



# Grant Gillon

Grant has broad experience and knowledge as a long-time resident of the North Shore, as a businessman, as a highly qualified academic, as a member of Parliament, and as a local government representative. He has an appreciation of the conditions and dynamics that build community, and is very advanced in his goal to do as much as possible to support strong community development on the North Shore.

Grant's working life began in 1974, as a 'rookie' fireman at the Ellerslie fire station; he trained at the Mt Wellington Panmure training centre. During his 14 years with the Fire Service he achieved a number of public policy qualifications; he rose through the officer ranks and became a trainer, and then a lecturer at AUT in emergency management in 2013.

Born in 1954 in Auckland at National Women's Hospital, his first home was at Bucklands Beach. When he was four years old the family moved to Bayswater, and the Shore has largely been home for Grant ever since.

*I arrived in Bayswater before the Harbour Bridge, and grew up in a very wonderful part of the world. It was a place full of kids. We all played together, grew up together, went to school together, went to church together. It was a recreational wonderland. We played down at Pullan's Beach in the rock pools and the mudflats and the boating club, swam off the boating club [wharf] and fished off the old Bayswater wharf, which is now quite changed. We built trolleys and*

*had trolley races down the hills on Norwood Road. We went out onto the shell banks. They were the days before television.*

Grant's mother, Joan, was a *stay-at-home mum* for Grant and his two siblings in the early years, but she later completed an accounting qualification and went to work. Grant's father, Paul, was a general manager for HC Kitchen Ltd, and went on to manage the building supplies company on the Shore. The company was originally where the old tram barn was behind Woolworths in Takapuna (now the car park), and then in Northcross Street. The site eventually became home to The Warehouse and, more recently, The Baby Factory.

Grant was educated at Bayswater Primary, Belmont Intermediate, and then Westlake Boys High School, before moving to Takapuna Grammar. He has always been interested in politics and social issues. At school he was part of the politics club led by 'Chalky' Chairman, a teacher well-known by many from that era at Takapuna Grammar in the early 1970s. *We all went to his house,*





*Grant (right) and colleague, operating the Jaws of Life, used to pry apart wreckage of crashed vehicles in order to free trapped people, 1978*

*in Eversleigh Road, on a Friday afternoon and debated politics, but it was an informal, round-the-couch sort of discussion. I was interested in politics, even back then.*

Grant's parents were also interested in politics; they met at a Young Nationals dance. They participated in community groups and organisations, such as St Michael's Church in Bayswater, Rotary, and the Belmont Primary School committee, so community participation was not unfamiliar to Grant. *I like to get out there and see what's going on.*

Grant met Kirsty at Takapuna Grammar and they were married within a few years. They first lived in Milford before

moving to Glenfield, where they raised their family. *When we first got married we rented a flat in Milford up above a fish and chip shop, opposite Surfside, as it was then, and Milford Marina. That's now become the mall. There was a lot more communal social activity around then. Those big dances and big pubs had a lot of negatives about them, but they also brought a lot of people together in the community.*

Grant has always admired people who knew what they wanted to do in life from an early age and set out to get it. He followed in their footsteps, as his work, his community building, and his broader life story show. *I set out to do as much as I could in a variety*

*of different ways, and it's still my goal. I don't want to sit on the couch with a rug over my knees and the slippers on my feet and say, 'I wish I'd done that.'*

He was in his 20s when he joined the New Zealand Fire Service, and loved the mix of physical and intellectual testing that it provided. He recalls having to gain substantial technical knowledge about fires and fire-fighting. *I had to come to grips a lot with science and maths in a way that I tried to avoid at school, things like hydraulics, and engineering, and pressures, measuring heights and angles. All of that is very important.*

Grant faced his share of personal risk when dealing with the aftermath of accidents, the victims of fire, and even murder. *I remember being in a burning shoe factory in Ellerslie, because it was all pitch black. It's not like the movies where the flames light everything up; it's actually very smoky and dark, and you're wearing a breathing apparatus which fogs up. The fire had burnt away part of the floor, and when I stood on it, it collapsed. So I reached out and grabbed something to stop myself falling through the floor, and then saw that what I grabbed was a cylinder that was hissing away in the fire. Two of my mates came along and each grabbed a shoulder and lifted me out, and off we went.*

In the late 1980s, an injury forced Grant to leave the Fire Service. The family moved to a 200-acre dairy block on the Kaipara Harbour, just outside Wellsford, which they later increased to 300 acres. He and Kirsty ran the farm with help from their children, and although it was hard work and long hours, they *absolutely loved it.*

