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Lone Rangers:
Women on New Zealand County Councils

A thesis
presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

Soon after being elected as a Matamata county councillor early in the 1980s, I visited my parents. My father, who had immigrated from England as a 20 year old but still retained some of the British class-consciousness from which he had sought to escape, was quite pleased to have a member of the family in a role that he saw as 'aristocracy'. On this occasion, Brian Talboys, a friend of my father's and at that time Deputy Prime Minister, was also visiting and Dad took the opportunity to proudly announce that his daughter had joined the political elite, being the first and only woman elected to this council. Mr Talboys pondered for a minute and said "Goodness! Did you have a shortage of pain in your life? The Matamata County Council must be the last bastion of male chauvinism." This was definitely not the reaction Dad had expected, but those words – and the grin with which they were delivered - stayed with me through many a long and difficult council meeting. It certainly impressed me that an experienced politician, and particularly a male one, should make that comment. In light of my subsequent experience, and my knowledge of the experiences of other women councillors I knew at the time, I wonder if county councils were indeed the 'last bastion of male chauvinism', or simply a reflection of their times. And if they were not typical of the times, what made them different and how was that difference manifest?

This study seeks to place the experience of women on county councils in the context of the times. Was their treatment different from that experienced by rural women in general and by women on urban councils? What effect did they have? Did they make any difference in the council chamber, or to council decisions? Did they see a need for change, and have any success in achieving it? And of course along with all these questions goes the 'if so, how?', and 'if not, why not?'

An additional aim of this study is to record the stories of these women, and establish them as part of our history. Studies of local government in New Zealand typically have a greater – if not exclusive – focus on urban authorities. This is not surprising as throughout the period under study around 80 percent of the population resided in locations administered by city or borough councils and only 20 percent or less in

county areas.¹ Even where attention is given to rural authorities, acknowledgement of the presence (or lack) of women councillors, and any contribution made by those who were there, is almost universally absent. But present they were, albeit as a small minority within an already small minority.

It seems a shame that as individuals and as a group female county councillors were, and remain, largely invisible. County councillors of all shapes and sizes ceased to exist as a result of the major reorganisation of local government in 1989. Thus ex-county councillors constitute another of New Zealand's endangered species, and if their stories are not recorded soon they will be lost forever. This of course begs the question as to whether these stories warrant preservation, and to what extent my view of this is shared by other women ex-councillors. The overwhelming response from the women who responded with information for this project was one of great enthusiasm and support, and many commented on their disappointment at the lack of any existing record, let alone recognition, of their work and experiences.

The end point for this study is 1989, when local government reorganisation abolished all counties and replaced them with district councils, changing the nature of both the electorate and the council. The objective of district councils was to reflect 'areas of interest'; the rationale being that rural areas did not operate in isolation but in commercial and cultural association with adjacent urban centres. Thus district councils combined counties and boroughs (and sometimes cities), with political representation allocated in proportion to the populations. So while rural areas retained, at least for a time, their own representatives, rural councillors were in almost all cases considerably outnumbered by their urban colleagues. The nature of the district council meetings, debates and processes followed more closely the conventions of the predecessor borough (or city) council than those of the county or counties they replaced.²

The start point should be the date on which the first woman was elected to a county council. This is not easy to ascertain, but is probably about 1950 when Dorothy Davies was elected to the Makara County Council.³ A very few women followed

¹ *New Zealand Official Yearbook*, 1997, p 110.

² Comments from reporters and many of the women who continued as councillors (on district councils) after 1989. Also Julie Hallam, interview, 21 February 2004.

³ *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz> Dorothy Davies, 8 April 2003.

Dorothy over the ensuing 20 years and by the late 1970s about a dozen women had held seats in various county council chambers. The 1980s saw a marked increase in female participation with possibly 75 women currently serving as county councillors by the time counties were abolished.⁴ This suggests a total of 90 to 100 women who have served as councillors on New Zealand county councils. I contacted all the current District Councils asking them for information on women elected to the counties which were amalgamated into their area. Most district councils responded, although several were prepared to provide this information only if I paid for the staff time required to find it. I also gained assistance from Archives New Zealand and Local Government New Zealand, and in all was able to obtain the names of 76 women, of whom at least six are no longer living.

