

Fridays
with Jim

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Conversations about our country
with Jim Bolger



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Introduction

The idea for putting together a collection of conversational interludes with Jim Bolger came to me a couple of years ago, when I was researching a story about New Zealand's diplomatic and trade history. Part of the brief had involved taking an hour's drive north from my home in Wellington to the coastal town of Waikanae to spend a Friday morning with the man who had been our country's thirty-fifth prime minister.

I felt that, as a former political leader, corporate player and a one-time ambassador, he could deliver some insightful comments. This he did with familiar aplomb.

Familiar *is* the word, too. Jim — pardon the deviation from usual journalistic style rules, but this is a first-name-basis book — is now in his mid-eighties. It's as if he has always been with us.

Oh sure, these days the hair is more vividly white. Those pale blue eyes have now acquired a more benign look. And, yes, he occasionally slips into referring to himself in the third person, in a slightly more crackly voice than that youngish new Cabinet minister used in the late 1970s and early 1980s. But the Bolger gusto, always one of his great signatures, is still there. See him out mowing the lawns or gardening

in the large section he shares with Joan. Listen to him holding forth on one or other of his pet themes — the eclipse of the white global class, say, or the environment — and there's no doubting the energy level.

Yet something else that struck me at the time was how little has been published over the decades about the actual man. It's a surprising omission: Jim Bolger has been in the public eye on and off for the past half-century, most notably as a three-term prime minister, and yet we don't know him and his interesting paradoxes all that well. A man from an orthodox party who is yet not an orthodox thinker. A quintessentially New Zealand leader from a relatively unusual background among New Zealand chiefs. A business leader who has moved in the wealthiest circles yet comes from an economically tough personal background. An academic leader who dropped out of school early. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, he's never really been a status quo kind of guy.

You'd think we would already have all that good oil. Actually, not so. The basic details of that public life are well known, and en route to the pantheon of political trivia. Any winning team in a pub quiz could tell you, for instance, that James Brendan Bolger, the son of Irish immigrants, was born in the Taranaki village of Opunake in 1935. His parents farmed rock-strewn land. He left school early to help them. Later, he married a young teacher, Joan Riddell; started his own family; and bought a sheep and beef farm in the King Country. The couple would eventually have nine children.

Unsurprisingly, he became involved with Federated Farmers, which was to be the springboard for a political career. He entered Parliament in 1972 as the National MP for the newly created seat of King Country. Three years on, the Opposition surged into office.

For most people of a certain age, Jim came to prominence as a minister of labour serving under Robert Muldoon. It was an era in



If only catching votes was so easy.

which the country sizzled with industrial disputes; at any one time there were as many as 30 roiling the economy. Compulsory unionism, which Jim would later be instrumental in dismantling, was the order of the day for workers. In an appointment that would probably be considered odd by today's standards, he was also an undersecretary for Maori Affairs.

The advent of television was pivotal to his political ascendance. Norman Kirk, whose one-term Labour government Muldoon had toppled in 1975, was the first New Zealand politician to really use the medium, and Muldoon later made it his own. Jim had neither the screen power of his leader nor Kirk's oratorical flair, but he looked appealing enough, and his background in debating was (and still is) an advantage.

Most strikingly, according to historian and former Labour minister Michael Bassett, he could be fearless when the occasion demanded, as much in Parliament as he had been when representing farmers. 'While extolling the virtues of his constituency, he revealed a sense of history, and understood the inevitability of change,' Bassett has noted. 'That kind of perception is not always the hallmark of farmers.' Nor, Bassett also noted, was he reluctant to break with tradition; despite the convention that new MPs should give only light and frothy maiden speeches, in 1972 he used his to launch a spirited attack on the newly elected government of Norman Kirk.

Jim became leader of the National Party in 1986. In the first few years he had the opportunity to study the relatively brief premiership of Geoffrey Palmer and the ridiculously briefer one of Mike Moore. Taking notes came naturally to somebody who, according to his former press secretary, Jim Burns, 'undoubtedly made mistakes, but never made the same mistake twice'.

