

A STATE OF THE NATION SPEECH



# The Kiwi Way: A Fair Go For All

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NATIONAL PARTY LEADER



Thank you for your welcome.

What a pleasure it is to be speaking to you in what I still think of as my home town.

I had a good Kiwi upbringing here in Christchurch. I grew up in Hollyford Ave, just down the road from here. I attended the local schools. I played in the local streets and parks.

I was mad on sport, particularly squash, which I played next door for the Burnside Squash Club. I also played rugby for this very club, as a hooker and a halfback. I was no Justin Marshall. In fact, I think it's safe to say that no matter how big Graham Henry's rotation gets, I won't be going to the World Cup.

Six years ago I made one of the most important decisions in my life: to leave a successful career in finance to stand for Parliament. It was a decision that brought with it changes, not only for me but also for my wife, Bronagh, and our young family. I thank them today for their continuing love and support.

For me, politics is not about the pursuit of power for the sake of it. Unlike some, I won't measure the success or failure of my political career by the number of years I hold office.

For me, politics is about the ability to make change for the betterment of all New Zealanders. It's about challenging us all to dream how great our country can be and then setting out to achieve it.

Over the next 18 months, my speeches will be along two sorts of lines. I think of them a bit like the hardware and software of a computer system.

The hardware, if you like, is made up of the big topics all politicians talk about – like the economy, health services, law and order, and the environment. These are all vitally important. They are the nuts and bolts of running this country. Our policies in these areas will demonstrate that National is ready to govern.

But there's a second group of speeches I intend to deliver that are much more about shaping and defining the sort of country we want New Zealand to be.

We have, over generations, evolved a set of essential New Zealand values, attitudes and shared experiences. These represent what I call 'The Kiwi Way'.

You get a taste of this when you listen to foreigners talking about what New Zealanders are like. They typically say we are friendly and modest people; we are inventive and empathetic; we are proud of the natural beauty of our country; we believe in working hard and getting rewarded for it; we think no one is born superior to anyone else and that everybody deserves a fair crack in life.

These characteristics are part of what makes our country unique. We should celebrate these things. We should be proud of our culture and society; the sense of identity we have as a nation.

But it is also critical that we debate and challenge the direction in which our society is heading.

We are not four million spectators, having a passing interest in someone else's game. This is our country; we make the rules and we should decide its direction.

Today, in the suburb where I grew up, I want to talk about what I consider to be an important part of The Kiwi Way. I want to talk about opportunity, and hope, and how we can bring these to some of the most struggling families and communities in New Zealand.

Part of The Kiwi Way is a belief in opportunity and in giving people a fair go.

As New Zealanders, we have grown up to believe in and cherish an egalitarian society. We like to think that our children's futures will be determined by their abilities, their motivation and their hard work. They will not be dictated by the size of their parent's bank balance or the suburb they were born in.

We want all kids to have a genuine opportunity to use their talents and to get rewarded for their efforts. That's The Kiwi Way, and I believe in it. After all, I was one of the many kids who benefited from it.

My father died when I was young. My mother was, for a time, on the Widow's Benefit, and also worked as a cleaner. But the State ensured that I had a roof over my head and money for my mother to put food on the table. It also gave me the opportunity to have a good education. My mother made sure I took that opportunity, and the rest was up to me.

I always felt I had a stake in New Zealand. I saw a ladder to take me higher and I made my own way up the rungs.

For most New Zealanders, being born into a struggling household is not a life sentence.

Since I've been an MP, I've talked to a lot of people who grew up in my street, or in streets just like it. Many have done well for themselves.

However, things are different now than they were 30 years ago. It used to be that any street in any community could be the launching pad for a happy and fulfilling life. That's not the case anymore. Today many are being left behind.

There are streets in our country where helplessness has become ingrained. There are streets of people who believe they are locked out of everyday New Zealand the way most of us experience it, and are locked into a way of life for which the exit signs and the road maps have long since been discarded. These streets have become dead ends for those who live in them.

I'm not just talking about poor communities – because we all know that being poor needn't rob you of hope. I'm talking about places where rungs on the ladder of opportunity have been broken. I'm talking about streets like McGehan Close, in Owairaka, Auckland. In one week last year, two kids in that small street killed themselves and another two

made unsuccessful attempts. It is a street terrorised by youth gangs.