As many of these women as possible were traced, using information from District Councils, electoral rolls, telephone directories, newspaper reports and 'snowballing' techniques – asking contacted women if they knew where other, more elusive, women were now living. Some women were known to have moved away from the area in which they were elected to a location not known, and some had remarried. Of these elusive women only three were traceable. I included only those councils which had at least one woman councillor, and which were truly rural councils. Some, such as Stewart Island and Waiheke counties, were called counties but had more in common with District Councils in that they included associated urban centres and did not have the wholly rural character of counties. This also applies to counties which had been rural long ago but by 1960 were so closely associated with large centres of population that they had more in common with urban authorities than they did with rural ones. Several counties were in reality part of Christchurch; notably Paparua and Heathcote, and the women who were elected to these councils were city residents, representing city areas. Seeking to preserve this study as that of rural women in rural local government I have excluded material relating to either councils or women who do not fit those criteria. Consequently, I was able to send out 39 questionnaires of which one was returned with a note asking to be omitted and 36 were filled in and returned.⁵ Three of those were not included because they came from women who had

⁴ This figure is not verifiable. The analysis of local government election statistics for the last election prior to the abolition of counties (the 1986 election) was not published. In 1983 72 women were elected to county councils. My investigations show 16 women were first elected to counties in 1986, and 15 sitting women were not re-elected at that election. These numbers are neither complete nor verifiable, but it has not been possible to obtain accurate figures.

⁵ A copy of the questionnaire form is included as Appendix 1.

been elected to urban ridings of the Paparua County Council. As 33 is approaching half of the possible total, and there is a good geographical spread across New Zealand, I believe a representative sample has been achieved. The sample of women is fairly evenly divided between North and South Islands, (18/14) and in all includes 27 counties. Of those 27, all but four had just one woman included in this sample, with the remainder having two (Matamata, Patea, Golden Bay, and Waimea). Of the 33 women, 23 were, for at least one three year term of their period on council, the only female councillor. Thus while the sample is smaller than originally hoped, I believe it is of sufficient size and structure to provide a valid basis for analysis.

My initial intentions for research were more broadly based than has proved feasible. Minutes of county meetings are not as readily available as I had expected. When counties were amalgamated into district councils in 1989, most of the minutes were transferred to the district council offices, and much of this material has since been destroyed. Very few were lodged with National Archives either then or later. Even those I was able to access proved less fruitful than I had hoped as they contain little background to the resolutions, thus giving no indication of the debate preceding the vote, and no hint of council dynamics. Occasionally 'votes against' were recorded, but huge quantities of minutes could be perused without obtaining any useful material. Newspaper reports proved to be similarly difficult. Because counties operated in the rural regions, few were reported in the major papers, and then only spasmodically when an issue of major interest was being debated. Prior to elections the small local papers regularly printed items on any up-coming contests, but were less predictable in respect of reporting meetings. I searched months of issues of three of the small Waikato papers but found very few mentions of county meetings. Those that did appear provided little of relevance to this study. Items tended to report the issue and the decision with little indication of the nature of the discussion and gave infrequent reference to those who took part in the debate.

Thus for this study, the information provided directly by ex-county councillors is fundamental, and constitutes the majority of the research material. Also recorded are interviews with some reporters who attended council meetings and wrote reports for local and national newspapers. Their comments have provided a more external view of the meetings, and can be used to compare impressions of urban councils in the cases where the same reporter attended meetings of county and borough councils.

Similarly, comment was sought from male councillors, so that the view of the council male majority is recognised in this study alongside that of the (often) lone female.

The limits on the scope of this study have necessitated some approximations and compromises in comparisons of data. Because the total number of women on county councils is small it has been necessary to aggregate the group across the period of study. This means that the statistics developed must be treated with some caution in that they are not derived from a truly homogeneous group in terms of time. In order to be able to obtain appropriate contextual material, I have accessed other studies, particularly those undertaken in or related to New Zealand. Generally, these have the advantage of numbers sufficiently large to enable restriction of timespan, and the definition of subsets relating to discrete times or elections. Thus some comparisons must be taken with caution, and I have emphasised these differences where they arise. While it is acknowledged this is less than ideal, some comparisons can validly and usefully be made.