No doubt part of Jim's success story was the dire state the Labour

government found itself in by the late 1980s. Its economic reforms had proved a mixed blessing at best. Squabbles and ideological ructions were rife. This all helped National secure its largest ever victory in the 1990 election, but so too, obviously, did its turbo-charged leader who, despite never doing wonderfully well in the public opinion polls, ticked off all or most of Michael Bassett's seven essential attributes for leadership: high ambitions, rude good health, intelligence, good [self-] education, the ability to come across well on television, a supportive home environment, a cheerful temperament, the capacity to make tough decisions and, perhaps most importantly, the ability to give a sense of a better world.

Among the achievements of Jim's stewardship of the country as prime minister was the introduction of a mixed member proportional (MMP) representation system. He helped negotiate a number of pioneering Treaty of Waitangi settlements, including with Ngāi Tahu and Tainui. He persuaded his party to embrace Labour's signature anti-nuclear policy and, most critically, his government brought the country's accounts back into balance. He nudged New Zealand's perception of itself away from being a satellite of Europe and towards being a fully fledged member of the Asia–Pacific region.

Considerably less successful were his attempts to promote republicanism, an argument he made on local terms rather than on the Irish experience that informed his conviction. Although, here again, good instincts possibly saved him from going out on a limb as the party's next three-term leader, John Key, did on the flag issue, and pushing for a referendum he could not possibly hope to carry.

In 1990 National was elected on the promise of delivering a 'decent society' but would be known for delivering what many regarded as a decidedly indecent Budget, a famously austere one delivered by Jim's right-hand-woman, finance minister Ruth Richardson. Her 1991 Budget

slashed government spending, which was arguably needed, while also undermining the softer brand National had been trying to project in the wake of the right-wing economic policies of the previous ninth-floor crowd. This was something the new government did not need.

Jim and his finance minister eventually parted company. Later still, in 1997, Jim would have his own parting of ways with his caucus when a confident Jenny Shipley deposed him as leader. It was the first successful coup against a sitting PM in decades — and ultimately one of the most pointless. Two years later the party was dispatched by Helen Clark's impressively re-energised Labour Party. It took National another three elections and four more leaders before they won again with John Key.

The man Shipley got rid of might, understandably, have percolated in bitterness over this. Apparently not so. There followed a successful dive into diplomacy as New Zealand's ambassador to Washington. Jim held this position for four years, most dramatically as our man in the American capital on the morning of 11 September 2001. He has since held a number of corporate positions, including, recently, a 12-year stint as chancellor of the University of Waikato, a ceremonial but influential role. His chairmanship of several boards has included being founding chair of Kiwibank and of the country's renationalised rail operation, KiwiRail.

Most of this stuff is relatively easy to find from a quick computer search. It's harder to discover anything much else offering a personal vantage. If, as Michael Bassett says, the real keys to Jim Bolger's life have been his rude good health, his religion, his marriage, his good temperament and a bit of (Irish) luck, then little has been written about any of this. I know it hasn't because I looked for it two years ago. I looked for it again before raising the subject with Jim.

This book tries to fill that gap.

This wasn't the first time I had thought about the missing Bolger narrative. In a sense, our Friday morning sessions actually began when I first met Jim back in July 1989, when he was prepping for what would be a successful campaign in the following year's general election. I was prepping for my own journalistic career by getting into the habit of interviewing political leaders.

The first of those interviews was with Jim's one-time political boss, the sourpuss of Tāmaki. I was in my early twenties, and more than a tad nervous as I presented my tape recorder to Rob Muldoon. Although he was no longer the country's premier, the old warrior still enjoyed a reputation for chewing up cub reporters. And there he was, in the moody light of yet another far-flung Friday morning, all red-rimmed eyes and rollicking mouth. No formalities, no hellos. In the event, Muldoon was relatively good-humoured, which was just as well because my tape recorder broke down about five minutes into the interview and we had to reschedule.

I interviewed most of the Labour leaders (and even got sued by one). Later there was Jenny Shipley, who had recently completed her transition from Sunday school teacher to being the woman who ended Jim Bolger's premiership. That was interesting. Lists of the many things she passionately believed in filled many pages of my notebook. Otherwise, I mainly stuck to pressing the record button. I remember wishing she didn't spend so much of her time smiling.