Around the country there are other places like this. The worst are home to families that have been jobless for more than one generation; home to families destroyed by alcohol and P addiction; home to families where there's nothing more to read than a pizza flyer; home to families who send their kids to school with empty stomachs and empty lunch-boxes; and home to families where mum and the kids live in fear of another beating from dad.

I'm talking about places where happy and sparkling six and seven-year-olds become angry and resentful 14 and 15-year-olds. I'm talking about places where there is a complete lack of hope.

I know I am not alone in my concern about what the flipside of contemporary New Zealand looks like.

When I talk to New Zealanders they tell me they are worried: worried about the growing number of LA-style gangs; worried about teenagers tagging their neighbourhoods; and worried about bullies threatening the communities in which they used to feel safe.

Just look at how this year kicked off – with a spate of homicides and assaults typified by callousness and brutality. Like the vicious stabbing of Doreen Reed, a frail 77-year-old who lived by herself on the North Shore. Or the attack on Porirua dairy owner Lee Dao Hung, who was beaten unconscious by a thug who wanted cigarettes.

Last week, for the first time in its history, New Zealand Post stopped delivering mail to three streets in Hamilton. They stopped delivering to Tennyson Road, Emerson Place and Dryden Road because gang violence has made them too dangerous for posties to enter. If it's too dangerous for a postie to enter, what is it like to live there.

We are seeing a dangerous drift toward social and economic exclusion.

One possible future for New Zealand is plainly obvious in many other developed countries.

There, we see the growth of whole areas that have become so dysfunctional that only people who don't have the ability to go somewhere else will stay; where shopkeepers and other business people don't want to remain; and where there is lawlessness, disarray and deep despair.

That is not The Kiwi Way. It's not the kind of New Zealand I grew up in and it's not the kind of New Zealand I want my kids to grow up in. It's not the kind of New Zealand I want anyone's kids to grow up in.

We should not be afraid to drive down certain streets, send ambulance officers into certain houses, and take our kids to certain schools. We must not be afraid, because to give in to such behaviour is to accept it.

I know we can do better. We have to do better. Because, left unchecked, the problems of a growing underclass affect us all.

These are tough problems – very tough problems. But I have no intention of being a Prime Minister who tackles only the easy and convenient issues. I don't pretend I've got all the solutions. But I can tell you that dealing with the problems of our growing underclass is a priority for National, both in opposition and in government.

We need some new and imaginative thinking. We also need to remember the enduring principles on which the National Party is based – individual responsibility, support for families and communities, and a belief that the State can't and shouldn't do everything.

I want to make three overall points.

My first point is this: the solution doesn't lie in just throwing more money at the problem. If it did, this Labour Government would have solved it a long time ago. And yet family dysfunction has flourished under Labour:

Look at the Kahui family. The Government recognised they were a needy bunch. So what did it do? It doled out around \$1,000 a week in benefits to the Kahuis and the Kings, and do any of us believe it helped them?

Families like these are trapped in a holding pen, fenced with state assistance. But we know that money couldn't protect little Chris and Cru Kahui.

Labour also funds lots of small programmes and sets up lots of committees. This is not about getting results. It's about ticking a whole lot of boxes to give the appearance of being up to the job.

You'll see this later today in Labour's response to this speech. A press release will come out listing a whole lot of programmes Labour has piloted and reviews it has introduced. It will tell you the cost of each of them.

Well, I'm not interested in spending money simply to allow me to ease my conscience, look busy, or fend off attacks from the opposition or the media. I'm interested in results. I'm interested in what works and what makes a difference. And it is clear to me that the Government's current mishmash of policies isn't working.

My second point is that we need to make changes to a whole range of government services.

Addressing the problems of the growing underclass involves tackling serious and interconnected issues of long-term welfare dependency, crime, illiteracy, poor parenting skills, social exclusion, malnutrition, drugs, and lost hope.

In all areas of social policy, I am tasking National's spokespeople to come up with policies to address the deep-seated problems in some of our families and communities.

In education, we need to ensure that all kids get an opportunity to learn from good teachers, no matter what decile school they go to. No child should be viewed as a write-off, or left behind by the school system.

Far too many kids leave after 10 or 11 years of schooling barely able to read and write, and not able to participate fully in our modern society. That is completely unacceptable.

