



# The pregnant PM

New Zealand's prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, on Trump, trade — and becoming only the second world leader to give birth while in office

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## “I have help: my partner will be primary caregiver” Jacinda Ardern

*Prime minister of New Zealand*

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Nothing about the modest red-brick bungalow on the outskirts of Auckland suggests it is the home of a world leader. A topsy-turvy pile of old trainers sits inside the front door and the prime minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, pads around her small kitchen in stocking feet, making tea. “We’re out of milk,” she says apologetically.

On the floor of the living room is a well-thumbed copy of *Dreams from My Father*, Barack Obama’s autobiography. In a couple of hours she is meeting him and is in something of a dilemma. “I’m still trying to decide whether I’ll ask him to sign it or whether that’s too naïf,” she laughs.

It has been an extraordinary year for Ardern, 37. Twelve months ago, few people outside New Zealand had heard of her. Now she is on first-name terms with many world leaders, takes calls from Donald Trump and regularly texts with Theresa May.

Next week she is due to arrive in the UK for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in London, and will see both May and the Queen. She knows England well, having lived in London for 2½ years in her mid-twenties, working first as a senior policy adviser under Tony Blair and then at the Home Office. She lived in Wood Green, Fulham, Vauxhall, then Brixton. “But I’ve never been to Buckingham Palace,” she says. “I will be very self-conscious because I’m not mindful of elbows on tables. I’m a bit casual.”

When I ask if she thinks of herself as a Blairite, she replies: “No. If you said that in New Zealand it would not be particularly meaningful. I’ve always instead described myself as a pragmatic idealist.”

Her star really began to rise when she was made deputy leader of the Labour Party in New Zealand last March. Suddenly in July — with an election looming and no prospect of winning — the lacklustre leader, Andrew Little, resigned, offering the reins to his somewhat reluctant young deputy. With just seven weeks to go, Ardern — campaigning on the slogan “Let’s do this” — instigated a spectacular turnaround. “This is it,” reads a victorious sign on a speaker in her sitting room.

Then, only six days before she assumed office last October, she discovered she was pregnant (which came as a shock to her and her partner, the TV host Clarke Gayford, as the couple had been advised they might need fertility treatment). They kept it secret until January, arranging scans after hours with her GP. Their baby is due in June, when Ardern will become only the second prime minister — after Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan — to give birth in office. Indeed, her visit to Britain is her last overseas trip before the baby is born. “Everything has happened really quite dramatically in the last year,” Ardern says. She plans to take six weeks of maternity leave, then hand over the bulk of the parenting to the “first bloke”, as Gayford is now known.

The phone has hardly stopped ringing since she was thrust onto the world stage. When Trump called to congratulate her, he was interrupted by the plaintive miaowing of their cat Paddles. “It was hilarious,” says Gayford, who has joined us, looking relaxed in a T-shirt and shorts. “[Paddles] was squawking her head off. I had to remove her.” Shortly afterwards, Paddles was run over — but her food bowl still sits in the kitchen. “We just couldn’t bring ourselves to get rid of it,” says Ardern.

New Zealand may seem like an Eden at the bottom of the earth, its rolling green hills and misty mountains providing the stunning setting for the *Lord of the Rings* movie trilogy. But under the surface are problems: a third of the country’s children live below the poverty line, homelessness and drugs are rampant and the country has the highest youth suicide rate in the world.

When we meet, she has just endured a tough fortnight of local political mishaps, including allegations of sexual assault and underage drinking at a Young Labour camp and difficulties with a pro-Russian deputy leader.

Not that you would know it to meet her. Her disposition is sunny and relaxed as she offers brownies and sips herbal tea. Determined to keep life as normal as possible, she does not have a stylist. “There are probably people who think I should, but I don’t.” She wears a low-backed red shirt, a black maternity skirt, dangly earrings made by a friend and two black onyx rings. “Onyx is meant to ward off things, isn’t it?” ➤➤➤

PHOTOGRAPH  
CHARLES HOWELLS

She still does most of her own shopping. “So much of this job is abnormal, I crave little things like going to the supermarket and making dinner at home.”

She shows me a Snapchat screenshot on her phone that a colleague has just sent her, of a young woman’s face goggle-eyed with amazement and the words: “Omfg, Jacinda is in queue at Spark [a phone store] eating a chocolate bar in a Cotton On dress, she’s so legit! The people’s queen.”

“It’s true,” Ardern laughs, “we were at a shop trying to top up Clarke’s phone.”

Only occasionally does the attention become too much. A couple of weeks ago, she was in a department store heading to a changing room with an armful of maternity bras. “A man started following me, saying, ‘Please please please, I’d like a photo.’ And I turned round and said, ‘While I’m *bra* shopping?’ — just to make it very obvious that it was slightly awkward. He was an older man and I could feel myself blushing. That’s the only time I’ve said no [to a selfie].”

