

## Helengrad and other epithets: Aspects of Helen Clark's third term media coverage

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### ***Abstract***

*As New Zealand's long-serving Prime Minister, Helen Clark, leads the Labour Party in its bid for an unprecedented fourth term in office, the nature of media coverage is crucial. This paper, while concentrating on Clark's current term, reviews her relationship with the media over two decades. It discusses the gendered nature of reportage that continues to dog Clark, despite international recognition of her leadership. The paper argues that an often subtle gender bias in the media portrayal of Clark puts her at a disadvantage in the upcoming political contest with a younger male opponent.*

### ***Introduction***

Nearing the end of an unprecedented third term of a Labour-led government, New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark dismisses the notion that gender is still an issue for her. Initially discounted as a woman with no leadership potential, she struggled her way to public acceptance and a protracted media honeymoon in her first term as prime minister. However, despite her eight years leading the country, Helen Clark's gender remains a subtle disadvantage in the media as she faces a younger male opponent. Studies (e.g. Norris, 1997; Ross & Sreberny, 2000; Tuchman, 1978; van Zoonen, 2000) demonstrate that media reporting of female politicians is subject to gendered news frames and stereotypes that trivialise their contributions and handicap them in their quest for office. This paper aims to explore whether Clark's media coverage in her third term reflects the normal treatment of a long-term incumbent up against a strong, media-savvy new opposition leader and whether it reflects a gender bias typically facing women political leaders.

Even in a time of rapidly expanding communication technologies, the mass media, as the key source of voters' political information, remain vital for politicians. Louw

(2005) is among a number of writers pointing out how mass media systems emerged to service the needs of mass democratic systems, advocating that journalists and politicians have a symbiotic relationship and that over time “journalists became key players in producing and circulating political symbolism” (p.60). The systems are so intermeshed that former metropolitan editor and current NZ Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Judy McGregor (1996), for instance, speaks simply of “news media politics”. Female politicians, however, must deal not only with watchdog journalists eager for any mini-scandal (O’Leary, 2002) to feed the needs of a commercialised news machine, but also the stereotyping, condemnation, trivialisation and absence that Tuchman (1978), borrowing from Gerbner, termed the ‘symbolic annihilation’ of women by the mass media.

Byerly & Ross (2006, p.37) categorise the contemporary representation of women in news as providing a “complex and mixed picture” across the globe, but they report on continued marginalisation and stereotyping of women. Women continue to be a marginal presence, significantly under-represented as news subjects, with little difference made in over a decade of the Global Media Monitoring Project (Gallagher, 2005). Other international studies cited by Byerly and Ross (2006, p.41) show when women appear they are overrepresented as victims, subject to blatantly sexist reporting “framing them as objects and temptresses”. In addition, Fountaine (2002) reports figures from the GMMP demonstrating that women’s marital and family status was more likely to be reported, particularly in political news, celebrity news, crime and accidents and disasters. For example, she says, the figures from 2000 show that “in political news stories, 17 per cent of women are identified by marital status compared to just one per cent of men” (p.246).

Sreberny & van Zoonen (2000) speak of the “the profoundly gendered nature of contemporary mediated politics” (p.13) in manifestations from serious journalism to talk shows. With the increasing “intimization” of politics, they argue, men’s representation in politics is moving close to that of women, implying greater media coverage about “the persona as well as the broader family context in which the politician lives, and with the representation of self (grooming, fashion, mannerisms etc.)” (p.11). As such, Sreberny & van Zoonen say, “gender is a more crucial issue in social and political life than ever” (p.13). However, the growing interest of political

reporters in the private sphere (traditionally the female sphere as opposed to the public sphere, the preserve of males) does not necessarily advantage women. For instance van Zoonen (2000) shows the Dutch gossip press portrays female politicians' family lives as suffering because of their political role, while male politicians, seen as having supportive families, can use them to boost their image of integrity and reliability. Moreover, Byerly and Ross (2006) contend there has been little progress, citing evidence, particularly from Britain, to show female politicians continue to be treated differently from male politicians and are "persistently trivialized by media speculation over their private lives, domestic arrangements, and sartorial style" (pp. 44-.45).

While both Clark and her press secretary have dismissed the notion that gender remains a factor in her media coverage (Comrie, 2006), this paper contends that the Prime Minister still receives different treatment because of her gender. The New Zealand media - only too conscious that women hold a number of key posts in government, judiciary and industry - have progressed. However, they still succumb to stereotyping and the thoughtless repetition of the "media misogyny" (McGregor, 1996, p.187) which characterised the treatment of Clark in the early days of her leadership.

