

Rt Hon Helen Clark Tribute to Michael Cullen at Memorial service:
Te Kura Whare Taneatua, Eastern Bay of Plenty, NZ. Saturday 13
August 2022.

E nga iwi Tuhoe,

E nga iwi o te motu,

E nga reo, E nga rangatira ma,

Tena koutou, tena koutou, tena koutou katoa.

Anne, Louise, Imogen, Reuben, Rebecca, and all other relatives,
friends, and colleagues of Michael gathered here today.

It's a privilege to add my tribute to Michael as this heartwarming
service nears its end.

I first met Michael in the second half of the 1970s at annual
conferences of the New Zealand Labour Party. They were always held
in the Wellington Town Hall, and had a touch of Tammany Hall about
them. Michael came as a delegate from the Castle Street Branch in
Dunedin, the Otago University branch, and I came from the Princes
Street Branch, the Auckland University equivalent.

We were part of the still smallish baby boomer cluster which was
making its way into mainstream politics, and was interested in picking
up a wider range of issues, including on women's rights, than old
Labour generally had.

In April 1980, Michael and I were among four early candidate
selections for safe Labour seats where sitting members had announced

their retirement— we were selected a full eighteen months before the 1981 General Election, along with Geoff Braybrooke in Napier, and Bill Jeffries in Heretaunga.

We were all duly elected together in November 1981 as Opposition backbenchers, always the lowest step in the parliamentary hierarchy. Parliament wasn't called into a substantive session until April the following year, giving us all plenty of time to be inducted into the vagaries of parliamentary life by the whips, Jonathan Hunt and the late Stan Rodger. As new Members, we sat in alphabetical order with Clark squeezed in between Braybrooke and Cullen.

After the gin and tonic election of 1984, Michael became the Senior Whip, and I became Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. We went into Cabinet together in 1987 ranked 17th and 18th. We were in Opposition together for nine years, with Michael as my Deputy for the last three of those. We then spent nine years together in government, with Michael as Deputy Prime Minister for six of those and the Minister of Finance for the entire period.

Over the years we developed a very close professional relationship which was fundamental to the achievements of our government. I relied on Michael not only to lead on economic and fiscal policy, but also to be a “Mr Fixit” - there were a number of complex issues and challenges over the nine years which required his razor-sharp intellect to be applied to finding solutions.

Michael's role in the government therefore went far beyond delivering budgets and keeping the books. He must take the full credit for innovative policies like Kiwisaver and the partial pre-funding of New Zealand Superannuation. His deep commitment to equity and inclusion saw him find the funding for Working For Families, twenty hours free early childhood education, interest free student loans, and more affordable primary health care as flagship policies. When Air New Zealand and KiwiRail in effect collapsed in private ownership, he made it possible for the state to buy them back as strategic assets.

Michael was also Leader of the House for the nine years we were in government. He had a thorough knowledge of parliamentary procedure, and was long one of Parliament's most effective debaters with his quick wit and ability to think on his feet.

In 2009, I left New Zealand for eight years to lead the United Nations Development Programme. At home, Michael took on key public sector roles, with his skills valued by governments led by both major parties. We spoke from time to time when I was home, and I always looked forward to getting his readout on the political scene and the outlook for New Zealand.

Just before my significant birthday celebration in early 2020, Michael phoned me to say that he still hoped to come, but had just received a very challenging cancer diagnosis. He did come, and he spoke as brilliantly as ever, which in the circumstances was quite extraordinary.

I encouraged Michael to write his autobiography, and it was published just two months before his death. As one would expect of Michael, his book is well written and authoritative, and stands to be an important reference work for all interested in the period of modern New Zealand politics to which he made such a major contribution. It is a tribute to Michael's strength of character and his resilience that he managed to complete the book while coping with round after round of cancer treatment.

Michael's illness and death was deeply distressing to all of us who worked with him over decades. I also convey the thoughts of Margaret Wilson, Judith Tizard, and Lianne Dalziel who have not been able to be with us today. We all acknowledge the love and care of Anne and family members as Michael took the last steps of his journey a year ago. If there is consolation to be found over Michael's untimely death, it is that he used the time he had among us to make a difference for the better for all. For that, we are forever in his debt. May he rest in peace.