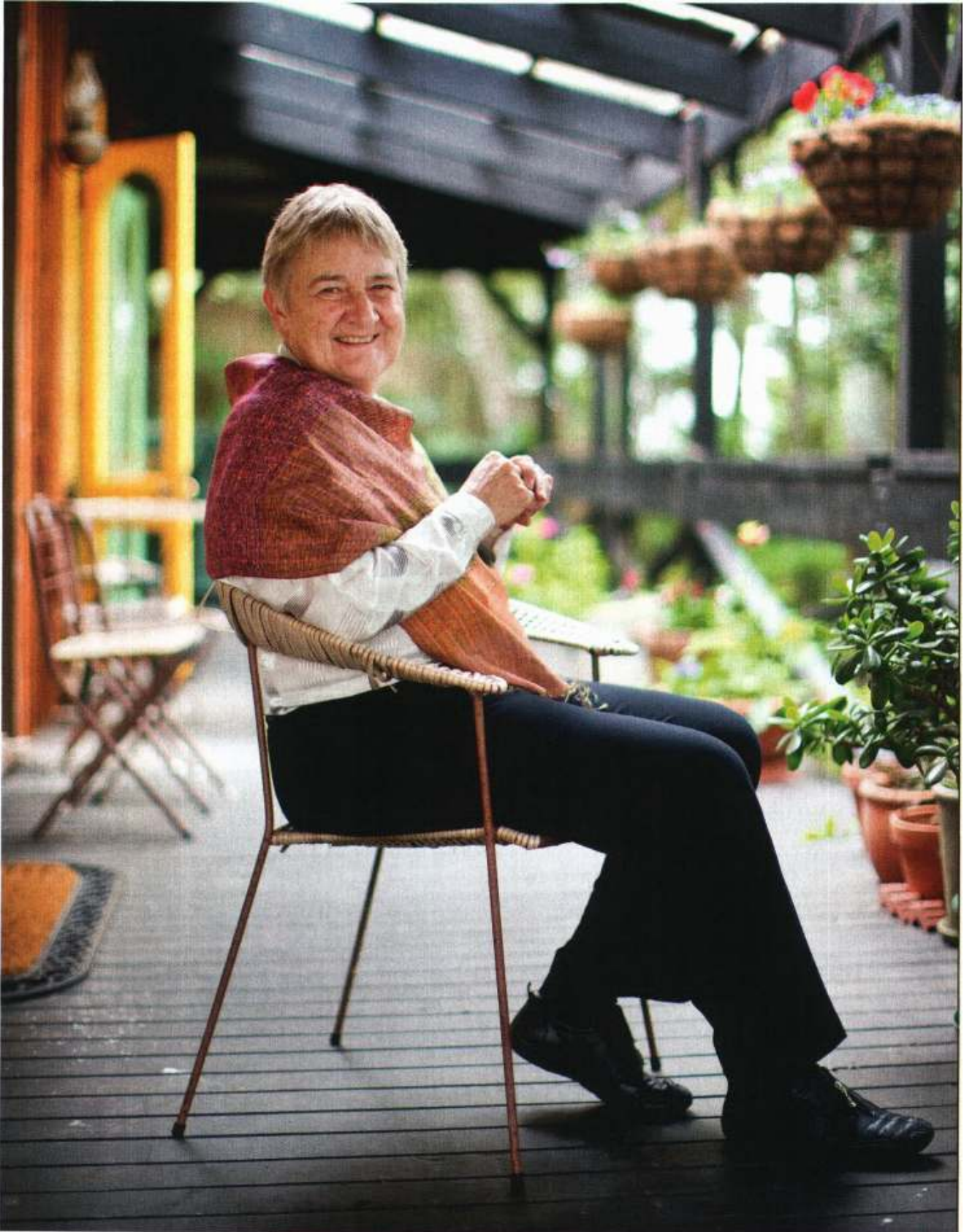




MARILYN WARING





Still counting

Internationally celebrated, Marilyn Waring was recently named on a list of 50 people who will change the world. **by GUYON ESPINER photo by DAVID WHITE**

At a cluttered desk in a shabby office on a nondescript campus in the soulless Auckland suburb of Albany sits a woman who changed the course of New Zealand history. Now a professor of public policy at AUT University, Marilyn Waring has an office crammed with her own work: texts and tomes and tracts on gender and GDP and governance, which are sold, studied and celebrated around the world. Her influence has extended into the arts, too. She has served on the council of Creative New Zealand and judged the Montana book awards in 2003.