There can be no doubt that this study is gender-related. It is also very much associated with women in politics, and particularly focuses on the small number of women involved in rural local government. But it is by no means intended as a study of “women-as-political-failures” as discussed by Marilyn Lake.⁶ In this work Lake evaluates the theory which had wide acceptance in the 1970s and which describes the small numbers of women in recognised political positions as ‘a failure’ in terms of women failing to gain – or even seek – election to political office. She challenges this argument by highlighting the ways in which women ‘do politics’ other than by being present in council chambers and parliaments. My study does not have the intention of furthering the former opinion, but its scope precludes an examination of ways in which rural women have taken an active part in local affairs without being elected to the local council. Neither does my study focus on the failure to gain greater female representation on councils nor the gap between the numbers in rural government compared to urban or central government. It is an indisputable fact that there were notably fewer women on county councils than in other areas of local government, and this has relevance to any study of rural governance. But beyond examining the numbers and statistical imbalances, I seek further to find why the experience of being that small minority was so surprising for most of these women,

⁶ Marilyn Lake, “Feminist History as National History”, *Historical Studies*, 106, April 1996, pp 158-61.

and the time on council so fraught with difficulty. Certainly the small number of women – and the widespread experience of being the only female – has a bearing on this, but it is seen as contributing to the answer rather than forming part of the question.

Joan Scott argues that for the purposes of historical analysis, gender is defined by the interrelationship between two propositions; first that gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and second that gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.⁷ Scott's approach describes the duality of gender which seems appropriate to this study. The two propositions can clearly be seen in action, both inside the county council chamber and outside of it. In their everyday life the women included in this study lived and worked within social relationships influenced by gender – none mentioned in any negative way their acceptance that they were 'the wife' (and not 'the farmer') and had limited involvement in management and financial decisions related to the farm even though many of them spent a great deal of time working as part of the farming operation. By contrast, most of them are very clear about their dissatisfaction at their apparent lack of involvement in council decisions, or even being seen as a 'real councillor'. What this study tries to clarify is to what extent, if at all, the social system inside the council chamber differed from that outside.

Power relationships were important in county government, as they are in all levels of politics, both formal and informal. The absence of party structures in rural elections left something of a vacuum in terms of recognised power hierarchies, but this by no means precluded significant exercise of power. Traditionally, the county chairman (elected by the council, not the electors as was the case with mayoralities) held a great deal of political power, both visible and invisible. However, in most councils, both the county engineer and the county clerk also exerted a significant degree of power, or believed they should.⁸ It was not uncommon for the balance of power between these two, and between either or both of them and the chairman, to be a source of ongoing struggle, albeit conducted in a most civilised manner and as invisibly as

⁷ Joan Scott, "Gender: a Useful Category of Historical Analysis", *American Historical Review*, Dec 1986, Vol. 91, p 1067.

⁸ Many of the questionnaires note this in various forms and contexts, and refer to the effect of the common 'power struggle' that went on between the holders of the two most senior staff positions. See also Jenny Simpson quoted in Jenny Rankine, "Shaking Up Local Bodies", *Broadsheet*, November 1986, p 27.

possible. Thus there was a somewhat ephemeral and mobile power structure which exerted a varying influence as alliances formed and reformed depending on topics debated and the rise and fall of various 'personalities' on the council. This had implications for the women on council in terms of whether they were able to become part of this power relationship, or chose – or were forced – to operate outside it.

It must be emphasised that not all the women surveyed expressed the belief that gender discrimination played any part in their council. A minority stated that being female was no disadvantage, and at times had some advantage.

Gender analysis such as attempted in this study must also be sensitive to considerations of class and race.⁹ Every endeavour is made to bear this in mind, but in the study of this female minority it is fair to claim little effect from race or class. All the women contacted are of uniform race, and I found the names of only three potential contributors who were Maori. Of these, one died some years ago and I have been unable to trace the other two. It has also proved impossible to gather reliable statistics in regard to the racial composition of county councils, but I am confident that the vast majority of male councillors were, like the women in the study, European New Zealanders (Pakeha).¹⁰ It is very possible that Maori councillors, both male and female, could constitute another important minority with its own unique experience of involvement on county councils. This is, of course, outside the scope of my study, but it needs to be emphasised that this is an absence which I would prefer to have been able to at least recognise and quantify. Despite considerable effort, I have been unable to obtain any relevant and authoritative material that enables me to comment upon the effect of race alongside that of gender. The invisibility of race other than Pakeha is, of course, a statement in itself. One of the women who participated in this study commented on the presence of a Maori man on her council, and his uncharacteristic quietness during meetings.¹¹ He expressed to her a feeling of being an outsider in an uncomfortable environment and, while relaxed and forthcoming with other councillors on informal occasions, found the situation of

⁹ Scott, p 1054-5.

