

## Leadership for the Greater Good: Reflections on Today's Challenges From Around the Globe

# Jacinda Ardern and the Challenges of Leadership



*What can former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership of New Zealand reveal about the complex mix of authenticity, transparency, and masking that all leaders must grapple with? ILA Fellow Suze Wilson explores this question and more.*

- 10 May 2023

Former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has attracted extensive media and public interest ever since becoming leader of the Labour Party, just 7 weeks out from the 2017 election. At the time, Labour's [poll results](#) were their lowest in 20 years. Ardern stepping into the leadership role in such circumstances could quite easily have become yet another instance of the "[glass cliff](#)" phenomena, wherein women are particularly likely to be selected for leadership in contexts where the chances of success are inherently risky and precarious.

Yet from her very [first press conference](#) as Labour leader, Ardern excited and impressed people. Articulate, authoritative, determined, optimistic, and confident, she was also warm, good humoured, and a careful listener. However, these are attributes [commonly expected of leaders](#). Moreover, her policy concerns were ones that are basically *de rigour* for contemporary social democratic parties. Arguably, then, none of those factors really help in explaining why Ardern, a leader of what is a small country of almost no geo-political significance, has gone on to attract the global attention and [praise](#) that she has.

Being only the second woman head of state to [have a child](#) in office made her notable, as did her relative youth. But the respect and admiration she has won pertains principally to her leadership of some notable crises – the [Christchurch terror attacks](#), Whakaari White Island [volcanic explosion](#), and [COVID-19](#).

That said, there's also a wider context that is worth noting. For many people beyond Aotearoa's shores, it seems that Ardern represents a hope of particular relevance to our present moment: namely, that U.S. President Donald Trump's [authoritarian, bullying,](#) and [hubristic](#) approach, comprising frequent displays of [sexism](#), overt hostility toward [migrants](#) and [anti-racism](#) and [climate change](#) initiatives, along with a general disregard for [truth, evidence, and science](#), all of which won over [his followers](#), will not be allowed to set the standard for leadership in the world today. At a time when so many had fallen under his spell, or that of [other populist authoritarians](#), Ardern has often been seen as the antidote, described by Vogue as "[the anti-Trump](#)," offering both inspiration and solace to many that contemporary leadership could indeed reflect and evoke the better angels of our nature.

There is a risk in this of [lionizing Ardern](#) as if she were flawless or omnipotent, switching the "[romance of leadership](#)" dial from hero worship to heroine worship but otherwise maintaining the same [limiting factors](#) that have plagued discussions about leadership for far too long: a too-heavy or even exclusive focus on leader attributes and behaviours; insufficient regard for the influence of

followers; a tendency to ignore contextual factors shaping what is doable and desirable in a given set of circumstances. Clearly, context has played a notable role in Ardern's leadership, not just her skills and character, while it was [resistance](#) from those who refused to follow her that made her job increasingly difficult, contributing to her [decision to resign](#).

Looking back at that first press conference now, it was perhaps the audacity of this young woman leader to project such confidence and, at the same time, to openly laugh about how she had just taken on, in the most difficult of circumstances, what is often called the most difficult job in New Zealand politics – being the leader of the opposition – that created the sense that Ardern was somehow different from most politicians. Her refusal to stoop to personalized attacks on her opponents, her courteous efforts to acknowledge each journalist by name when responding to their questions, and her generous acknowledgement of other people's strengths, however, were also subtle indicators of the value of [kindness](#) that Ardern has so often emphasized. And that *is* something that distinguishes her from many other leaders.

Her performance that first day clearly impressed many in the press gallery, with one key commentator concluding the governing National party [should be scared](#) of the vision for change which she represented. Yet in reflecting on that 7 week period from becoming Labour party leader through to the general election in her recent [valedictory speech](#), Ardern described it as “a cross between a sense of duty to steer a moving freight train and being hit by one.” In that same speech she described herself as a “control freak,” saying she had “spent the better part of my professional life anticipating risk and worrying about it.” She also said that “I leave this place as sensitive as I ever was, prone to dwell on the negative, hating question time so deeply that I would struggle to eat most days beforehand.”

Such comments are intriguing because these inner realities were simply not evident in Ardern's many interviews, press conferences, speeches, or appearances in Parliament. During the [2017 election](#)

[campaign](#), she appeared to be relishing the opportunity that had come her way. During her tenure as PM, she has clearly not presented as an anxious control freak riven with worry and focussing on the negatives of the situation at hand. Indeed quite the opposite – Ardern has often been [masterful](#) in communicating with the public in the most testing of circumstances, conveying confidence, perspective and resilience. Yet Ardern is also often seen as being an “[authentic](#)” leader. So, what’s going on here?

I suggest that at least part of the reason people associate authenticity with Ardern comes from her frequently making the [effort to explain](#) a broad range of considerations that had informed her thinking on a given issue, be that value-based concerns, such as wanting to keep people safe from COVID-19, or the key evidence that informed a particular policy choice. This transparency has given observers the sense that she is being open about her values and motivations, as well as an understanding of how and what she thinks about when making decisions. Both help to form a sense that she is presenting herself to the public in an authentic way and that her actions align with her words.