She stands to meet her guest and her face brightens into a chirpy smile. Despite the heaviness of her calling and the weight of history, Waring isn't weary, or wary: she's open, invigorated and at ease with the world and her substantial place in it.

On turning 60, she has made some big decisions. It's time to spend more time on herself. She will pull back from the international speaking circuit – no more gold-plated corporate gigs like the one from which she has just returned, in France, where she joined Cherie Blair and others in Deauville for the Women's Forum for the Economy and Society.

They went "wild" about her speech but it made her despondent because it was what she'd been saying for 25 years. It was the core of her book *If Women Counted*, written in 1988 and made into a film in 1995 – not in New Zealand, but by

Canada's National Film Board. In it, she eviscerated the mighty measurement of GDP with her celebrated example of how the oil-spewing Exxon Valdez was the

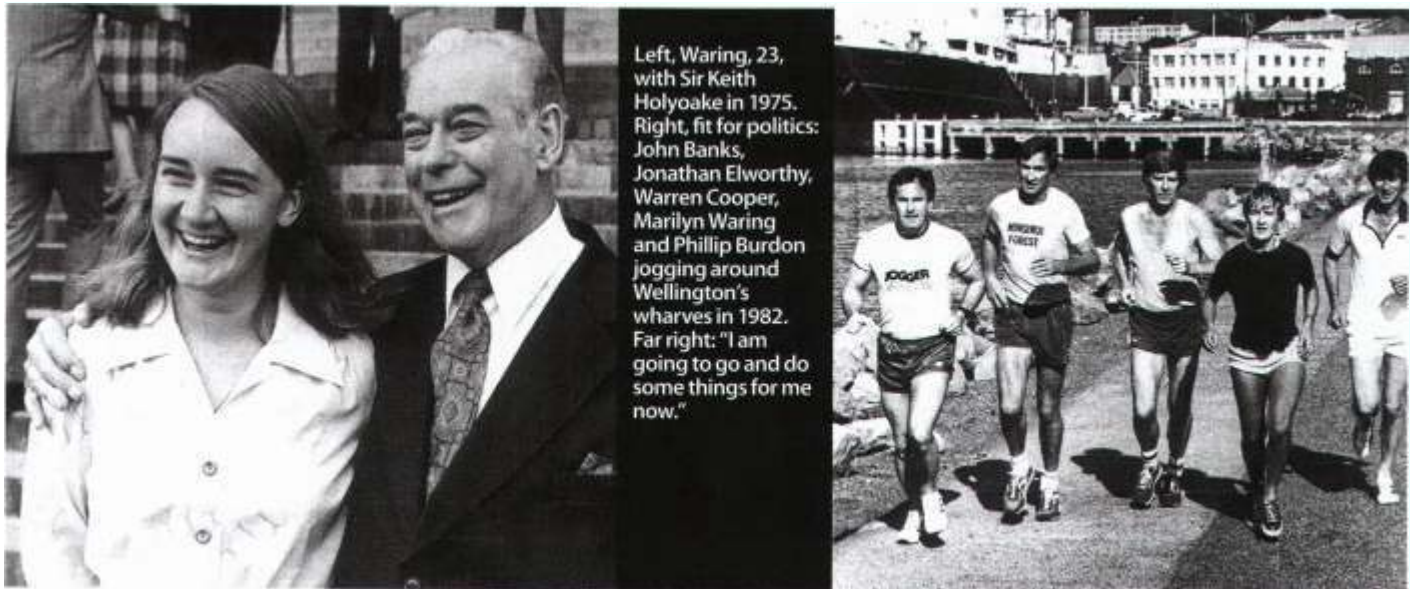
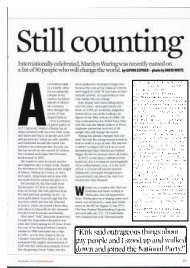
most productive oil tanker voyage ever because the costs of the clean-up contributed hugely to GDP. "If you want to have fantastic growth, it's a good idea to ram your tanker into an iceberg."

Sure, people have been taking notice over the years – although mainly offshore. In 1994, an Australian magazine named her as one of the leading cult figures of the 20th century. In 2005, she was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and this year the British edition of *Wired* magazine named her in its list of 50 people who will change the world.

Waring has already changed New Zealand. She was the young woman forced to sink or swim in a sea of suits. She was the country's youngest MP, took on its most intimidating Prime Minister and helped trigger the law we treasure above all others.

