



jeanette Fitzsimons



If Jeanette Fitzsimons is getting tired, she's certainly not showing it. After almost four decades of political organising, the former Greens Co-leader has the finish line in sight and has said publicly that she plans to retire before the next election. Yet she remains as committed as ever to the principles she has fought for both inside the House and in the community!

Hers has been, and remains, an inspirational and selfless political and Parliamentary career with what she calls "the only movement that can ensure the survival of humanity," and when Jeanette says it like that, you can only believe her.

Party politics wasn't always Jeanette's calling. In fact university life swirled more with classical music, languages and history than with student activism. However, that's not to say politics was completely off the agenda.

"If politics is about human affairs, then I guess my interest in it started from a very young age," she says. "However, it wasn't until I travelled through places such as India, the Congo and South East Asia that I started to blend an intellectual understanding with first hand experience. That was the key."

It was in Geneva, in the early 1970s, that a long time concern for massive social injustice especially between nations came together with insights into the destruction

of the natural world through such seminal environmental works as *The Limits to Growth* and *Silent Spring*. From this point, Jeanette determined it must be possible to do more than what she terms "smoothing the pillow of a dying planet".

It was about then that a young Jeanette Fitzsimons stood in her kitchen in Geneva reading an article on a small but growing political movement in New Zealand called The Values Party, and it was the spark required to ignite her political involvement.

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"I just remember being massively excited reading about the launch of the Values Party," she recalls. "All of a sudden I realised that in my own country there were others who thought like I did! I had disliked intensely the old models of party politics which were nothing more than two sides of the same coin, both of which stood for maximum destruction of the natural environment."

Returning home in 1974, Jeanette joined the Values Party and embarked on a period filled with what she remembers as "wonderful policy discussions". Terms like 'sustainability' were coined by the Party to link its thinking on population, land, capital and energy. Jeanette, in fact, was the Party's energy spokesperson until 1982 by which time she was also teaching at the University of Auckland's Planning Department.

"I came back to participate and this period was an intellectual experience that for me

has not been equalled since," she says. Despite widespread support, the Values Party's inability to enter Parliament saw it fade away. Jeanette meanwhile continued to teach sustainable planning and work with environmental groups, and it wasn't long before the Green movement began to build.

"The Greens emerged as a local government force toward the end of the eighties and then national networking became a priority leading into the 1990 election," she says. "Harry [husband and rock] and my son Mark both stood for the Greens that year but I was happy to work behind the scenes."

Not for long. Seven years later Jeanette became the first Green MP (under the Alliance banner) to speak in the New Zealand Parliament, and she laughs when she thinks about the experience.

"We got elected in October but Winston [Peters] made sure that Parliament only convened in February so for four months I was consumed with what I was going to say," says Jeanette. "Greens had been waiting for that moment since 1972 and I was so weighed down by it, I forgot to enjoy summer!"

In Parliament, alongside the late Rod

Donald, Jeanette recalls being ridiculed for the issues they were raising: "We realised it was the first time these things had been brought up in the House. We couldn't believe it!" she says.

"Sometimes you wonder, when the world is moving toward an acknowledgement of all the issues we have highlighted, why do people still feel compelled to say 'Mind you I'm not a Greenie'?" she questions.

"Perhaps it's because we've never acceded to populism and green-wash. We've always been real. That said, I'm infinitely proud of what we've achieved as it's been through a mix of integrity, influence and good ideas. In that respect the Green Party is in good shape and this great bunch of people will keep on promoting solutions to get us all out of this mess."

Now that the Co-leadership has been passed on, Jeanette reckons Harry will be happy to have a bit more help on the farm, and the grandchildren will be getting a lot more attention. But don't think for a second she's finished.

"I can't cope with the concept of retirement as there's still so much left to do," she insists. "The question now is 'what is the next step for sustainability?' The job is far from over."

And, by the sound of it, when one of the most respected political careers in New Zealand history comes to the finish line before the next election, well, that will be the start line for another adventure.



Photo: Sadie Curlett

Date of birth: 17 January 1945

Family: Married to Harry Parke, two sons Mark (39) Jeremy (36) one grandson Jasper (4) grand-daughter Isabella (18 months)

Hobbies: Tramping, kayaking, farming/gardening, music, grandchildren

Favourite NZ animal or bird:

Tuatara, because they have learned to de-stress and get some work/life balance

Favourite movie: *Whalerider*

Favourite novel: *Quicksilver* by Neal Stephenson, and its two sequels

Music I play on Saturday mornings: Bach and Pink Floyd

My never-fail recipe: Go down to the garden, pick whatever looks best and cook lightly

Greatest sporting achievement: Aged 9, celebrated not coming last for the first time in school running races

Year entered Parliament: 1996

Green Spokesperson for: Energy, Transport, Climate Change, Science, Agriculture, Sustainable Economics

First political action: Overcoming my fear of public speaking to debate a university professor on nuclear power, 1976

Most embarrassing political moment: I don't do 'embarrassed' — if I did, I'd have quit long ago

Proudest political moment: Winning Coromandel in 1999, and 5.3% of the party vote against all predictions

Hero: Petra Kelly, German Greens