



The Mighty Totara: The Life and Times of Norman Kirk

David Grant

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A major biography of arguably New Zealand's greatest modern political leader As Norman Kirk's body lay in state near the steps of Parliament on the day after his death on 31 August 1974, a kaumatua wailed 'the mighty totara has fallen'. The lament reflected what many New Zealanders felt about this big, commanding and loved leader, dead at just 51. More than 30,000 people filed past Kirk's casket over two days, and again in Christchurch, in a commemoration that matched only Michael Joseph Savage's for emotional power. Both men died in office, both men were humanitarians. Kirk also worked to move the Labour Party away from its cloth-cap heritage to embrace a much broader electoral compass, for it to become, in his words, 'the natural party of New Zealand'. Prime Minister of New Zealand between November 1972 and August 1974, Kirk's childhood was blighted with poverty, yet he thrived. He moved into a succession of manual trades, before booming into local body politics. His political rise was rapid, from mayor of Kaiapoi at the age of 30 to leader of the Labour Party within a few years. This book examines Kirk's political leadership; his successes, especially his stunning performances on the international stage, but also his later difficulties when the country's economy was rocked by international oil shocks. He deferred the 1973 Springbok tour and sent warships into the French nuclear testing zone near Mururoa Atoll, his government set up ohu and the established the DPB. He was New Zealand's first truly regionalist Prime Minister, drawing New Zealand closer to Asia and the Pacific, as the ties to 'mother Britain' slowly loosened. This landmark book takes the full measure of the remarkable New Zealander who was our last working-class Prime Minister.

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