



Jenny Kirk

Jenny's political work as a Member of Parliament and North Shore City councillor has been focused on community building, as seen through the lens of feminism. Enhancing the role and position of women in society has been a great driver for her, but she has also been involved in issues of wider concern in the community, such as the establishment of a community house in Northcote and Awataha Marae.

Born in Mount Albert in 1945, when she was five years old Jenny's family moved to Glenfield on the North Shore. Jenny recalls seeing the Auckland Harbour Bridge being built in the 1950s, and in May 1959 walked across the bridge with her family, and thousands of other Aucklanders, before it was opened to vehicles.

After a short time at Birkenhead School, Jenny attended Glenfield School, which was at the time a small, two-teacher school. Northcote Intermediate was next, and then Jenny was in the second founding year of Westlake High School. *That was a boys and girls school at the time, but four years later, I think, they built the boys' school up on the hill and turned Westlake into Westlake Girls' High School.* After leaving school she then attended Auckland Business College in Hobson Street. She does not recall why she took the secretarial course there, but thinks it was because career opportunities for young women were so limited in those days.

Jenny married at 21 and she and her husband lived in Pakuranga from 1967 to 1970, before emigrating to Australia, where they

lived for four years. When they returned they lived in Hastings with their two sons, then returned to Auckland and bought a house in Northcote.

During her time in Hastings, Jenny joined the National Organisation for Women (NOW) and, with other members, visited local groups, such as Plunket and Playcentre, to speak about women's liberation. She recalls being astounded that self-employed members of NOW still had to get a male relative's signature for anything to do with their business. The underlying sexism was slow to change.

Although she loved her children, and being a mum, Jenny found that being at home all the time was unsatisfying. A friend suggested she attend a few night classes, which she did, including a creative writing class taught by Gordon MacLauchlan. She was also involved with Playcentre and the Sunnybrae School Parent Teacher Association. However, it was during this time, in the early 1970s, that Jenny began to think about women's liberation and feminism.

It started in Brisbane, as a matter of fact. I joined a women's debating club, not that I was very good at it, but we did have some good discussions. We came home from Australia just in time for the 1973 United Women's Convention in Auckland that Sandra Coney and a number of her friends organised. Another was held in 1975 in Wellington, and there were others in Christchurch and Hamilton. For a lot of women of my generation, the women's conventions were a pivotal point in developing our thinking. Well, what are you going to do with the rest of your life? As well as looking after the children, having a garden, etc.

It was the International Women's Year in 1975, and Jenny recalls discussions at the women's conventions that if women wanted to change society, they would have to do it politically. *Sandra Coney actually started a Women's Party. They stood candidates in one election.* Jenny recalls that many women stood in the local government elections that year and many were elected. It was a stirring, she says, of women thinking, *'Well, I'm part of this country, I'm part of this district and I'm part of this area and perhaps I should be having a part in saying what goes on.'* It was around this time that Jenny met Jean Sampson, who had been elected to the Northcote Borough Council in 1975, and who was later mayor of Northcote from 1979 to 1984.

It was an exciting and stimulating time. Sandra Coney and other women began a magazine called *Broadsheet*. Women's right to have legal abortions began to be debated openly. *It was a controversial topic.* Jenny was a member of a local North Shore committee, which organised public meetings to debate the issue, at which Jean Sampson and Wyn Hoadley were speakers. *We ran a series of meetings, one a week for four weeks, and I wrote a story for the North Shore Times for each one highlighting the women who were*

speaking and why. The Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act was passed in 1977, which legalised abortion under some circumstances.

When her marriage ended, Jenny went on the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB), an experience she describes as *pretty tough*. Her sons were attending acting classes with Theatre Corporate in Auckland City. In 1981, the company director, Raymond Hawthorne, asked her if she would do some part time publicity work for the theatre; she was able to take the job as she was allowed to earn some money while on the DPB.

From 1979 to 1983 Jenny also worked full-time as a reporter for the *North Shore Times*, then edited by Pat Gundry. *Quite frankly, I can't think how I managed because I had two boys going to school, and life was just a huge big busy world.* She began to write stories about community groups and met John Raeburn and Ann Hartley, who were instrumental in the establishment of community houses on the North Shore. While she knew of a number of community people and supported their work, Jenny was not directly involved in community work herself. Although she had begun to think politically about women's issues, she was not, at that time, a member of any political party.

She recalls a speaker at one of the women's conventions saying that if women wanted to make change in society then they had to get political, and that meant joining a political party. A friend had joined the Values Party, but Jenny did not know if that was the right party for her. *I was discussing it with a friend at Theatre Corporate, Michael Smythe, and he said, I think you should join the Labour Party.* So, in 1983, she did.

