

# Challenging Patriarchal Amnesia

by Jocelyn Harris

**The Political Years** by Marilyn Waring (Bridget Williams Books, 2019), 376pp, \$39.99

In the interests of full disclosure, I declare that I like and admire Marilyn Waring. Now, after reading *The Political Years* at one gulp, I'm quite simply awestruck by her principles, courage, intelligence, stamina, and saving sense of the ridiculous.

How on earth did she cope with Robert Muldoon? One day, wanting to show my children democracy in action, I took them to Parliament, where the prime minister was jeering and sneering away like a teenager just asking to be sent to his room. I happened to have a large drumhead cabbage in my bag, and my fingers itched to pot him with it. A single, brief exposure and I was ready to snap, but Waring endured him year after wearisome year.

On the black and white cover of *The Political Years* a young woman stands solitary in a phalanx of men, many of them old. A thin red line points to the anomaly. Waring's friends, constituents, correspondents and some of her parliamentary colleagues would be generous in support, but relentless and often vicious pressure came from other MPs, anonymous trolls and the media. The loathsome *New Zealand Truth* even outed her as a lesbian at a time when New Zealand was deeply homophobic. 'Part of me was broken,' she writes, but 'something

reckless was also unleashed in me, and I would use that energy for the issues ahead' (p. 67).

Use that energy she certainly did. In the belief that feminism was broader and more encompassing than party politics, Waring crossed the floor and discussed matters of conscience with Opposition politicians. In her usual prophetic way she urged long-term planning to protect the environment from natural climatic changes and industry, to look at our whole internal transport system, and to recognise that the Pacific would become 'the crux of our foreign policy' (p. 69). And she spoke up passionately for women, arguing in 1976, for instance, that 'when a person is murdered, the murderer is put on trial but when a woman is raped, it is the woman who is put on trial' (p. 61).

Waring always did her homework, recording events and conversations in clippings, letters, notes and diaries that she wasn't supposed to keep. That way she could compare 'what was said and agreed in caucus, and what Muldoon told the media and the public' (p. 78). She also spoke knowledgeably on a dizzying array of topics including 245T, Agent Orange, alternative energy, Bastion Point, divorce, domestic violence, education, employment, homosexuality and the Colin Moyle affair, housing, human rights, land rights, nuclear power, overstayers, parental leave, parliamentary boundaries, parliamentary reform, privatisation, rural depopulation, sales tax, shop trading hours, urban planning, unionism, water, and youth rates. But she was largely ignored. 'Bigoted and anachronistic laws'

were upheld and ‘difficult decisions postponed for another day’, leaving her ‘cynically resigned to hopelessness’ (p. 70).

On women’s health, for instance, the distance between MPs’ understanding and women’s evidence-based research was ‘galactic’, writes Waring (p. 82), especially about abortion. The government was plotting to limit access even further, but she argued that since justice was ‘considerably slower than procreation’, women would find it faster and cheaper to seek out illegal abortionists. Parliament voted late at night, Muldoon could not remember what he had voted for or when, and all of George Gair’s compromise amendments were lost.

Looking back, though no longer in anger, Waring writes that her political autobiography challenges ‘the dominant “history” of the period; it breaks the silence and challenges patriarchal amnesia’ (p. 9). In short, it bears witness. She makes of her ‘visceral memories’ (p. 8) a page-turning and sometimes hilarious narrative, even though her lists of activities would make most people clutch their heads and scream. A list chosen at random reads: ‘visiting pine-forest nurseries, plastics factories, electric-fence manufacturers, retirement villages, rest homes, and the Church of the Latter Day Saints school and village in Tuhikaramea. I went to Geoff Chitty’s bull sale in the Waikaretu Valley’ (p. 29). She kept on top of it all, primed and ready to contribute.