This paper examines aspects of Clark's third term coverage, particularly since the accession of John Key to the National Party leadership. It opens with a brief report on the use of the term 'Helengrad' in major newspapers and magazines (traced from its genesis in 2000 through the use of the Factiva data base). A second source of data was the coverage of three key opinion polls in May 2007 when Clark for the first time in eight years lost her status as preferred prime minister. Articles on the polls, published between May 13 and June 4, in the three largest metropolitan dailies - the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion Post* and *The Press*, were studied, along with immediate poll coverage on TVNZ's *One News* and TV3's *Three News*. Finally, some aspects of treatment in the capital city's *The Dominion Post* are referred to, particularly the "pole dancing" episode and images by cartoonist Tom Scott (also syndicated in other Fairfax papers).

***Context: Clark and the Media***

Helen Clark's early roller coaster ride with the media has been documented in a number of sources (for instance Comrie, 2006; Edwards, 2001; McGregor, 1996; O'Leary, 2002). McGregor noted the "obsession, which runs to a substantial clippings file, with Labour leader Helen Clark's hairstyle and voice" (p.181). The problem for women in politics, as McGregor saw it, was the media's search for a gendered ideal "a Beehive bimbo-Boadicea who combines political energy and power with a stereotypical femininity expressed in conventional prettiness" (p.183). Clark's early years in politics were dogged by rumours about her sexuality, pushing her into marrying partner Peter Davis in 1981 (Edwards, 2001). When, she gained party leadership in 1993 by toppling the populist Mike Moore, *The Dominion Post* printed a front page photo of Clark and Davis in an awkward open-mouthed kiss, even though another more flattering picture was available. Reviewing such events, McGregor (1996, p.187) pointed out the struggle Clark had to gain acceptance as Labour leader was linked to "media misogyny".

Clark responded to the attacks with media training and an 'open all hours' policy for journalists. This paid off in a protracted first term media honeymoon (O'Leary, 2002) that continued, despite some damaging incidents, until well into her second term (Comrie, 2006). By early 2004, though, media were ready for change, greeting the meteoric rise of National leader Don Brash on the back of his racially divisive Orewa speech with open delight. The consensus was that Clark at last had an election fight on her hands (see for instance Clifton, 2004a and 2004b).

After a too-close-to-call election, Labour, along with coalition partners, formed a third Labour-led government in late 2005. National's leader Don Brash was soon ousted. His downfall was partly attributable to persistent rumours about an extramarital affair, reflecting contemporary media focus on the personal lives of both male and female politicians. Brash's replacement was the younger, personable John Key, who stressed his state house background, skilfully disassociated himself from Brash and his dubious alliances and media dealings exposed in *The Hollow Men* (Hager, 2006), and was prepared to ditch unpopular policies.

National had for some time been doing well in the polls, but it took Key to overtake Clark, who lost her status as preferred prime minister in three May 2007 polls: the TNS-TV3 poll released on May 13; the Herald-DigiPoll of May 26; and the One News Colmar Brunton poll of May 27. The prospect of a closely-contested approaching election gives an opportunity for the media as Fourth Estate to deliberate leadership qualities and political policies of two competing leaders. Clark has the huge advantage of incumbency and an accompanying greater media presence. Key, however, has the advantages of fresh news appeal and the ability as opposition leader to profit from any government blunders, whether real or apparent.

The question is whether Key has the additional advantage of being male in a gendered media terrain. In gendered reportage, strength in a male leader becomes overbearing control in a female leader. A woman's tears mean weakness while a man's signal a desirable sensitivity. Although male politicians' parental status is rarely questioned, female politicians can be in a Catch 22 situation where those with children risk being portrayed as distracted or neglectful, while childless female politicians can be dismissed as unable to understand 'normal' family life.

### ***'Helengrad'***

In January 2008, the term 'Helengrad' - "a noun used to describe the iron grip of New Zealand's prime minister over Wellington" - was reported as having made Australia's Macquarie online dictionary among 85 other new words (McDonald, 2008, p.A1). Helengrad first made the news media on April 27, 2000, when Clark was starting out on her media honeymoon. In an editorial in the capital's *The Evening Post*<sup>1</sup> centred on a critique of Broadcasting Minister Marian Hobb's gaffe-prone performance, the paper called Clark a "control freak" with "exacting standards" and asked "Does she know the Capital's earned the nickname, Helengrad, such is her total command of issues, initiatives and airtime" (The twin concepts of skill and loyalty, 2000). Members of Clark's cabinet (particularly Hobbs) had already faced a media barrage for inexperience in dealing with both issues and the media. In a gendered interpretation by the media, Clark's mastery of government and action to discipline

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<sup>1</sup> *The Evening Post* closed and merged with the morning paper the *Dominion* to become *The Dominion Post* in July 2002.

and protect novices were not represented as deeds of a strong leader but those of a control freak whose standards are not 'high' but 'exacting'.