In 2012, as she takes a sabbatical from academia, she is writing an autobiography of her parliamentary years. It is the story of how a 22-year-old woman entered Parliament, eventually brought down a government and paved the way for a nuclear-free New Zealand.

Waring was a country kid. Dad was a butcher and Mum worked at McKenzies, the old department store. Waring gave up a singing career and, barely out of her teens, came into Parliament as the MP for Raglan. It was 1975. The New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation was split into TV1, TV2 and Radio New Zealand that year. Homosexuality



Left, Waring, 23, with Sir Keith Holyoake in 1975. Right, fit for politics: John Banks, Jonathan Elworthy, Warren Cooper, Marilyn Waring and Phillip Burdon jogging around Wellington's wharves in 1982. Far right: "I am going to go and do some things for me now."

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was still illegal. Anton Oliver was born, Norman Kirk was dead and Robert Muldoon was Prime Minister.

In her second term, between 1978 and 1981, Waring was the only woman in the National caucus and one of only four women in Parliament. In fact, she recalls, when she first entered Parliament all the heads of government departments were men, all 23 judges were men, all the 37 metropolitan and provincial newspaper editors were men, as were 31 of the 39 press gallery journalists.

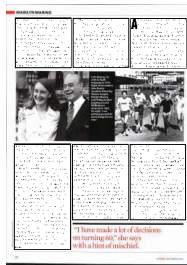
What was that like? “Dreadful,” she replies flatly. “I am glad I was so young and resilient and had heaps of energy and it meant that I didn’t buckle as much as I think I may have chosen to in later years.” Her first letter to the Clerk of the House

requested a crèche in the building. She would later recount, in *A Letter to My Sisters*, published in the *Listener* in May 1984, a typical lunch conversation between National Party MPs at Parliament’s Belamy’s restaurant.

“MP No 1: ‘How can you legislate against rape in marriage? It couldn’t be implemented.’ MP No 2: ‘That’s not the point. Why should you be able to rape your wife in the bedroom but not beat her up in the kitchen?’ MP No 3: ‘Then beat her up in the bedroom and rape her in the kitchen!’ Honourable Members: ‘Ha ha ha.’”

She spent the last few years of Parliament on antidepressants. She would cry behind dark glasses on the commute





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from Hamilton and vomit when she got to work. But outwardly her strength was phenomenal. She defied the entire party machine and its brutal leader to cross the floor and vote with Labour on a bill, promoted by Richard Prebble, banning nuclear ships from New Zealand waters. Then she withdrew from National's caucus and select committees. After leaving Parliament, Waring set up an angora goat farm in Waipa, near her old electorate. She stuck at it for 15 years but gave it away in 2003.

She admits she deliberately provoked a drunk Prime Minister into calling a snap election over the stand-off. “I was 31. I knew what I was doing and why I was doing it,” she says. “When you have worked with them all for that long, they are very predictable.”

As laid out in *His Way*, Barry Gustafson's book on Muldoon that Waring confirms is accurate, the young MP is called to a crisis meeting with the Prime Minister. She changes into a tracksuit and trainers and takes an apple with her. With Muldoon fuming over his wafer-thin parliamentary majority, Waring puts her feet on a coffee table and crunches the apple in the face of a “vindictive monologue”.

Now she will have her own account in her upcoming book. “You weren't supposed to but I took minutes of every caucus meeting,” she says. “Because it is pre-email and text, everything is there – everything. Caucus committee minutes, every letter everybody ever wrote to me

about anything.” She offers tantalising glimpses of these treasures – apparently an archivist holds 42 cartons of her files – although the book could be two years away.

“There is extraordinary material there. It's quite a period. It's dawn raids, it's Bastion Point, it's Springbok Tour, nuclear-free New Zealand, three reproductive-freedom debates and Lord knows what else.” Being an academic, she spent two years reading academic books about autobiography and asked herself some serious questions. “I am very aware the person writing this is not the person who lived through it. I am writing it but I am a different person,” she says.

So, how did the men view her? Paul East was a fellow backbencher between 1978 and 1984. He first thought Waring an odd fit with National but says it was her belief in “personal freedom” that drew her to the party. He says she was the first MP to speak up on women's issues and “carried the flag” almost on her own in the whole Parliament. “Many of us might not have liked it at the time, but looking back you really have to admire that,” he says.

And Waring feels the time is right to look back. “For a long time I knew I couldn't write it because I was angry. One of the things that I know about writing is that if you write when you are angry, it hits the reader off the page – and it's not the reader's fault.” She's not angry now. She seems to relish the fact she is revisiting

the rebel she was and that her story will again echo down the corridors of power.