¹⁰ My own recollection of County Conferences, like those of other female county councillors I asked, is that of a very few Maori men. Some could not recall any, but were not sufficiently confident of their memories to state there were none present. This perception is supported by an examination of county council photographs (not a comprehensive study of all county councils by any means) in which very few show non-Pakeha appearance. It is recognised that this constitutes a highly subjective and scientifically unreliable source, but the best I could obtain.

¹¹ Noeleen Buckland, questionnaire.

a structured council meeting very foreign and intimidating. I could find no evidence of any other ethnicities being represented on county councils, but given that my source of information came from only a sample of women councillors, with the added restriction that I have made contact only with those councils who ever had at least one woman councillor (probably around two thirds of all counties), it is not possible to make a confident claim in this regard. None of the women I spoke to could recall knowing of any county councillors (male or female) other than Maori or Pakeha.

Rural New Zealand is not a classless society, but in general terms a county council could be considered close to single class. Rural society is most clearly defined in class terms by the division between 'owners' and 'workers', and as far as I have been able to ascertain, it was almost solely farm owners who were present at the council table, albeit the female councillors in the form of spouse of the 'real' owner. This is, however, an oversimplification, and will be touched on further later in this thesis. It seems possible that class boundaries could effectively be raised on an ad hoc basis, at the whim of the majority. Such considerations as how long an individual – or their family – had resided in the district held 'class' significance, and the difference between being born in the area and arriving later could be used as a definer of credibility or class.¹² Several questionnaires included comments on occasions when male councillors discounted female opinions on the basis that they were 'too new to the district to understand', and conversely some women attributed their acceptance on council to their 'status' in local farming terms. They also remarked on the impression that male councillors believed that there was some degree of mana attached to being on council, or possibly being in a position which enabled them to be able to take days off for council meetings. This meant, in most rural areas, that they had to be farm owners, and probably older owners who had achieved the financial position of being able to run the farm with staff rather than being involved on a day-to-day basis. Class differentiation, while less clear and apparent than may apply in urban situations, certainly existed. Literature on class structure in New Zealand has difficulty with classification in the rural sector. In their table of occupational groupings, Jones and Davis place farmers as a separate section within their fourth group from the 'top' along with small proprietors but below lower level professionals

¹² Jocelyn Fish, Katrina Gardiner, Robyn Grigg, Heather Little, Jenny Wilson, Sue Lane, questionnaires. Commonly the histories of counties and rural areas describe councillors as 'respected farming leaders' and comment on the size and nature of their land holdings. Non-landowners and 'workers', or even sharemilkers, are conspicuous by their absence.

and 'routine non-manual clerical and sales people'. Agricultural workers make up the lowest group, below 'skilled manual workers'.¹³ This is in conflict with analyses based on capitalism and asset ownership, which places farm owners high on the list, on the basis that they have ownership of land which is a means of production. Farm workers remain low, but intermediate positions such as sharemilkers are ignored.¹⁴ The class structure in the rural sector is not well defined by studies of class in New Zealand,¹⁵ and is complicated by the structured mobility, especially in dairying areas. In the period of this study, approximately 1975-1990, progression in dairying areas from worker to sharemilker to owner was universally recognised, and thus in dairying districts a farm worker was commonly perceived as much as a potential owner as he was a current 'worker'. This established a different model to the urban worker/employer/owner strata, and different again to that of non-dairy farming, which varied between districts and farming regions. The fluid and often unspoken nature of 'class' *within* rural society makes it more difficult to pin down as a category of analysis.

My own involvement as both researcher and participant must be acknowledged and clarified. As already stated, part of my motivation for choosing this topic arose from my own experience as a county councillor. This creates problems for me as researcher, and I have tried to limit my inclusion of 'self' to the same level as that of the women who have contributed material. In order to include myself in comparisons and statistics, I filled in a questionnaire as did all my respondents. Thus I have used my 'responses' where it has been appropriate to combine information from all or several respondents. I am mindful that I have knowledge of the full nine years of my experience on council, which is far greater than the amount of information any of the other women have been able to contribute. I am also keenly aware of my attitude and reaction to my own experiences, and have consciously endeavoured to both set these aside and to welcome the challenge to these that other women's comments have

¹³ F L Jones and Peter Davis, *Models of Society: Class Stratification and Gender in Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986, p 18.