We also need to ensure there is effective policing in all parts of our cities and in all areas of the country. We will not tolerate violence and antisocial behaviour. Under a National government, gangs will not be controlling neighbourhoods so posties can't even deliver the daily mail.

The tragic events surrounding the parole of Graeme Burton show that Labour's law and order policies seem to be based on the rights of criminals.

Let me say that under National, the parole system will be focused on protecting innocent Kiwis from hardened, unrepentant and dangerous criminals. Under any government I lead there will be no parole for repeat violent offenders.

We will do more than that to improve our criminal justice system, but for today let me send the clearest of messages. Those who break the laws of our society destroy the fabric of The Kiwi Way. No government I lead will put up with that.

We also have a serious and growing problem with long-term welfare dependency.

I have said before that I believe in the welfare state and that I will never turn my back on it.

We should be proud to be a country that looks after its most vulnerable citizens. We should be proud to be a country that supports people when they can't find work, are ill, or aren't able to work.

But we should be ashamed that others remain on a benefit for years even though work is available to them. That is no way forward for them and it is no way forward for New Zealand.

Long-term dependency robs people of confidence, motivation and aspiration. Ultimately, it robs people of a stake in their own society.

We have to ensure that Kiwis, even those with relatively low skills, are always better off working than being on a benefit. We have to insist that healthy people receiving assistance from the State have obligations, whether that be looking for work, acquiring new skills for work, or working in their community.

National will use the welfare system, on behalf of all New Zealanders, to motivate long-term beneficiaries to change their lives for the better.

Where we give opportunity we will expect responsibility. In giving a fair go we will expect a fair go in return. That's part of The Kiwi Way.

The third point I want to make this afternoon is that we are all in this together. We all stand to lose from the emergence of a growing underclass, and we all stand to gain by doing something about it.

Yes, the government has a hugely important role in creating opportunities. But no government sitting on high will ever come up with the grand solution to all New Zealand's problems. After all, even the most experienced and intelligent Cabinet will still be made up of politicians!

New Zealanders don't want us to go around putting our blue or red stamp on everything, claiming credit for all the successes in the country. They don't want us to have a finger in every pie and another finger pointing at someone else's mistakes.

Kiwis know, and I know, that creating a better New Zealand is going to require a combined effort by mums and dads, aunties and uncles, churches, charities, communities, iwi, and businesses, as well as the government.

So the mission of my leadership will be to invigorate and support us all to do our bit, and to work together to fix some of the problems in our society and to make our country great.

A National government will team up with business and community groups to deliver better services to those in need.

Here are a couple of examples I often think about.

Is it really beyond us as a country to ensure that every kid turns up to primary school with some food in their stomach? I don't think so.

Hunger and malnutrition are simply unacceptable in a developed country like New Zealand. And it's a fact that kids can't and don't learn if they are constantly hungry. Their brains don't develop properly and they can't stay focused in the classroom. An empty stomach and an empty lunchbox set kids up for an empty life.

Obviously it's a parent's responsibility to feed their children. What more fundamental parenting role could there be? But that is not what is happening in some parts of the country.

Unless we tackle this problem we are effectively punishing children for the sins of their parents.

Currently, some schools dip into their operational budgets to provide a few Vegemite sandwiches for those who miss out. That is not good enough.

I believe this is an area where government can work alongside the business community to find new and innovative solutions to a deepening social problem.

A National government will challenge the business community to work with us in backing a programme of providing food in low-decile schools for kids in need.

I also think that playing sport is an important part of growing up in New Zealand.

Kids who are out there playing rugby or netball or soccer or softball or any other sport are developing their bodies, getting fit, working in a team with others, and learning to play according to rules.

For kids with poor home lives, sport gives them something constructive to do, to fill the void they have in their spare time. Otherwise, the temptation is to fill this void by hanging round the streets, drifting into drugs and getting into trouble.

But sport can be expensive: football boots, netball uniforms and transport all cost money. It can be hard to find a coach to take the team. In my own electorate, and around the country, many people come up to me with the same observation.

Too many kids in our poorest communities are being excluded from sport because their parents can't afford it. These are the very kids who need it most.

A National government will work with schools, sports clubs, businesses and community groups to ensure that more kids from deprived backgrounds get to play sport.

