FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 19.10.2020 | Damien Cave

Jacinda Ardern, hero to liberals abroad, is validated at home

New Zealand's PM is coasting to victory in national elections. But it's unclear how far she will push her progressive promises

Her face has graced magazine covers all over the world. Her leadership style has been studied by Harvard scholars. Her science-and-solidarity approach to the coronavirus has drawn legions of fans in other countries who write to say, 'I wish you were here.'

The global left (along with a chunk of the centre) has fallen hard for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand, giving her a prodigious presence for a leader who manages a smaller population than many mayors do. Now her country's voters have come around as well.

On Saturday, Ms Ardern, 40, was well on her way to a second term. With most of the votes counted, her Labour Party was projected to win a clear majority in Parliament, with around 64 of 120 seats and 49 per cent of the vote — its strongest showing by far since New Zealand overhauled its electoral system in the mid-1990s.

Riding a wave of support for her 'go hard, go early' response to the coronavirus, which has effectively been stamped out in the country, Ms Ardern has now cemented her position as New Zealand's most popular prime minister in generations, if not ever.

'We will govern as we campaigned — positively,' Ms Ardern said in her acceptance speech in Auckland Saturday night, adding: 'We will build back better from the Covid crisis. This is our opportunity.'

The sizable win reflects a rapid rise to political stardom.

The rise of Jacinda Ardern

Three years ago, Ms Ardern was a last-minute choice to lead the Labour

Party, and in her first term she often struggled to fulfil her progressive promises like making housing more affordable, eliminating child poverty and attacking climate change.

But after managing the responses to the Christchurch terrorist attacks, the White Island volcano eruption and a pandemic — not to mention the birth of her first child — she has become a global standard-bearer for a progressive politics that defines itself as compassionate and competent in crisis.

'The anti-Trump?' That's what Vogue called her. 'Saint Jacinda?' That one comes from the usually staid Financial Times, while a New York Times editorial last year carried the headline 'America Deserves a Leader as Good as Jacinda Ardern.'

In New Zealand — a small-c conservative or small-c centre kind of country where the love for Ms Ardern had generally lagged behind her profile abroad — she now has a mandate more in line with her international adoration. If Labour gains at least 50 per cent of the vote, it will be the first time since 1951 that a party has won an outright majority in New Zealand.

What's unknown is whether that will help deliver the major policy successes that have eluded her.

How progressive is Ms Ardern?

'She has significant political capital,' said Jennifer Curtin, the director of the Public Policy Institute at the University of Auckland. 'She's going to have to fulfil her promises with more substance.'

Ms Ardern has said little about her legislative plans. She won primarily with a pandemic-fuelled surge in support, as New Zealand recently declared community transmission of the coronavirus eliminated for a second time.

The remote Pacific Island nation of five million people, which has tallied only 25 coronavirus deaths, now looks and feels mostly normal: A recent rugby match between Australia and New Zealand in Wellington, the capital, drew 30,000 fans.

Given such progress when other countries are seeing coronavirus cases increase, Ms Ardern sailed through her campaign with the slogan 'Let's keep moving.'

In a parliamentary democracy like New Zealand's, legislation can move quickly, which means the success or failure of new policies will fall squarely on her shoulders.

Her opponent, Judith Collins, a lawyer and member of the centre-right National Party, tried to dent her credibility by arguing that the virus had re-emerged in August on Ms Ardern's watch because of some kind of breach in protocol at the border or at a quarantine facility.

At a handful of debates, Ms Collins sought to portray Ms Ardern as untrustworthy, more shine than steady leader. In the final days of the race, she labelled the prime minister a liar.

'She told us on June 23 everybody was being tested. What a lie,' Ms Collins said at a campaign event this week. 'When she said she went hard and fast, she went slow and pathetic. And she lied to us about what was happening.'

Coronavirus Schools Briefing: It's back to school — or is it?

A reformist rather than a radical

Polls showed that Ms Collins never gained much traction with lines of attack like these.

But even as Ms Ardern glided to another term, her next government will confront an unfamiliar set of challenges.

New Zealanders have historically liked their politics down the middle. Coalition governments are the norm, and Ms Ardern's first term was marked by a partnership with the populist, centre-right New Zealand First Party, which was projected to win no seats this time around.

Now Labour will be able to govern on its own with the support of the Greens (they were projected to win around 10 seats) and the Maori Party (one seat), giving her more leeway to move left. The core decision that Ms Ardern faces is how far to push, with which proposals, at a time when the economy is still threatened by the pandemic.

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'If you can't blame the minor party for putting the hand brake on, then

you better make sure you deliver,' said Richard Shaw, a politics professor at Massey University in Palmerston North.

One option would be to abandon her usual preference for consensus and reach as far and fast as possible. The more likely choice, observers say, is that she will recognize that she won in part with center-right voters, and will linger in the center as she angles for a third or fourth term — a Labour dynasty.

At her core, Professor Curtin said, 'she's a reformist rather than a radical.'

An elusive political programme

Morgan Godfery, a writer and commentator who specializes in political issues affecting the Indigenous Maori people, said Ms Ardern reflected the political environment from which she arose.

'The Labour Party is something of a contradiction at the moment, because they are more popular than at any point since the 1940s, but they are more cautious,' he said. 'They don't seem quite sure on how they're going to use that popularity. There's very little new thinking on housing, tax, Maori issues.'

During the campaign, Ms Ardern ruled out a wealth tax favoured by the Greens, which would require individuals with wealth of more than 1 million New Zealand dollars, or about USD 665,000, to pay 1 per cent above that threshold as tax. Those whose wealth exceeds 2 million dollars would pay 2 per cent.

Oliver Hartwich, executive director of the New Zealand Initiative, a centre-right think tank, said Ms Ardern had been a more effective communicator than policy strategist.

Asked for one new idea to stimulate the post-pandemic economy during the second debate in late September, she provided a conventional response.

'Invest in our people,' she said. 'Make apprenticeships free. Make vocational training free. Get them into vocational jobs that grow the economy.'

Professor Curtin said that in many ways Ms Ardern's response to the

pandemic's economic impact — emphasising infrastructure, small businesses and exporters — reflected traditional thinking that overlooked industries, such as health care and child care, that could do more for the economy and encourage greater equality.

'She's said she's a feminist,' Professor Curtin said, 'but she's been careful and perhaps a little too slow in addressing the material well-being of many women in New Zealand, particularly poorer women or older women.'

A good communicator

Oliver Hartwich, executive director of the New Zealand Initiative, a centre-right think tank, said Ms Ardern had been a more effective communicator than policy strategist.

'When it comes to P.R., when it comes to her daily press conference in the Covid crisis — taking the people along and explaining what she wants to do and what she wants to achieve, there's no one who comes even close to what Jacinda does. She's phenomenal and a genuine talent,' Mr Hartwich said.

'Where she's not good,' he added, 'is on the details of policy, on the details of strategy, of execution, of implementation, of evaluations, of all the normal things that come along with government.'

For many voters this week, though, Ms Ardern's clear skills in managing crises were more than enough.

Steph Cole, 58, a motel owner in Hamilton, said she usually cast her ballot for the National Party. She voted Labour for the first time, she said, after seeing how Ms Ardern handled the Christchurch attacks and the pandemic, unifying the country in times of life and death.

'I just think Jacinda Ardern epitomises everything a good leader should be,' Ms Cole said.

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