The catchy 'Helengrad', combining anti-left bias, totalitarian imagery and a trivialising personal element, apparently originated from a National Party stalwart. It was understandably irresistible to the Opposition and swiftly taken up by National Party leader Jenny Shipley (Steeds, 2000). The term appeared 55 times in New Zealand papers during 2000<sup>2</sup>, frequently employed by the Opposition, reiterated by the right-wing *National Business Review*, but also as a backhanded compliment in a *Dominion* commentary piece on the National Party Conference (Venter, 2000). Generally, however, Helengrad was an epithet. For instance, a *Dominion* editorial, criticising Clark for not providing lighting for the Premier House Christmas tree, asked: "is it further evidence of a descent into a joyless Helengrad?" (Joylessness to the world, 2000, p.20). In 2001 Helengrad crossed the ditch to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, but mentions were fewer over the next few years (even in election year 2002 when the controversial Helengrad website, featuring Clark as Stalin and a dancing Cossack, was closed down).

By 2003, a year into Clark's second term, Colin James wrote in *Management Magazine* that 'Helengrad' had disappeared with a mature government which had "captured the centre" (James, 2003, p.34). However, come the election, gender was still on the agenda. After TVNZ's first noisy leaders' debate of 2005, although Brash was mocked for saying he hesitated to interrupt Clark because she was a woman, the overall coverage showed the media were still ambivalent about a robust female debater. It was notable that Clark was described as "aggressive", becoming "strident" in order to be heard above protracted heckling. In a review of the final debate (where TVNZ firmly reigned in the audience) *New Zealand Herald* writer Fran O'Sullivan (2005), judged Clark as the winner on performance, even though she lacked her "usual lethal force". Then in a casual aside called her, "The political dominatrix – whose regime has been termed 'Helengrad'".

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<sup>2</sup> These and subsequent figures in this section are taken from the Factiva data base featuring major NZ newspapers and magazines (calculations exclude repeated articles and letters to the editor).

The 'dominatrix' image, further reinforcing the brute force notion of Helengrad, was not only hostile and sexist, but harked back to rumours about Clark's sexuality and her relationship with men, including her husband, which have never been allowed to rest.

Although Helengrad was seen by several commentators as applying only to Clark's first term, it remained in relatively regular use by the *Herald's* Fran O'Sullivan, along with right wing writers like Ian Wishart of *Investigate* magazine. Then in 2006 the label was revived with a vengeance to describe Clark's response to the Auditor General's critical report on election spending by political parties. Left-wing commentator Chris Trotter prompted a number of "battle of Helengrad" imitations when he advised Clark to learn from the lessons of Hitler's troops at Stalingrad: "break out of Helengrad and retreat in good order to a more defensible position" (Trotter, 2006, p.15).

The word 'Helengrad' resonates with cartoonist Tom Scott's repeated portrayal of Clark as Hitler. On June 20, 2005 as Labour's ratings continued to slide, Scott's *The Dominion Post* cartoon called 'Downfall' in a take-off of the recently released Hitler film, showed Clark in the bunker surrounded by uniformed staff. In 2007 his similar 'Siege of Helengrad' cartoon was repeated on January 16, 2008 as part of the best of Scott summer break series. Interestingly, it is a representation that Scott never tried of Robert Muldoon, a notoriously authoritarian National Prime Minister of the 1970s and 1980s who banned Scott from his press conferences, but who in the mainstream media still merited the 'strongman' title rather than either the pejorative 'fascist' connotations of Helengrad, or the trivialising 'control freak' label applied to Clark.

The persistent use of 'Helengrad' and associated imagery by high profile commentators and cartoonists demonstrates the media's continuing ambivalence about the merits of strength and the ability to command in female leaders. Meanwhile, the dictionary entry report in early 2008 kept 'Helengrad' alive in the local lexicon, and it is safe to assume that if Clark continues to act as an effective leader, the word will be used with growing frequency in the media as the election approaches.