¹⁴ David Bedgood, *Rich and Poor in New Zealand A Critique of Class, Politics and Ideology*, Auckland: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1980, refer discussion in Chapter 5 "Contemporary Class Structure".

¹⁵ Many studies either ignore rural categories or isolate them in comparison to urban ones. This gives no indication of 'class' relative to the broad heading of 'farming'. Refer David Pitt, *Social Class in New Zealand*, Auckland: Longman Paul Ltd., 1977. Farming is not mentioned other than prior to 1900, except in the chapter "Occupational Choice and Social Class in New Zealand" where it is isolated – the three broad categories are manual, non-manual and farm, p 81.

presented. This has created a difficulty that I had not expected. In the course of my research I found that my experience was more extreme than I had realised at the time. What I had put up with (or tried to) during my term of office because it was 'just the way things were', I now find was not the way things were for many other county councillors. Some perceived no discrimination at all, most others experienced a measure of discrimination that seems to be less than I did. This raised an unexpected level of retrospective pain, which I certainly had not anticipated, and created some problems for me in terms of what Liz Stanley refers to as "real meaning, with hindsight".¹⁶ The process of accepting other women's experience as different to mine has included a degree of personal battle, not only to remain objective, but to exclude the 'what about poor me?' reaction. Had my experience been more typical I could more readily have ignored it. Objectivity and subjectivity themselves are both highly subjective, and vastly more complex than expected when related to painful personal experience. It has been possible to avoid "tampering with my past" as outlined by Stanley¹⁷ but I have struggled with the temptation to enter into dialogue with it. Had I realised the negativity of the personal memories thrown up by this research, and the effect they would have on me, I might have chosen a different topic. At this stage I can only state that I am aware of the potential difficulties associated with my dual role, which I recognise and have tried to prevent unduly influencing my work.

As already noted, literature and previous research directly related to this topic is very limited. There exists, however, a significant body of work associated with local government, women's involvement in politics both national and local, and social studies of various aspects of rural life in New Zealand. I intend my work to go some way toward filling the gap that exists in the record of rural women in rural local government. Only a small proportion of overseas studies are applicable to this area of research. Many other social structures are too different from the New Zealand rural context to be comparable, such as in strongly ethnically and/or tribally influenced African countries¹⁸ and those in markedly different cultures to Western

¹⁶ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: the Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, p 21.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p 54.

¹⁸ Refer several discussions in MacLean, Quadir and Shaw (eds.) *Crises of Governance in Asia and Africa*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2001, especially Sandra J. MacLean, "Ethnicity and Race in the Changing Political Economies of South Africa and Zimbabwe", and Abillah H. Omari, "Ethnicity, Power, Governance and Conflict in the Great Lakes Region".

democracies, such as Japan.¹⁹ Many countries have carried out re-organisations similar to that of 1989 in New Zealand, and abolished bodies comparable to counties too early for use in valid comparisons within my timeframe.²⁰ Many of the European countries have systems strongly influenced by local culture which makes comparisons with the 'British' form of local government hazardous.²¹ Even the British system itself, upon which the New Zealand structure was originally based, was changed significantly by restructuring in 1973, at which time 'counties' formed a tier more comparable to our regional councils, with districts and parish councils on a lower level within the county.²² Some systems of overseas local governance are so different to ours that comparisons are, at best, difficult and possibly dangerously misleading, as in the United States where most of the positions equating to senior staff in New Zealand are held by elected incumbents.²³ Far more detailed and comprehensive studies than this thesis have either avoided comparisons or made ones which are very difficult to understand.²⁴ Given these problems, I have avoided becoming enmeshed in hazardous and potentially confusing comparisons with overseas local government structures. In fact New Zealand local government has some unique features, notable among them being the absence of overt party affiliations in county politics, which make direct comparisons irrelevant. Nevertheless, note has been taken of work originating from overseas studies, and comparable findings are given consideration where appropriate. Because existing work is broad and varied in relation to my topic I have devoted a full chapter to its analysis. This enables me to use the work of others to fully explore the environment within which my work is located.

¹⁹ Margaret Bowman, *Local Democracies a Study in Comparative Local Government*, Melbourne: Longman Cheshire Pty Ltd, 1983, p 18.

²⁰ Japanese counties were abolished in 1921 and replaced by bodies more comparable to our District Councils, see Council of Local Authorities for International Relations, *Comparative Study on Local Government Reform in Japan, Australia and New Zealand*, Sydney: Japan Local Government Centre, 2000, p 9.