She has also let the public into her private life in ways that are atypical for a head of state. Having struggled previously to conceive, her unexpected pregnancy only a few months after becoming Prime Minister necessitated her engaging in [public commentary](#) on what was a deeply personal matter. But, in doing so, she highlighted that her experiences were those familiar to many women – morning sickness, for example – and familiar to many families – such as juggling work and child-care responsibilities. During COVID-19 lockdowns, Ardern broadcast from her home in casual wear on [Facebook live](#), articulating key messages in a chatty manner and responding to questions raised by the public. On one occasion she was [interrupted](#) by her daughter who had got out of bed, leading her to ask those on the livestream if they also had toddlers prone to doing the same. Thus, Ardern’s daily life entailed experiences that many people could directly relate to, and that she could talk about very informally. This helped build a sense that her leadership reflected the real Jacinda.

All that said, it's also clear from those comments in her valedictory speech that Ardern is skilled at masking her feelings. She is selective about what she reveals in the public domain. Rather than conclude this means Ardern is inauthentic and untrustworthy, it reminds us just how complex "[authentic leadership](#)" is as an idea, despite its prima facie appeal.

Perhaps, then, Irving Goffman's [dramaturgical lens](#) may offer some help here. Drawing on his ideas, leadership constitutes a "front of stage" role that carries with it certain broadly shared expectations (in his language "scripts"). Hence, to perform that role in ways that others can perceive as appropriate, leaders may be compelled to set aside their own emotional realities, to push them to the "back of the stage," out of public view. At times leaders may therefore be "inauthentic," if you like, because that's what the role demands of them.

As an example, consider Ardern's response to the Christchurch terror attacks. In her very [first public statement](#) about the attack she highlighted that while the victims were likely migrants and perhaps even refugees, "they have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us." In conveying this message of support and legitimate belongingness to members of the Muslim community, Ardern simultaneously sought to elicit a sense of connection to them from all New Zealanders.

Yet while it was her empathy and decisiveness in response to these events that attracted worldwide [praise](#), in an [interview](#) just a few days before her valedictory Ardern revealed that after becoming aware of the terrorist's manifesto shortly after the attack her feeling was one of rage. That she could so quickly channel this into what became a message of compassion and inclusivity, and an urgent review of gun laws, suggests she understood an emotive display of anger from her as leader simply would not serve the greater good and needed to be left backstage.

While Ardern's time as New Zealand's leader has been significantly shaped by influences and events not of her making, her response to those have nonetheless reflected her values and helped to make her the leader she has become. She has been able to push aside personal vulnerabilities and her emotions in order to step up to the responsibilities and expectations of the leader role while, simultaneously, seeking to lead in ways that genuinely reflect who she is. This complex mix of context, chance, competence, and character, of authenticity, transparency, and masking, are challenges that all leaders must grapple with. Ardern's experiences in dealing with these offer a multitude of salutary lessons that are deserving of ongoing attention.



[Dr. Suze Wilson](#) is a leadership scholar and senior lecturer at Massey University, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Her research examines issues of power, identity, gender, ethics, discourse, practice, context and crisis in relation to leadership and its development. Her doctoral

thesis won the 2014 Fredic M. Jablin Doctoral Dissertation Award given by the ILA in partnership with the Jepson School of Leadership Studies. Her work has appeared in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, *Organization*, *Organizational Dynamics*, *Leadership and Culture and Organization*. Suze's books are *Thinking differently about leadership* (2016), *Revitalizing leadership* (2018), written in collaboration with Stephen Cummings, Brad Jackson and Sarah Proctor-Thomson, and *After leadership*, which she edited in collaboration with Brigid Carroll and Josh Firth. She is currently involved in editing the forthcoming *Routledge Critical Companion to Leadership Studies* along with David Knights, Owain Smolovic-Jones and Helena Liu. She is an Associate Editor of the journal *Leadership* and also writes public commentary for *The Conversation*. Prior to entering academia Suze held a range of senior leadership roles in several government agencies, the New Zealand postal service, in a trade union and in the student union movement.

The screenshot shows the ILA website's navigation bar with links for Home, Global Conference, Jobs Board, and Member Login, along with a search bar. A secondary menu includes About, Membership, Events, Webinars, Resources, Books & Journals, Awards, Directory, and Support. The main content area features a teal header with the text "Leadership for the Greater Good: Reflections on Today's Challenges From Around the Globe" and a sub-header "Jacinda Ardern and the Challenges of Leadership". Below this is a portrait of Suze Wilson, a woman with long dark hair, smiling. To the right of the portrait is a text excerpt: "What can former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's leadership of New Zealand reveal about the complex mix of authenticity, transparency, and masking that all leaders must grapple with? ILA Fellow Suze Wilson explores this question and more." Below the text is a date "10 May 2023" and social media share icons for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. On the right side of the page, there is a "Return to Blog Home" link, a "Recent Blogs" section with three items: "How Relationships Fuel the Future", "Leadership Insights for 2025", and "Eight Powerful Words to Empower Global Leadership". At the bottom right, there is a promotional banner for the "27th ILA Global Conference" with the tagline "LEADING TOGETHER", dates "15-18 OCTOBER 2025", location "PRAGUE, CZECHIA", and a "Register Now!" button. The banner also features a graphic of a globe and a cityscape.

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