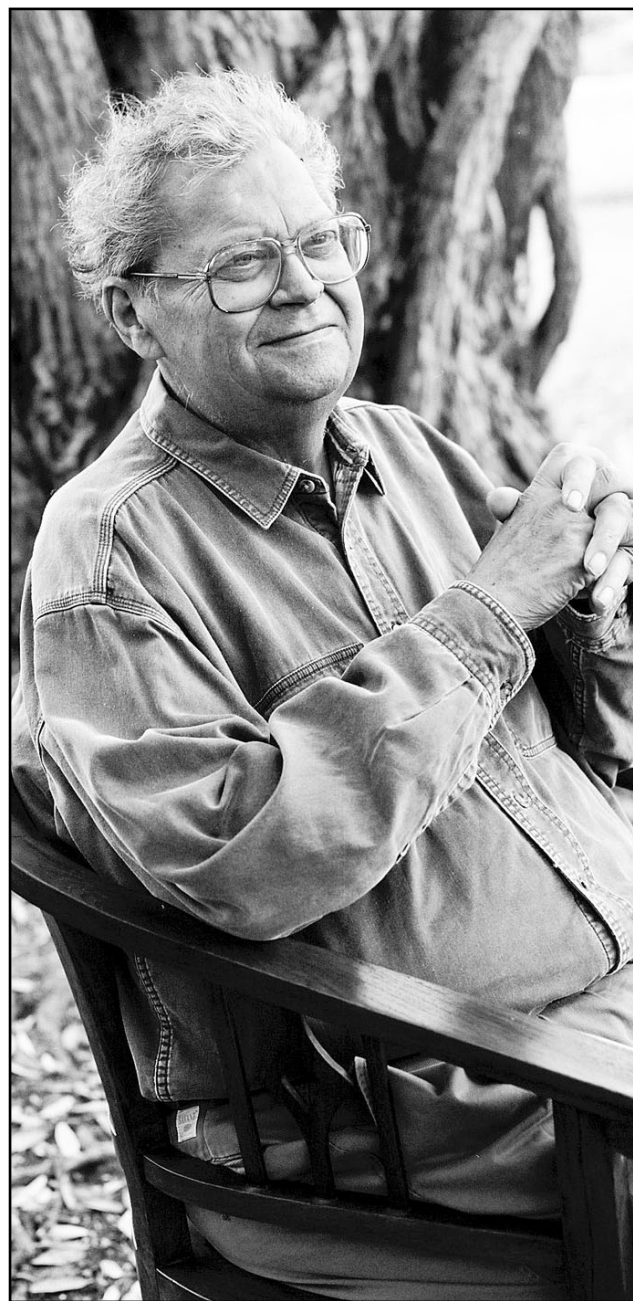


# Mourning for Reagan and Lange

PHOTO: GULF NEWS



**DAVID LANGE: One of our country's greatest and most committed leaders.**

Now that the heat of the election and its aftermath have begun to subside, it seems appropriate to reflect on one of its less obvious casualties. The passing of David Lange in August brought an oddly muted response from New Zealand as a whole. For a man who was a two-term Prime Minister during New Zealand's troubled but necessary puberty, the reaction was decidedly low-key. Granted, there was an election campaign under way and both sides were necessarily wary of politicising the issue. But contrast this with the flood of grief that Ronald Reagan's death precipitated last year and our restraint seems a little excessive.

Apart from the noise their departure generated, the similarities are striking. Each was an iconic two-term leader and has come to symbolise what was grand and god-awful about politics in the 1980s. Both were divisive, loved passionately and almost unreservedly by their supporters and similarly maligned by their detractors.

Each ushered in an era of foreign policy which saw the country increasingly isolated internationally but which was wildly popular on the home front. Each was lauded more for their communication skills than their political savvy. Each cast a shadow so great that their party only survived one further term in power before slipping away. Each passed away during a campaign with their former party fighting for survival.

Yet when Ronald Reagan finally succumbed to his own health demons on June 5, 2004, the United States was plunged into deep and almost gratuitous mourning. The following week saw his deeds raised to almost mythic level, the Morning in America era almost overtook the 1950s as the period middle (read: white) America most reveres.

Republican Senator Mitch McConnell from Kentucky sponsored a bill aimed at having him usurp Alexander Hamilton on the \$10 bill. More than 200,000 mourners passed by his coffin. During what has come to be known as Reagan Week — the seven days between his death and state funeral — organs as rigorous as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* each ran more than 100 Reagan-related items. In the broadcast media this looks rather restrained, by comparison, with CNN topping out at 180 separate items.

By contrast, state broadcaster National Radio ran a miserly hour on Lange the Monday following his death, before getting back to sports round-ups and cooking shows. Just 2000 attended his public memorial service, held at an inaccessible tent in an industrial area, and our media seemed almost at pains to emphasise the "flawed" over the "genius". Even the international media failed to pick up on the story in any meaningful way.