²¹ See descriptions and discussions in Alan Norton, *International Handbook of Local and Regional Government*, Birmingham: Edward Elgar Ltd, 1994, and Henry Teune (ed.) *Local Governance Around the World*, Pennsylvania: The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1995.

²² Bowman, pp 26-27.

²³ Refer work by Flammang and Hallowell, discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1.

²⁴ Norton, p 34. A table comparing Classes and Numbers of Sub-National Authorities excludes New Zealand completely, but another table comparing Intermediate Authorities, which includes English, Irish, Welsh and US counties shows New Zealand as having 14. This number doesn't equate to the number of any local authorities as defined by Anderson and Norgrove, (in *Comparative Study on Local Government Reform in Japan Australia and New Zealand*, Chapter 3 "Local Government Reform in New Zealand 1987-1996) but is closest to that for Regional Councils, which are a different tier of government, and not comparable in function or structure to counties in NZ or overseas.

The structure of this thesis is intended to provide sections each of which deal with a discrete topic, but which taken together provide a coherent account of the involvement and experience of women in New Zealand rural local government.

Chapter one researches the work already carried out that raises issues and provides context to my topic. This includes both New Zealand and overseas studies, and while little of it relates directly to women on county councils, an examination of social and political issues for women is necessary to clarify the context for the subsequent observations and conclusions of this thesis. As already noted, the context for this study is not that of the council chamber and the council electorate in isolation. The experiences of the women on New Zealand county councils must be placed in the setting of local government, the rural social structure, and the changing mores of the time. Thus I have devoted a full chapter to the review of literature and research in order to clarify the theories relating to both women's political involvement and the effects of social environment on the quantum and nature of that involvement. As already noted, most of the women participating in my study held office in the period from the late 1970s to 1989. This period closely follows a very turbulent time in the establishment of women's place in all parts of society, and has significance in terms of reaction to this turbulence, which includes both progress and backlash in gender relations.

The second chapter traces the development of the county system. It is important to have a clear picture of county government within the overall scheme of local government in New Zealand, and of how differences between governance in town and country have arisen. It would be good to be able to establish to a greater extent *why* the differences arose and were sustained, but that has proved too difficult to ascertain within the scope of this work. Suffice to say that at least some of the differences are substantial, and have relevance to the experiences of the women involved in this study.

The next four chapters examine the experiences of the women who contributed their memories to this research. Chapter three compares and contrasts the county women with their urban counterparts. It seeks to find to what extent, if any, the county women were different from their urban colleagues and, similarly, to identify any

differences between society and governance in the two areas that might have affected women councillors on rural and urban councils.

Nomination, election campaigns and experiences prior to election are explored in chapter four. The most obvious point of difference between rural and urban election processes is the lack of any party or 'ticket' involvement in the county electorates. While this had a major effect on how the elections were experienced by both candidates and voters, other less obvious influences also characterise rural elections. Most of these have been established over many years and are integrated into the social structure of rural areas, for example the influence and involvement of Federated Farmers, which was, during the period of study, largely closed to women. There were no equivalent organisations in urban centres which had the active support of such a large majority of the male voting public.

It must be noted that all the women included in this study did at some stage succeed at election and become a member of a county council. I have been able to find only a few isolated references to female candidates who stood but were never successful.²⁵ It is therefore not possible to surmise how information from that source might have influenced this study, but as the numbers of women who did achieve election are small, and those I could trace even smaller, it is fair to speculate that any input that might have been obtained from never-successful candidates would be a very tiny sample. Given that belief, and the difficulty of endeavouring to trace them, I have not spent time in this pursuit.

Chapter five examines the experience of taking one's place at the council table and becoming part of county governance. While some of these experiences bore out the rather dire warning delivered by Brian Talboys, by no means all of them did. This chapter examines not only what the women themselves have related, but also considers other perspectives. I wanted to include some input from male councillors in an endeavour to give a more balanced perception. The scope of this work allowed only a small sample of male councillors to be accessed, but those contacted displayed a marked lack of enthusiasm. I did not feel it was appropriate to seek input from

²⁵ Diane Grant *Here I Stand The Experiences of Women Candidates in the 1980 Local Body Elections*, Martinborough: Affirmative Action, 1983. At least two unsuccessful candidates for county elections in 1980 are quoted (pp 42-43), but as none of the contributors to this publication are identified they cannot be traced.