**T**here is a sense in New Zealand that Ardern is healing the nation where her predecessors have failed. Her commitment to improving relations with the Maori population has won her widespread praise: she stayed for an unprecedented five days in the far north in February, for the commemorative ceremony at Waitangi for New Zealand’s national day, where she welcomed an invitation by Maori elders to bury her baby’s placenta at the site in a symbolic gesture.

Her political drive comes from a deep-seated sense of social injustice. Born to Mormon parents in Dinsdale, a working-class suburb of Hamilton on the North Island, her early years were spent in Murupara, an impoverished and predominantly Maori community, where her father was the local policeman and her mother a canteen worker. “I have very vivid memories of a little boy walking home from school on his own and I thought, ‘He’s my age, why is he on his own?’ Then I noticed he didn’t have shoes and had soiled himself. He was clearly unwell and was just sobbing as he walked. I’ve never ever forgotten it.”

A photograph from that time shows her and her older sister, Louise, with mullet haircuts, on a trailer surrounded by Maori children. “I remember having bottles thrown at our house,” Ardern says today.

At the age of eight, the family moved to Morrinsville, a tranquil farming community 85 miles south of Auckland. Cows are dotted over the gentle hills leading into the town, and a handwritten sign offers “Pony poo for sale: \$2.50/bag”. Little has changed since Ardern’s day: the Golden Kiwi fish-and-chip shop where she used to work still has pride of position on the colourful high street, and John Inger is still principal at the high school, Morrinsville College. “Gosh, we’re proud of her,” he says, munching sandwiches during a lunch break. “She spent a lot of time in this office, not because she was in trouble, but because she was advocating on behalf of other students. Anyone who underestimates her will find they’re bitten on the bottom,” he chuckles.

In the large school library, her former English teacher Jacqui Fitzgerald shows me the 1998 yearbook, where Ardern is listed as “Most Likely to become prime minister”. “It makes me laugh,” Ardern says the next day. “It certainly wasn’t because I talked about having these ambitions, it was just ‘Jacinda likes politics, she’ll be prime minister’. I had so many wonderful



opportunities because I grew up in that small town. I wonder whether or not I would have got a little bit lost in a big school.”

Inger directs me to a peaceful street by the golf course where Ardern lived next-door to her best friend, Virginia Dawson. It is a beautiful setting, Mount Te Aroha looming in the distance, the only sound the chirping of birds. The pair remain great friends — Ardern is godmother to one of Dawson’s children and both now have babies due on almost the same day. Dawson’s mother, Alison, offers to show me the old Ardern family home, a simple “lockwood” property — constructed of planks that slot together without nails. “My grandfather built the house,” Ardern says.

Becoming prime minister was extraordinary enough, but when she told her family the baby news they were speechless. “There’s something in that [phrase], ‘give work to a busy person’, but there are limits.” She admits to having suffered from “horrific” morning sickness, but refused to let it get in the way. “I just felt sick all the time, but I took a very no-nonsense approach. I didn’t have time to mess around, so I just got on with it.” Or, as she put it bluntly earlier this year: “I’m pregnant, not incapacitated.”

Not, she says, that she wants to create “this picture of perfection”. “Women multitask all the time, I just happen to do it in a more public way. I’m very mindful that I don’t want to be some kind of poster child saying women can do everything, because it implies women should do everything. And I think women have enough expectations. I can only do everything because I have help, by which I mean Clarke: he’s going to be primary caregiver. He’s cool with that, it’s not like we really had a choice, we didn’t sit down and say, ‘Right, who’s going to give up work?’ We just accept that that’s our lives.”

The two of them are, she says, very much an equal partnership. “What are you answering on my behalf?” asks Gayford, who has wandered back into the room. “Clarke does more washing than I do, hands down,” Ardern quickly admits. Gayford laughs. The problem, he says, is that Ardern ruins his white T-shirts by putting them in with red socks. She still does a lot of the cooking — Gayford recently suggested that if she chose a recipe early in the day, he would buy all the ingredients and line them up, ready to go. “Hmmm,” says Ardern, “he’s yet to do it.”

In 2001, she graduated from the University of Waikato, where she studied politics and public relations, and went to work as a researcher for Helen Clark, New Zealand’s second female prime minister (Ardern is the third). From there she moved to London, and was later elected as president of the International Union ➤➤➤

#### HOUSE GUEST

Right: hosting the former US president Barack Obama at Government House, Auckland, last month



#### HIM OUTDOORS

A spot of DIY with her partner, Clarke Gayford — hours before winning the general election on September 23, 2017



**CLASS ACT**  
Graduating from the University of Waikato, with a degree in politics and public relations, in 2001

of Socialist Youth. She became a Labour MP in New Zealand at 28, the youngest lawmaker in parliament at the time. Her early success was, of course, mostly down to her own flair and drive, but also has something to do with New Zealand's progressive feminist politics — in 1893, it was the first country in the world to give women the right to vote. "A path was carved well before I came along," she says. "The vast majority of people in New Zealand don't make decisions based on gender. By and large, we give people the benefit of the doubt. I don't think politics is nearly as vicious here as it is [elsewhere]."