I also interviewed Jim a number of times. The first was that earlier piece for the *Evening Post*, then again later while he was PM, and once more with feeling in Washington DC, where we sat together in the monastic hush of his office at the New Zealand embassy. At the time of our first encounter, and indeed for a good period afterwards, the Labour Party was short of breath. This provided a natural angle for my original article. Afterwards, I remember thinking I should have

made more in the piece about his obviously impressive knack for sensing the popular mood. This was something that was starting to be reflected in the polls.

His farming background probably had something to do with it. Certainly, it must have given him the constitution he obviously needed to keep the business ticking over while also raising nine children and discharging his political duties. It has also made him a recognisable Kiwi type. And growing up in a small rural community gave him a gut feel for what that average New Zealander might be thinking or feeling; even as he has always insisted, perhaps not entirely convincingly, that he is somewhat impervious to popular fashion and mood.

The more I reflected on it, the more I perceived a number of other themes in his life with which I hazily felt some degree of personal identification, or at least keen interest. Take his lack of formal education. Jim is one of four premiers during my lifetime who quit school early — he was 15. The other three were Keith Holyoake, Norman Kirk and Mike Moore, which, when you think about it, says something about our country. Something good, I think.

It has often occurred to me in journalism that the better the formal education most people have, the more entangled (for lack of a better word) in it they tend to be, even decades after they get their diplomas or degrees. At first — and here I speak as one drawn from the ranks of the autodidactic — I used to rather envy this and wish I could have been part of that self-contained, socially advantaged elite. Gradually I changed that view. I started to appreciate that my kind of educational experience had the great benefit of leaving no trace on me at all. Any academic deficiencies are more than compensated for by the fact that one's first experience of adult life comes not through a cloistered education by people from exactly the same environment but rather by people actually living and earning their living.

Jim is an example of what I mean. Here's a self-taught man who learnt the ropes in the real world and went on to run a government for the better part of a decade with the corporate touch of a Harvard MBA — and no, the Ivy League comparison isn't strained. More than one old parliamentary hound I chatted with made a point of saying that the Bolger-style executive branch of the 1990s was the country's first truly professionalised political structure.

The self-education probably explains other things about him, not least his much commented on, and sometimes derided, knack for mimicking accents, which might come more naturally to people who take their lessons from those they are talking with, and a slightly overformal way of speaking. It probably also says something about his pragmatic sensibility. When you learn your cues by listening to others, it's natural to make room for at least some of their arguments. He also grew up quite poor by today's standards. That's hardly surprising for the offspring of migrants from Wexford, Ireland, who arrived in New Zealand with little money and who started out in this country as farmworkers during the straitened height of the Depression.

Jim's commitments during his formative years also meant he never got to experience the Kiwi rite of passage, the great OE, until he was a slip of a lad of 63. I refer, of course, to his successful stint as the country's ambassador to Washington DC. Here our paths crossed again when I interviewed him for *Metro*, the now defunct Auckland city magazine.

Finally, there was the world as it is today, on which the country's oldest elder statesman seemed well placed to offer thoughtful views. And who isn't interested in that?

Oh, I nearly forgot to mention Covid-19. Actually, Jim was the first to mention it. Around the time we wrapped up our conversations, in early 2020, we were chatting about the likely production schedule for the book. I mentioned that I thought it would probably be printed in China.

‘That could be difficult,’ he murmured.

I didn’t understand what he was getting at, and so he explained: the coronavirus. I scratched my head. I had only vaguely heard of it, and had assumed it was just another strain of the flu making its way around parts of East Asia.

‘Oh, this is going to be big,’ he said warmly. ‘Really big.’