During those years Grant learned a lot about the financial and social costs of farming. Interest rates on mortgages were punishing, at 16 to 18 per cent, with some even higher. He noted the effects of government policy and service changes, like the closure of rural hospitals, post offices and banks, and how these

impacted negatively on farming families and the towns that relied on them. He saw how stresses developed in the community, and how unemployment and suicides increased. Grant recognised the desperation of farmers, their lives locked into their work, lifestyle and financial commitments. *It's their home and their work. They were captive to the wishes of the bosses and the dairy companies, and I saw often it was very one way with the dairy companies and Fonterra. We left before Fonterra was formed, but I suspect the corporate environment is a lot harder on the farmers now than it was then.*

The family left the farm in the early 1990s, and Grant and Kirsty then established, and ran, a number of businesses. Grant says that his form of recreation is to run a business, which he thrives on. *I started a business when I was in the fire brigade because we had some days off and I got bored sitting around.* Included in these were a printing and publishing company, Grant Gillon Publications, Highbury Quick Print, Pupuke Aquariums, and a light manufacturing company. Chocolate Heaven, a well-known shop in Takapuna for many years from the early 1990s, was another business they established after their return to the North Shore. Grant and Kirsty currently manage the historic Esplanade Hotel in Devonport.

Grant cites his experience of farming, and his insights into the hardships of rural communities, as one of the key reasons he formally entered politics. He had also been involved in employment relations when he was in the Fire Service, and became president of the Auckland branch of the Fire Fighters Union in 1989. That was the beginning of his active role in politics.

Grant first joined the Democratic Party, formerly called Social Credit. Then, in 1996, he was elected as an Alliance list MP for Glenfield and served for two terms until 2002. One term was in opposition and the other in a coalition government with the Labour Party. He sat on a number of Parliamentary committees,

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including the MMP review committee. *I always thought that MMP would be the defence against a strong government or strong executive, but in the end it hasn't proven that. If you think of the defences that other countries have, it's either a written constitution that is overseen by a supreme court or an upper house, or a strong head of state. We don't have any of those. We don't have a written constitution. We don't have a strong head of state. The head of state is only allowed to assent to legislation but not allowed to dissent.* While in Parliament, Grant studied public and social policy at Massey University and eventually graduated with a PhD in Public Policy in 2008.

In 2007, Grant followed in his daughter Paula's footsteps as a councillor for North Shore City. Paula was 18 years old when she was elected, and served one term before leaving for the UK. She also served on the local community board, and the Birkenhead Licensing Trust. *She used to come to political meetings with me. I remember a lot of the other little kiddies would run round making a nuisance of themselves, but she would sit there and listen. She understood what was being said in the speeches. Very perceptive. It gave her good training.*

Grant stood in the local body elections and was elected to North Shore City Council, serving from 2008 to 2010. *I was representing the Kaipatiki area, Glenfield, Northcote and Birkenhead. I was also on two community boards, so it became a natural progression to stand for the newly formed Kaipatiki Board.* Grant's son, John, is also a member of the Kaipatiki Local Board.

Grant now serves on two local boards: the Devonport-Takapuna Local Board, and the Kaipatiki Local Board. *I had always had strong associations with a wide range of North Shore communities. And so, when the amalgamated Auckland Council came in and put an artificial divide of the motorway between communities, I found myself in the position of having strongly advocated for some special projects in the Devonport-Takapuna area that I was then cut*

*off from. But also, I had projects in the Kaipatiki area that I felt very strongly about as well.*

He is involved with a number of projects that originated within the old North Shore City Council, such as the Devonport Library, the Marine Square Project in Devonport turning the old naval barracks at Takapuna Point into community spaces, the Northcote Town Centre redevelopment, Birkenhead Town Centre redevelopment, and Le Roys Bush outlook in the centre of Birkenhead. *We have strong heritage communities, we have other areas that are more economically deprived and need more resources put into them. The communities are quite different so they have different needs. There is probably more of a business focus need and a beach focus in Takapuna, but Kaipatiki has a lot of resource in the native bush and the people associate themselves closely with the bush, so we have put a lot of work into developing tracks through those bush areas.*

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Grant has his own views on the role of council supporting and working alongside communities.

He stresses the need for local government not to control the community development process, but to listen to the needs of the community, and to appreciate the knowledge of those who work at the grassroots.

*All our projects should have a community development sense about them. We talk about community development a lot in council, but development has really become a bit of a catch-cry and in effect council wants to control communities. They talk about community development almost as camouflage for the actions of controlling the community. It's very much controlled, down to designing a particular seat outside a shop. They say that's community development because the community has been involved, but actually all they have done is get feedback on putting a seat somewhere. So it's all in the language.*



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