
in New Zealand local government

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of

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DEDICATION

For my dear friend and colleague, Suzann Clair Olsson, whose passing came far too soon for everyone who loved her and benefited from her creative spirit and her ability to be open to the moment.

ABSTRACT

This study began with the premise that looking at leadership in a different setting might generate new understanding of how leadership works. Only four women mayors had held office in New Zealand before the 1980s but when their numbers grew over the next two decades, there were signs of a difference in their approach to leadership. Although the amount of scholarly work published on leadership is vast, the body of academic literature on local government leadership is slender. The possibility of finding new knowledge about leadership by studying women mayors made them an intriguing area to research.

The research sought answers to two questions:

- how do women mayors perceive exemplary mayoral leadership and explain their own leadership practice; and
- how do women mayors' views of leadership compare with leadership theory?

The information gathered to assist in answering the research questions included:

- interviews with three mayoral candidates in the 1998 elections,
- interviews with 18 of the 19 female mayors in office during the 1998-2001 term, and
- a case study of Jill White, mayor of Palmerston North from 1998-2001.

The case study comprised a series of interviews with Jill White during the three year term, a selection of newspaper stories about the mayor and council gathered during 1998-2001 and interviews with four key informants about Jill White's leadership after she lost the election in 2001.

The findings of the research were that the research participants saw leadership as a process that took place working with the community to achieve mutually desired leadership goals. Leadership was not generated by a single person's abilities, nor was it automatically linked to a position such as being mayor, although being mayor gave a lot of opportunities to participate in and encourage leadership.

Four areas participants considered to be requirements of exemplary mayoral leadership were:

- being at the centre of webs of people rather than at the top of a hierarchy
- having less concern for ego than for working towards change
- being committed to making a difference in the community and/or the council
- being prepared to sacrifice their own interests for the good of the community

Comparing participants' views of leadership with leadership theory showed that their descriptions and examples of leadership were closely related to transforming leadership (Burns, 1979), whereas transactional leadership in the sense of acting in your own self-interest or trading favours with others, met with strong disapproval.

The heroic paradigm of leadership that has been prevalent in the literature, with its focus on the leader, was absent from the participants' accounts. Their achievements came from working with others and they saw the ability to involve others in the leadership process as the strength of their leadership.

The implication of these findings is that the focus in much of the literature on individual attributes of people in leadership positions, as if they had to 'do' all the leadership themselves, is misplaced. Being concerned to make a difference with and through others is at the core of leadership.

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He manga wai koia kia kore e whitikia
It is a big river indeed that cannot be crossed.

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