***Losing her grip: May 2007 Leadership Polls***

In May 2007 three major polls (TNS-TV3, Herald-DigiPoll and One News Colmar Brunton) showed Helen Clark had, for the first time in eight years, lost her preferred leader status to relative newcomer National's John Key. Analysis of coverage in the three main metropolitan papers (the *New Zealand Herald*, *The Dominion Post* and *The Press*) and two major prime time news bulletins (*One News* and *3 News*) showed the media set up a revealing dichotomy between Clark and Key. Altogether there were six newspaper editorials and 29 newspaper articles reporting and analysing the results, while TVNZ and TV3 restricted themselves to one story each (each covering results of their own channel's poll). TV3 opened coverage with the 'stunning' results of its own poll in a story typical of those that followed. Generally the poll stories included comments from the two leaders, an analysis that viewed the results as highly significant, emphasised Labour's current difficulties (with recent legislation and politicians' behaviour), and concluded by warning that, under MMP, votes for smaller parties could made an unpredictable difference to election results.

Over the three weeks of poll coverage a generally unfavourable contrast was drawn between Clark/Labour and Key/National. For instance, *The Press*, on June 1, compared a "tired administration" and an "out of touch" Clark "looking somewhat tattered at the edges" to a "resurgent" National Party with "a fresh and appealing message" (Out of touch, 2007, p.10). Similarly, *The Dominion Post*, on 29 May, weighed a "stone-chipped" government against "a fresh-faced" Key "brimming with enthusiasm" (New faces needed for team Clark, 2007, p.B4). Watkins (2007, p.B5) also in *The Dominion Post*, described support for Labour "nose-diving as National's star rises"; an analogy picked up the next day by cartoonist Tom Scott who depicted Clark as a World War II allied fighter pilot going down in flames.

While there was a general feeling of the vultures circling - particularly in various cartoons - and little attempt to probe beyond Key's surface presentation, only *The Press* resorted to clearly hostile adjectives. Although the 15 May editorial (Key's poll coup, 2007, p.10) acknowledged National's leader was as yet new, untried and "still enjoying his political honeymoon", it described Key's leadership style as "moderate", "smooth", "pragmatic" and "constructive". All these adjectives could be applied to Clark's successful leadership of diverse party and coalition members over seven



years. However, the “embattled” Clark was described instead as, “one of the shrewdest political operators”, “ruthlessly prepared to do whatever it takes to retain power” and now “desperate”.

In the *New Zealand Herald*, commentator Colin James (May 22, 2007) took a more balanced, but still dichotomous, assessment: “Clark comes to decisions slowly ... That is the way of a safe-pair-of-hands manager... Key listens, then moves decisively... His is the way of a leader with dash. Clark’s risk is to be thought dull and dismissible. Key’s risk is to be though incandescent and inconstant... Key’s pitch is to be the face of the future ... He has humour and accessibility... Now to paint Labour as out-of-puff and out-of-date. Clark’s pitch ... is to paint her government as a strategic manager of future risk. She is well received in the malls, she says. Now to paint National as unready and unreliable... so to put it in marketing terms: respect for Clark, versus attraction to Key.”

While in the six months since Key became leader the major change had been a general narrowing of the policy gap between Labour and National, commercialised news values encouraged the media to write articles creating polar opposites and stressing potential conflict. Perhaps predictably, media coverage ultimately favoured Key, but there was little evidence of gender bias. A clear exception to this was the attack by the *Herald’s* Fran O’Sullivan on May 27, 2007. Despite the fact she was presumably drawing an implicit contrast with a National leader fresh from his own ‘coup’, O’Sullivan wrote of Clark: “the blue-stockinged academic who shafted two former PMs on her way to the leadership - will be alarmed... but will put on a brave face”. This is another case where Clark is tarred by a brush dipped in past stereotypical coverage. The ‘intellectual’ label in Australasian politics is not necessarily a compliment and its connotations of cold distance are negated by various past polls showing Clark in fact has ‘the common touch’ and particularly good empathy with the Pacifica community. Ironically, the ‘blue stocking’ label with its out-dated implication that education and thought is not the preserve of females, came from a female journalist. Further, those who report politics understand power generally comes from deposing a previous leader and that Clark’s rise was no more ruthless than any other politician. Dwelling on this ‘shafting’ 15 years down the track, while ignoring Key’s far more recent ousting of Don Brash, indicates either deliberate bias

from a reporter who publicly claims objectivity (see O’Sullivan, 2006) or an expectation that female politicians should have different behavioural standards. In the New Zealand context, Fountaine (2002) has referred to the ambivalence surrounding social expectations for women’s behaviour as it is applied to politics and the problem this can present for women’s representation.