In 1974 Waring had joined National on impulse after Norman Kirk refused to support any legislation that treated homosexuality as ‘normal behaviour’. Though introduced at the Raglan selection

meeting as the ‘wonderful candidate Marilyn Monroe’ (p. 30), she won the seat handsomely. The *New Zealand Woman’s Weekly*, unable to abandon its stereotypical thinking, described her as a ‘girl, brown-eyed, honey-blonde’, with ‘a mischievous giggle’. Even when talking ‘earnestly on a subject close to her heart, Marilyn’s voice is scarcely raised. She is a lot gentler, prettier than newspaper articles and photographs have indicated’ (p. 54). Waring was both Muldoon’s youth card and his token woman. ‘I wanted a woman,’ said he, ‘and I will help all I can’ (p. 19). It didn’t last.

Photographs illustrate some of Waring’s most urgent concerns—carrying a box of petitions asking for reform of the abortion laws up the steps of Parliament; moving a plaque commemorating 75 years of women’s suffrage from a back corridor to a more prominent location; joining protesters at the Hamilton game of the 1981 Springbok tour; and leaving her office on 13 June 1984 for the debating chamber, where she would cross the floor on Richard Prebble’s Nuclear Free New Zealand Bill.

Waring tells a riveting inside story about the Bill. Although it had already gained a majority, Muldoon stopped it from going to Executive Council to be signed by the governor-general. For Waring, as for Opposition MPs Helen Clark, Wallace Rowling and Jonathan Hunt, that was an appalling threat to democracy, but the Speaker shut her out of the debate. With the National Party holding a majority of one, resignation was not an option. Instead, she withdrew from caucus and all her committees.

‘Just what do you think you are up to now, you perverted little liar?’ demanded Muldoon, swilling down glass after glass of brandy and ginger. ‘If you say that again outside the room I will sue the shit out of you,’ returned Waring, munching on an apple. Muldoon accused her of lying, of being ‘just after headlines to please her lefty feminist friends’ (pp. 341–42), then announced a snap election in his infamous drunken press conference. Waring refused to accept the blame, thinking to herself, ‘You will have to fight on your lousy leadership, poor economic management, and abusive personality’ (p. 343). Labour won, and the Nuclear Free New Zealand Bill passed into law.

The grind eventually drove Waring to the limit. Being part of the party under Muldoon was ‘extremely dark’ (p. 233), she writes, especially in the ‘very crazy period’ of the 1981 rugby tour when ‘hypocrisies, lies and double standards were all in evidence as we engaged the nightmare’ (p. 245). She swam and she ran and she knitted furiously, but the stress brought on weeping and vomiting. Ashamed and despairing about her enforced complicity with the government’s abuse of foreign leaders, its public release of SIS information about protesters and its ‘breath-taking lack of integrity and principle in the name of holding a few rural seats’ (p. 251), she held her public and private lives together until the day the vacuum cleaner broke down, then she slumped to the floor, back to the wall, unable to move. Luckily, her GP happened to come by and sent her to a private hospital for a rest. Waring’s dreams of

raising goats on a paradisaal farm became more and more vivid, and she handed in her resignation.

Outside New Zealand Waring’s reputation grew exponentially, and in 1980 she received a standing ovation in Copenhagen for speaking feminism in New Zealand’s name at a UN Conference on Women. Long before the word ‘intersectionality’ was invented, she explained how women were oppressed in multiple, overlapping ways. On a fellowship to Harvard in 1981 she relished conversations with like-minded people, and in 1984 she published her hugely influential economic treatise *Counting for Nothing*. Here she explained that to measure success by the Gross National Product is to overlook the trillion-dollar contribution of unpaid workers such as mothers, rural women, caregivers and volunteers. More than three decades later our current government is busily replacing the GDP with more inclusive indicators.

As Waring once said, ‘It was unfortunate that I was elected to Parliament with a mind, and I’m going to use it, but it doesn’t make people happy’ (p. 325). Muldoon tried to break her spirit and wear her down, but as a constitutional commentator explained, the role of caucus is ‘to challenge Prime Ministers to think again. There is no other body to provide such a check on the political executive.’ Marilyn Waring, the ‘conscientious and competent’ back-bencher, ‘understood this and acted on it’, he said (p. 323). That was the job she was elected to do, and she did it. Some youth card, some token woman.