There had been some boundary changes, and the new seat of Glenfield was established at this time. Jenny volunteered to help in

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Above: Ann Hartley, Jenny Kirk and Judy Keall (MP for Glenfield)

Below: Jenny as Labour candidate at Birkdale Community House during the General Election campaign with David Lange, 1987



the new electorate and met her second husband, Owen, there. *I helped with the organisation of getting a candidate and organising the campaign. Then [Prime Minister Robert] Muldoon called the 1984 snap election. Judy Keall was selected as the candidate and we did everything that you are meant to do to get your candidate elected. After Judy Keall's successful election, Jenny became her electorate assistant.*

Jenny stood as a candidate for the Birkenhead electorate in the 1987 election. *I was sitting in the office thinking, 'I think I can do this.' I wasn't very good at public speaking. I totted up all the things I knew I needed, and public speaking wasn't one of them. But I thought I could learn that 'on the job'.* She joined the Birkenhead Labour Electorate Committee and was selected as a candidate. Jenny began work fundraising, canvassing by door knocking and attending candidates' meetings. When she was elected MP of Birkenhead, she recalls there was still a level of unacceptance of women being in Parliament. *I was invited to a function as the local MP. I was standing chatting to some guy and he said, 'Whose secretary are you?'*

The National Party was in disarray in the electorate. MP, and leader of the National Party, Jim McLay unexpectedly retired about six months before the election, and it seemed that Jenny might have a chance of winning the seat, which she did. She was the Birkenhead MP for one term, between 1987 to 1990, and did not really enjoy the experience. There was constant in-fighting, both within the caucus of the governing Labour

Party, and among the ranks of Labour Party members, because of the Government's economic policy that later became known as 'Rogernomics'. In early 1988, Prime Minister David Lange called a halt, and said that the Government would pause for 'a cup of tea' to think about which direction to proceed in.

Jenny agreed with Lange's call for a pause, but was in trouble with the caucus after speaking with a newspaper about her opinions. *So I thought, 'If you are going to be in trouble, you might as well try and find people who you can be in trouble with.' So I shut up for a little while and listened to people in caucus, and I gradually realised that there was a group of MPs, mostly new MPs, who were opposed to what Roger Douglas was doing, and I asked if I could join them. From then on we met regularly as a backbench group, and we met with David Lange on a regular basis, once a fortnight. Richard Northey was part of that group, and Sonia Davies.*

Jenny stood again in the 1990 election, but was not re-elected.

Instead, she became Chief Executive of the National Foundation for the Deaf from 1990 to 1994. *I got to know a whole lot of stuff about the various types of deafness, fundraising and all sorts of things, and community work. Then Brian Putt asked me if I'd be interested in taking the reins at the North Harbour Employment Resource Centre. Jenny worked there for four years until 1998.*

During her time with the Foundation for the Deaf, Jenny was also the chairperson of the Awataha Marae management committee. She had known about the campaign to build an urban contemporary marae on the North Shore since her time as a reporter for the *North Shore Times*, which had published articles about the issue. She met Rangitini and Arnold Wilson and joined in their meetings, and worked with Pākehā organisations to build support for the establishment of the marae. *When I was an MP,*

I worked with Ann Hartley, Jean Sampson and Brian Putt to obtain government funding to build more of the marae. By that time, all three of them were in the inaugural North Shore City Council and Ann was Mayor. In the end the Labour Government put up three quarters of a million dollars for the marae.

Jenny had also been a founding member of the establishment committee of the Onepoto Awhina Community House in Northcote between 1985 to 1990. All these connections came together when Jenny stood for North Shore City Council. She was elected to represent the Birkenhead Ward in 1995, and became chair of the Council's Strategy and Finance Committee

from 1995 to 2001. She was also a Council-appointed member of the Birkenhead-Northcote Community Board from 1995 to 2001, and of the Glenfield Community Board from 1998 to 2001. A lasting legacy of her time on Council was the building of a new library in the Birkenhead township, the preservation of bush

areas in the district, and the extension of Kaipatiki Road between Glenfield and Beach Haven.

Around ten years ago Jenny and her husband moved to Whangarei, where she is now involved in an anti-mining campaign, centred on a local marae at Whakapara, north of Whangarei. *I've learnt so much more being just on the edge of a small hapū; it has enriched our lives even more.*

Jenny says that her motivation for her public and community work has always been feminism, and supporting grassroots community activity. She looks on everything she has done from being on the Onepoto Playcentre management committee, to working as a journalist, to being an MP, to being a councillor as a learning experience, and she says, *I'm still learning.*

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