If Hillary Clinton had run against Donald Trump here, might she have won? "I don't know," she replies. "But I do feel remarkably lucky to live in a country where youth and gender have not hampered the role I've been able to play in politics."

She mulls over why it is that female leaders are often known for trivial things, such as Theresa May's leather trousers or Hillary Clinton's hair: "I'm mindful that probably there are a lot of people who will only know me for being a woman and having a baby while in office. But I get that too. When you're only the second person in the world [to do so], it's going to stand out. I just don't want those to be the only things [remembered]."

There was recent outrage on her behalf over an interview on the Australian current-affairs TV show *60 Minutes*, which was described as sexist and creepy. The veteran reporter Charles Wooley said he was "smitten" with the "attractive" PM, then tried to count back to the precise conception date. Ardern was unfazed. "I'm not sensitive. When a famous rugby league legend in New Zealand [Graham Lowe] called me a pretty little thing, was I offended? No, because his intent wasn't to upset me. Intent, for me, matters a lot." She was more surprised when a young male journalist recently asked how she was going to give birth. "I just said, 'Like everyone else. Do I need to describe it to you?'"

Most memorable, however, was her reaction when a TV presenter suggested to her last year (before she became pregnant) that women should tell potential employers if they plan to start a family. Ardern lost her patience: "It is totally unacceptable in 2017 to say women should have to answer that question in the workplace."

When the situation calls for it, she is unblinkingly forthright. At the East Asia Summit in Manila, she overheard Trump telling the person standing next to him that her election "had caused a lot of upset in New Zealand." "I just said, without even thinking, 'Well, no one marched when I was elected.'" She joined the Auckland march for women's rights following Trump's inauguration and has been hailed as the "anti-Trump".

She has developed a good relationship with May, who, she says, "is navigating an incredibly tough political environment". May was quick to call her to congratulate her on the election win. "Since then we've exchanged a few text messages and I really appreciate that level of informality in communication." As for a post-Brexit trade deal with New Zealand, Ardern says "the ball is very much in the UK's court. We are ready and willing.

“Women multitask all the time, I just happen to do it in a more public way”

If you're going to start anywhere, I'd say we'd be a good place to start. I have no doubt that Australia will be very keen as well. The only hold-up from our perspective is the UK's readiness, and just the delays that the exit might create. In the meantime, we've put a lot of emphasis on trying to progress an EU Free Trade Agreement and, hopefully this year, there'll be a mandate from the EU to begin negotiations with us."

She is determined that the feelings that led to Brexit do not spread to New Zealand. She believes the centre left is on the back foot globally because of the new technological revolution and the uncertainty this has caused among voters. "We're in a cycle at the moment: left and progressive parties are just not doing well. People are feeling more insecure, be it financially or not having a sense that their future is quite as predictable as before, and might be looking for an outlet or something to blame for that sense of insecurity. And no one's immune to that. I want at least here in New Zealand for us to be in front of that, so we don't leave anything to chance." She wants to ensure that "workers are transitioned into future opportunities and are not left behind by the carnage of a new industrial revolution".

Often described as "genuine", sometimes as "naive", no one doubts that she speaks from the heart. "I am earnest, there's no denying it. And [I've been called] a girly swot, which is also fair." Asked what is the wildest thing she has ever done, she hesitates. Gayford teases her: "She's not telling you because I'm around."

"Yes, sure, I'd much rather tell the world than you," she tells him sarcastically. Nevertheless Gayford slips out of the room and Ardern continues: "I was not that kind of young person where I'm going to have some debauched story. I've been a bit bold about where I've travelled: I remember getting stuck at the border between Israel and Palestine and having trouble communicating with two young men with very large guns, and I thought maybe this wasn't the smartest idea."

At university she did a stint as a DJ and still has a penchant for alternative rock. She left the Mormon church while living with three gay friends in Auckland in her early twenties, realising that she could no longer countenance the church's refusal to support gay marriage.

Gayford, who for the moment still hosts his popular angling programme, *Fish of the Day*, is relaxed about becoming a father. "I always ask people for their one piece of advice," he says. "Jaspers," he calls over to the press secretary Mike Jaspers, who is with Ardern: "What's your key piece of advice?" "Share the sleeping duties," Jaspers replies. "Don't both get up in the night." Jaspers glances over at Gayford, barefoot and still in T-shirt and shorts, and reminds him he's due to meet Obama soon. "You'll need to change," he teases. "Well, obviously," says Gayford, not moving from his chair.

An hour later, immaculate in a well-cut suit and tie, he looks on proudly as Ardern presses noses — literally — with Obama, during a *hongi*, a traditional Maori greeting. Afterwards, Ardern and Obama walk together into Auckland's Government House for a private meeting. "I hear you're expecting a baby," Obama says to her as they pass where I am standing. "I am, yes, in a few weeks," Ardern replies. "That's so exciting," he enthuses. She later says that Obama shared some advice on being a leader and a parent: "You do your best."

So, did she ask him to sign her copy of his autobiography? "I did!" ■