At this distance it's hard to fathom why she joined the National Party at all. As a student at Victoria University in Wellington, Waring would visit the library each morning and read the *Dominion*. “I walked in there one morning and [National MP] Venn Young had indicated his desire to introduce a homosexual law reform bill from Opposition. Kirk was the Prime Minister and Kirk said outrageous things about gay people, and I stood up from the library and walked down to the centre of Wellington and joined the National Party.”

Some things change: Waring is “definitely” no longer a member of the National Party. Some things don't change: New Zealand is still debating whether to give gay people the same standards of citizenship as everyone else. Waring describes Louisa Wall's marriage equality bill now before Parliament as “fantastic”.

But there are new battles – such as equal rights for third-gender people. Just as she cuts through the miasma of jargon that clouds economics, so she does with human rights issues. “As far as I am concerned, gender isn't dichotomous ... it's male at one side, female at the other and many in between,” she says.

“Filling in forms, in particular, where you only have male and female as your options – I think even the Australians



have moved passports to male, female, third gender." Waring has successfully brought the issue of third-gender people into training documents she has prepared for the gender unit of the United Nations Development Programme. The books are used to train senior bureaucrats and MPs, from Iran to Niue.

She gets up and drags a hefty report off the shelf. "These are the first UN documents that talk about third-gender persons other than in HIV and Aids," she says. She convinced the UN to include third-gender people after demonstrating that numerous countries – including India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand and Pakistan – either had recognition of them or words for them. "So you can show even in the language that this is no new Western-imposed, manufactured, dreadful, decadent thing. This is natural and normal and it happens. But it was a battle to get it in. I did have to battle, but in the end I feel chuffed that it was in there."

Waring is a true internationalist with an uncanny knack for being there when history unfolds – or perhaps a keen eye for pursuing it. She was in Bombay when Indira Gandhi was assassinated in 1984, in Ethiopia during the famine that same year and even attended the state funeral for Bob Marley in Jamaica, as New Zealand's official representative in 1981.

Her academic experience is international, too, with fellowships at universities in the US, Canada and Australia.

Her international experience and exposure, although gruelling, keep her optimistic about the relevance of feminism. "Because I am in the international

arena so much, I am surrounded by another two generations below me of extraordinary young women: brave, creative, strategically clever, working so well and so hard."

In Istanbul in April, at the Association for Women's Rights in Development, Waring was with 2500 women from 135 countries – a third of them under 30. "Every one of them was unapologetically feminist," she says. The stories from women in Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Egypt and Tunisia give her a perspective few New Zealanders get. "For me, feminism has not dissipated, gone away, run out of energy or fallen into silos, because I continue to have that international perspective from the grass roots to the higher echelons."

So, what about the backlash and the reaction against feminism that anyone can hear on talkback radio?

She doesn't listen to talkback radio, describing it as "tragic" and "soul-destroying" and won't generalise about whether New Zealand men feel threatened by her views now. In fact, she still can't explain why they felt threatened in the 1970s.

"Why were all of those much older, bigger men threatened by one 23-year-old? You know? That seems a bit bizarre. There must be some real problem with who you are to be threatened like that."

Discrimination, she says, is not going to disappear. She has just listened to radio coverage of a Government announcement guaranteeing jobs to Kiwis rebuilding Christchurch.

"What you hear are the men saying: 'Now these 900 positions are going to be

great for young men – oh, oh, oh and women, too!' So, actually, it is not part of their framework at all. They are going out to look for young men and [women are] an afterthought. So have we moved a lot further since 1975?"

Waring has moved and now it is time to move again. "I have made a lot of decisions on turning 60," she says with a hint of mischief. She had something of an epiphany on a beach walk in France after her speech to the Women's Forum.

She began to ask why she was spending all her time on the road, singing the same old song. So by the time she left Deauville, she had resigned from various boards, written a proposal for a sabbatical to work on her autobiography and developed new criteria for accepting international work offers.

"These are the two I said no to yesterday," she says, running her finger down a list of invitations from the UN, the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and various governments.

"If I think I am going to accept an international invitation, then I have to run it past my father, because then I have to really work hard to justify it," she says. "I've still got my mum and dad. I am very lucky. I have close family and fantastic friends and I thought I've just done enough of this," she says, laughing. "I've done enough of this. I am going to go and do some things for me now." ■

 For Marilyn Waring's 1984 *A Letter to My Sisters*, visit www.listener.co.nz.