### ***Pole Dancing – Sexualised reporting of Clark***

A Murray Webb cartoon of a pole-dancing Clark gracing the second (political) page of *The Dominion Post* in August 2007 prompts the query of why coverage of Clark has continued to be sexualised rather than merely gendered. The cartoon resulted from a report that Kevin Rudd, then Australian opposition leader, had visited a New York strip club and that Clark had apparently commented this was not “appropriate entertainment’ (Stepping down a shady path, 2007, p.B4). There was a flurry of laddish stories as gallery reporters questioned MPs about their strip club experiences. Kay’s (2007) story was typical: “With almost indecent haste, male MPs are revealing the naked truth...” The accompanying cartoon shows a by-no-means attractive Clark in stripper gear clutching a pole saying “OK, OK, you chaps!! Whatever it takes to get your attention”. This sexualised treatment of Helen Clark is not isolated; sly allusions to Clark’s sexual orientation, the state of her marriage, her childlessness and her sexual appeal, have been an undercurrent of reportage over 20 years. It should be noted these attacks can play into the hands of the Opposition, as for instance in 1999 when National sought to position the then Prime Minister Jenny Shipley as “mother of the nation” and possessor of a devoted family and husband in implicit contrast to the childless Clark whose husband worked in another city (Fountaine, 2002).

While only a right-wing, ‘fringe’ commentator like Ian Wishart in a 2003 edition of *Investigate* on ‘The Siege of Helengrad’ would dwell extensively on Clark’s supposed sexual ‘issues’ (Witchel, 2003), there is a steady drip of innuendo across the years that tends to surge around election times. Paul Holmes in a 2005 Prime TV pre-election documentary lingered in Helen Clark’s bedroom making remarks impossible to imagine applied to a male leader. It was an atmosphere that allowed National leader Don Brash in 2004 to accuse Clark of having no respect for the institution of marriage. Immediate backlash within the media pressured Brash to confess to an earlier adulterous relationship (Venter, 2004). However, the episode did him little

harm and Scott's view two days later was a cartoon featuring a hapless Clark with two of her staff. One holding a newspaper asks, "Seen this? Brash owning up to an extra-marital affair is turning him into a stud muffin." While the other leans across her desk saying "We're going to have to go one better Prime Minister. Why don't we spread a rumour that you and Peter have a trapeze in the bedroom and are active in the Auckland swingers scene..." This echoes the dominatrix motif referred to earlier in the paper and is all part of a sexuality theme, where it seems there is still one rule for 'the boys' and another for 'the girls'.

### ***Conclusion***

Clark's longevity as a leader, and her even longer sojourn in the public eye, gives us an exceptional chance to examine changes in the way the media portray female politicians.

The tenor of Helen Clark's media coverage in the third term is, to echo Byerly and Ross (2006), both mixed and complex. However, despite the media now being accustomed to a woman prime minister and despite Clark's evident political success, journalists continue at times to portray her in a gendered manner. This gender factor is strongly reinforced in political cartooning. Such coverage places Clark as leader at a potential disadvantage when up against Key in the coming election.

Nonetheless, gendered coverage is the exception rather than the rule and lapses are frequently subtle. In New Zealand's media of 2005-8 we see little evidence of what Norris (1997) terms the common gendered news frames of female leaders<sup>3</sup>, nor of the crass sexism of the British popular press greeting "Blair's babes" in 1997 (Ross & Sreberny, 2000). What we do see, though, is evidence that Clark carries the baggage of not so much the mistakes of a long career but of the biased and gendered coverage of the past. It is tempting to assume that individual journalists are not always aware of the gendered nature of their words, that they instead see themselves as privileged intimates of the political arena, touching on in-jokes and old behind the scenes gossip. New Zealand's small size and close political scene, where journalists, politicians, PR

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<sup>3</sup> Norris identifies these frames as: the leadership breakthrough for women, women leaders as outsiders, and women leaders as agents of change.

people and officials live cheek-by-jowl in Wellington, contribute to this propensity. Further, many journalists, commentators and cartoonists are of the same baby-boom generation as Clark and have known her since she was still an academic. Clark rarely responds to the barbs, speaking out only when her husband is attacked, and indeed any response would invite media Helengrad-style retaliation.

Conversely, journalists know little of Key's background and in this initial honeymoon stage at least, have made minimal attempts to investigate beyond the material that Key and his support team provides. He is indeed 'fresh' and, like male politicians in the Dutch popular press studied by van Zoonen (2000), comes with the masculine advantage of young family. Meanwhile, Clark, it seems, continues to face the double jeopardy of women leaders. In this Catch 22 media world women are either too young or too old, too attractive or too plain to be in office. Here, marriage and family are as much a drawback as to be a single woman, and to be married without children is apparently worst of all.

Mostly, of course, Clark is portrayed and judged in the same way as 'normal', male politicians, but traces of sexism and gendered framing linger for a variety of reasons. Despite a liberal self image, the New Zealand media give Clark, as female leader, less of a 'fair go' than she should have. This is unfortunate for democracy.

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