councillors with whom I shared the council chamber as this could be embarrassing for them, and might well provide information that was influenced by politeness or a reluctance to be completely candid. Other male councillors were, however, curiously unwilling to participate. Of the eight contacted only one agreed to talk to me.²⁶ This places me at risk of doubly compromising this aspect. First, I am including views from only one male councillor alongside those from 33 females, and second, it leaves me with the dilemma of choosing between using a single sample or nothing. Therefore I have been very judicious in the use of the male perspective. I have tried to overcome this to some extent by use of another male perspective, that from a member of the New Zealand Dairy Board in the 1980s. The Dairy Board at that time was the most comparable farmer-dominated governing body outside of local government. Dairy Board members (apart from two government appointees) were farmers directly elected by farmers,²⁷ and who had dealings with county councils both as ratepayers on their own farms, and as a body needing to have dealings with counties.²⁸ Interviews with male councillors would have been more directly applicable but, being unable to obtain those, this was be the only way I could achieve a degree of male perspective via a comparison of the county council culture with that of another similarly rurally-driven governing body.

At most county meetings one or more reporters, from the small local papers or 'stringers' for the bigger dailies, sat through the day in the hope of obtaining useful copy. Many of these were the newest, youngest reporters who had to go through this process as part of the rite of passage to better things, and certainly a lot of them moved on as quickly as they could to more interesting material. But I have been able to trace some who not only remember their days as 'county reporter' but also have scrapbooks of stories and columns they wrote at that time. This has provided a view of county meetings that is largely external, and again this perspective has been used to balance the view of the women from whom the majority of the input was obtained, and to test their perspectives against those that have no political or personal affiliations. It must be stated however, that all the reporters who agreed to being

²⁶ I have chosen to keep the identity of the sole male councillor confidential, although he did not request this. Many of his views contrast with those of the women interviewed, and I felt that juxtaposing his statements with those of the sole female on his council adds useful perspective to this study, but in that context could be personally embarrassing for him.

²⁷ The Meat and Wool Boards at that time were elected via an electoral college system, not direct voting by constituents.

²⁸ Typically dairy processing plants are located in rural areas, and construction or renovation required planning permission from the local authority.

interviewed for this project are female; whether this made any difference to their views is impossible to ascertain. I believe that they all acted as professional reporters, and they told it as they saw it, but they did see it from a female perspective.

Chapter six relates some of the more personal stories that came as part of my information gathering, and while these are very individual and anecdotal I have included them without, I hope, compromising academic integrity. When I first made contact with the councillors I was able to trace, I emphasised that my study was in social history, not politics. Many of the women needed clarification as to what this difference means, and I explained that social history is about 'what it was like for people' rather than a record of political manoeuvres and the rationale and repercussions of decisions. Such a large proportion of them responded to my explanation with comments such as "Oh! you want to hear about my toilet debate" or "I must show you my cufflinks!" that I started a file of 'Funny Stories'. As this grew I could not bear to let them languish unseen, and have devoted this chapter to the sort of experiences that made us seek each other out at precious moments when those of us who were sole female councillors had the chance to meet with our colleagues. This happened rarely, at national County Conferences or more often at gatherings of women in local government, and we always leapt at the chance to be able to share dire tales with the only other people who really understood. Even women on urban councils used to wonder at our urgency to get together with a little wine and large amounts of very loud laughter. Those gatherings were acknowledged as therapy, and played a valuable role in restoring battered egos and sanity.

But as well as having a degree of light-hearted, informal content, this chapter encapsulates the invisible side of the experiences of female councillors. The few records of counties that exist are confined almost exclusively to debates and decisions that were part of the public face of county government. As with any group, the public face conceals a wealth of informal activities that sustain both the individuals and the group as a whole. This chapter reveals a little of what was less visible but still significant, particularly for the women involved. It therefore provides valuable additional insights into the realities as they existed for at least some of the female county councillors.

The conclusion summarises the findings and returns to the questions with which I began. Was it different for the county women compared to those on urban

authorities? What were the differences and why did they arise? If gender discrimination was present, was it the norm, and how did female councillors react to it? Did Brian Talboys make an accurate assessment of county government or was he simply finding a way to avoid responding to my father's proud claim without actually stating what might have been a rather unpalatable truth; that county government barely rated in the political hierarchy. Talboys was a man of great warmth and courtesy, I believe his statement carried an element of both.