There are significant differences between the two events. The President's place in American society far exceeds that of New Zealand's prime



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minister, and Lange, for all his charisma, could never match the Californian B-movie king for bravura tear-jerking performances. Our election was that much closer than the American equivalent and New Zealand is a far more austere nation, unwilling to be seen to publicly fawn in the way America feels compelled to. In addition, with the exception of Nixon's blighted demise, America hasn't had a former president die since Lyndon Johnson. So it hadn't had the opportunity to have an unencumbered public outpouring in more than three decades.

All the same, New Zealand's response seemed excessively subdued. Will our oft-cited "tall poppy syndrome" not allow us to acknowledge greatness in an area as contentious as politics?

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In spite of all the arguments regarding the reforms which were made on his watch, his occasionally unpleasant remarks or any other personal failings, he will surely be remembered as one of our finest leaders. He gave us a sense of autonomy and nationhood which remain to this day and, however contentiously, saved us from the chasm Muldoon had all too obdurately prepared for the country. The manner in which he consistently and selflessly served

his working class constituency in South Auckland, well beyond the call of duty or the years he represented it as an MP, mark him as a humanist of rare quality.

It seems churlish to demand that a nation "grieve more convincingly", but there was something a little hollow and glossy about our reaction to his demise. Perhaps it was the timing, or the stinging remarks that had emerged from his autobiography, *My Life*, just weeks earlier.

Regardless, he deserved better. To lead during such a turbulent time is never easy; many would have failed abysmally under such stress, but aside from his isolation late in his second term, he performed admirably throughout. While no one is suggesting that we need to match the American excess, we definitely seemed a little too restrained in our response to the passing of a man who, for all his much-vaunted flaws, showed an intelligence, zeal and compassion that too few modern leaders strive for, much less possess.

Sometimes the wishes of one individual for privacy are over-ridden by public responsibility. A life like his needs celebrating and acknowledging when it comes to a close. New Zealand did too little of either. Perhaps time will raise his stature and put his minor miscalculations in their proper perspective. As it stands now it seems that our nation barely flinched when one of its greatest, most committed leaders passed on.

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## Top performance critical to new party's survival

In one of his frequent moments of despondent reflection, Oliver Cromwell wrote a cautionary note to himself in the 1650s:

"Do not trust the cheering, for those persons would shout as much if you or I were going to be hanged".

Being an apolitical animal, such an observation was particularly germane for Cromwell's experiences in the 1640s and 1650s. When he killed the King — one of the high points of his rule — he discovered the previous support he enjoyed evaporating, to be quickly replaced by bitter factionalism.

There is a lesson in Cromwell's adage that could be taken to heart by the new crop of Maori Party MPs. They have entered Parliament on the crest of a large wave of Maori opposi-

tion to the previous Labour Government's ambiguous foreshore and seabed legislation.

However, the cheers of support could well become shouts of derision if the Maori Party fails to deliver to its constituents in four key areas. These are the return of sizeable control of the foreshore and seabed to hapu and iwi; the Waitangi Tribunal strengthened; the Maori seats entrenched; and an end to the mainstreaming of health and education. The party has formulated numerous other policies, but it's on these four areas constituents will be focused.

Failure to make significant changes in these areas would be sufficient to trigger a slide by many Maori voters back to Labour in the next general elec-

tion. Mana Motuhake and Mauri Pacific were two parties which promised to represent Maori interests. Only for Maori to revert back to Labour when the promises were not realised.

For the Maori Party to break this pattern of voters returning to Labour, it needs to do two fundamental things: change key legislation and find out why many Maori find solace with Labour.

The answer may be that Labour offers history, what one Labour Maori MP defined as a "political whakapapa". It is a party with a tradition for many Maori, in some instances it has almost been grafted on to modern Maori culture. By contrast, the Maori party may be good for a flirtation but there is no

shared history, so they are easily abandoned by their supporters.

Looking at how votes were cast in the Maori seats, four of the seven seats returned Maori Party candidates. But in the party vote all seven seats had clear Labour majorities. If nothing else, this suggests that the umbilical cord connecting so many Maori voters to Labour has yet to be severed.

The fact that the Maori Party was unable to garner a majority of party votes from those on the Maori roll or the roughly 200,000 Maori on the general roll, should be a cause for some contemplation in the coming months.

**The cheers of support could well become shouts of derision if the Maori Party fails.**



Paul Moon

Another challenge facing the Maori Party is with its parliamentary line-up. There are divergent personalities and differing ideologies, which have already shown flickers that could ignite terminal clashes within the party.

Even on the most fundamental of all issues — the primacy of parliament — at least one member-elect for the Maori Party has expressed their reluctance to accept that there can only be one legislative authority in the country. With publicly-stated opinions such as this, the processes by which the Maori Party maintains internal discipline will be critical to its credibility in the next Parliament and even more so for its longer-term survival.

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