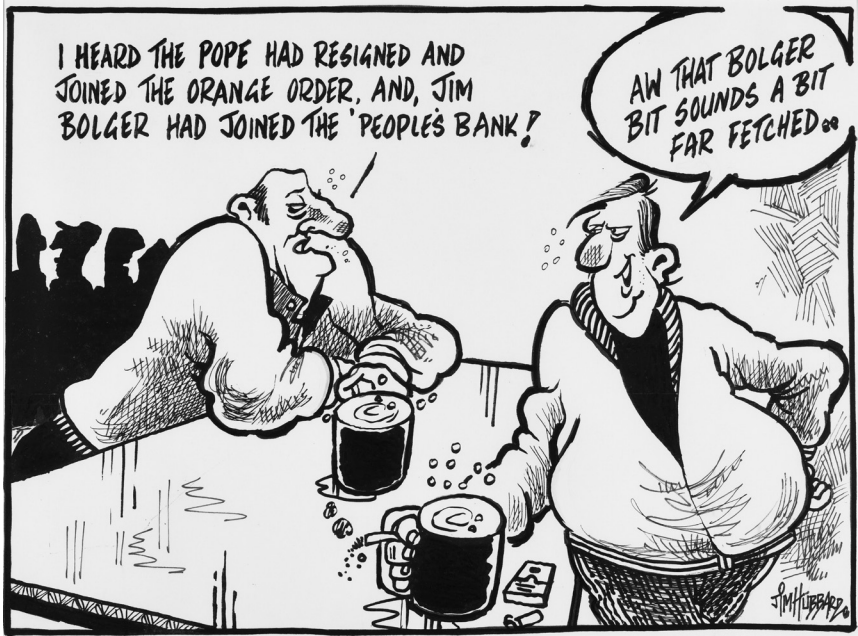
So much for my prognosticatory powers.

The weeks went on. The news got worse. Naturally, the question arose as to whether we should include an additional conversation about the subject that had quickly absorbed everyone on the planet. Yet it would not have been all that straightforward.

Part of the problem was that the general understanding of the new virus was changing by the day. We knew everything about it, and we knew nothing about it. We didn’t know definitively when it started, precisely where it began or how it was circulating. In light of all this, the only thing that seemed sure was that anything Jim had to say about the condition would date badly — possibly by the following week, let alone by later in the year.

A few days after our initial exchange on it, however, he gave what in retrospect appears to have been a prescient speech in Waikanae, to members of Zone Four of Local Government New Zealand, touching on what was then still a nascent menace:

The biggest immediate threat in the world at the moment is the coronavirus, which was first identified in Wuhan in China. And the



A Jim Hubbard cartoon from XXXX.

first big lesson that the virus has reinforced is how interconnected today's world is and so every day the virus has spread further. There are the obvious upfront personal and community health risks and associated costs. The amount is as yet unknown, but very large financial costs across the world are inevitable.

China is New Zealand's largest export market and that means New Zealand will suffer significant direct financial costs as most industry sectors will be affected. The bigger issue, as the virus spreads, is its impact on the world economy and whether the spread and the measures taken to control the virus will drive a world overburdened by debt into recession.

These costs will range from food exports through to Chinese students being unable to come to New Zealand to study. Education is our fifth largest export earner.

Other costs will be related mainly to the export sector like food, timber and tourism. Tourism will be a big upfront loser, but the losses will flow on to virtually all other sectors. Collectively we can expect a virus that first appeared on the other side of the world to significantly impact our economy.

And on it went, segueing from the new virus to the speaker's politically passionate views on climate change. Voila! We had a superbly fitting conclusion. This has therefore been added as a book-end, and it is one of a number of hard-to-find (on the internet at least) speeches by Jim over the years that have been sprinkled throughout the text. Later, as we communicated over the finished project during the national lockdown, Jim and I agreed that we should probably update the text with a bit more on the damn virus. Those updates have been sprinkled in here and there, along

with a fresh aside on the political ascension of his one time staffer Todd Muller.

Elsewhere, the book sticks with the personal themes I originally picked out, around which we structured a year-long series of monthly conversations in Waikanae. Usually we met on Friday mornings. The idea was always less to present a biographical portrait than a collection of revealing interludes drawn from 30 or so hours of conversation.

The chapters have all had a bit of editorial intercession, mainly in the interests of excising repetition, or adding in the odd corrected fact here and there, but the text is still basically as it happened. In all but the last chapter, my voice has been dropped from the text, mainly because the question and answer format can become wearying to read over the long haul. I did go back to that format in the final chapter because it was more conversational than thematic.

The title of this book, *Fridays with Jim*, is a bit of a play on Mitch Albom's celebrated memoir, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, about a series of visits the American author made to his old sociology professor, who was dying of motor neuron disease. But there the similarity ends. As readers will, I hope, enjoyably discover for themselves, our great helmsman is very much alive.