We will invest in getting those kids playing sport because it reinforces The Kiwi Way.

You might ask "where will the money come from?"

The fact is we are already spending millions of dollars for Wellington bureaucrats to write strategies and to dream up and run their own schemes. I want more of those dollars spent on programmes that work, regardless of who thinks them up and who runs them.

National knows there are not-for-profit groups, businesses, and individuals who have good ideas and who are dedicated to making their communities better places. We know they can often do a better job than the government could ever do.

So I want to turbo-charge the efforts of private and community groups making a difference. I want to change the balance of spending between government and privately-run groups.

Labour often views non-government providers as its competitors, not its partners. It sees them as unprofessional. It tries to squeeze them into boxes that just don't fit. It smothers them with paperwork and makes them apply to multiple funding pools.

Well, I want to grow the competition. I want to get alongside the amazing groups that make a difference in our communities. I want to ask them what the government can do to support and extend their efforts.

I have recently visited many privately-run organisations that are helping to make New Zealand a better place to live. These organisations run innovative and effective programmes to tackle the complex problems which threaten The Kiwi Way.

Programmes like Project K, which gives 14 and 15-year-olds one-on-one mentoring to increase their confidence, and encourages them to fulfil their potential. Programmes like Big Buddy, which teams up fatherless boys to spend quality time with men from their community. Programmes run by the Family Help Trust here in Christchurch, providing child-abuse prevention services for ultra high-risk families.

I know there are many more organisations like these achieving great results. They are run by Kiwis who want to make a difference: the men and women who pour their efforts into City Missions, Citizen Advice Bureaux and the Salvation Army; the people who work at Barnardos, on their local marae, and with all the other organisations that exist to serve their communities.

A National government will get in behind these sorts of organisations. We know that with the right support they can turn deep-seated problems around.

In some cases, we will team up with private and community groups to deliver better services to those in need. In other cases these groups won't want or need our money but will benefit from our co-operation.

Because of our desire to do this, I am charging National's spokespeople to focus on listening to, and working with, the community groups behind these sorts of programmes.

They will be supported by my fellow Auckland MP Paula Bennett who, in a new position of responsibility, will act as a link person with community groups. Paula will be reporting to me personally, because I am determined that we do everything to ensure that opportunities are available to all kids in New Zealand.

When I look back on my own upbringing, I know I was fortunate. Not because of what, in a material sense, my mother was able to give my sisters and me, but because of the love, guidance and self-belief she gave to us.

I remember how it felt to be a little boy on his bike riding past this club on his way round the block.

I remember how it felt to peer in the windows of homes that were materially better than my own, looking at kids with toys better than mine, families with both a mum and a dad, and homes where the fridge was full and there was a car in the garage.

That experience didn't make me bitter or jealous. It made me determined – determined to create a better life for me and for my family. I have done that now, but I'm not stopping there.

I have not lost the ability that I had, even as a child, to work out which things were worth pursuing, to filter out the substance from the trivia, and then to figure out how to achieve my goals. It's just that once I wanted the improvements for myself and my family, and now I'm looking at the goals New Zealand should be striving for, and how best to achieve them.

My ideals have not changed; it's just that the canvas has got a whole lot larger.

Today, I say to all Kiwis that I want you to dare to think what New Zealand can be like and what all our lives can be like. Not to despair, or to feel helpless, but to form your own view of the Kiwi dream and seek to achieve it.

I know our future can be great.

But I also know that when we are frightened and sickened by acts of violence in our community, we don't have to accept it. I know that when we are appalled by how many of our young people are turning to drugs, we don't have to accept it. I know that when we are filled with despair by the problems of families and neighbourhoods, we don't have to accept it.

We can do better as a country; we can provide a future that is brighter.

In our hearts we all know that what makes us proud to be a Kiwi isn't written on a birth certificate or embodied in our passports. It's about a collective pride that ours is a great little country and we are lucky to call it home.

My time in politics will only ever be a success if I can look back knowing I played my part in building on that pride.

I believe the best years for New Zealand are ahead of us. As a nation, we have everything to look forward to. We can be a country that is coming together; not a country that is coming apart.

I am determined to lead a New Zealand that delivers on our promise. I invite you all to join me in that mission.