

# *Contents*

Introduction.....	6
Humble Beginnings.....	8
Ngati Luigi.....	16
A Fuse Is Lit.....	25
We All Live On A Yellow Submarine.....	33
Vladimir Putin Lived In Karori.....	53
The Maori Loans Affair.....	59
When In Rome.....	72
Battle Of The Bolger.....	84
Sickly White Liberals.....	90
How To Win Friends.....	104
The Years Of Living Dangerously.....	115
Enter The Gladiator.....	124
Mutually Assured Destruction.....	138
The Sarah Neems Mystery.....	158
Conspiracy Fact.....	165
It's 2am, It Must Be Winston.....	183
A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To The Poll.....	201
The Battle Of Black Stump.....	208
Winston On The Witness Stand.....	232
Winston's Secret Deal With Ratana Church.....	248
Great Expectations.....	260
Crash And Burn: 1997-1999.....	276
And They Got Up Again.....	296
The Price Of Politics.....	306
Keeping The Bastards Honest: Snapshots.....	319

# Introduction

Let's assume you've just arrived from Planet Mars to New Zealand, and know nothing of a politician named Winston Peters. Why should you care, what's to know?

This book is intended to shake you out of that faulty assumption. Love him or loathe him (and there are few people to be found in the middle ground), Winston Peters has been a driving force, a Colossus, of New Zealand politics for nigh on four decades.

Although he's constantly dismissed as a "conspiracy theorist" or a "populist" or a "racist" – or sometimes all three – by his foes, it is easy to fall into the trap of being beguiled by popular opinion, of following the dog-whistle that sharp political operators employ when trying to manipulate public opinion.

Of course, some would say Winston Peters is just as good at dog-whistling himself.

There has been a previous attempt at a biography – 1995's *Winston First* by Martin Hames, a former Ruth Richardson staffer. Unfortunately Hames' book contained no bibliography and no footnotes, so proving the accuracy of the claims made in that book was difficult if not impossible for scholars.

Those who paid real cash for *Winston First* generally loved it, if only because Hames was preaching to a choir who loathed Peters with a passion. However, in a scathing review of *Winston First*, political historian Barry Gustafson wrote:<sup>1</sup>

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1 "Book Review: Martin Hames, *Winston First*", by Dr Barry Gustafson, *Political Science* December 1995

“Unfortunately Martin Hames’ version is a sustained and at times almost hysterical partisan polemic with little if any pretence at academic objectivity or balance...According to Hames, everyone that Peters ever criticised was a blameless victim and there was never any justification for a public inquiry into the activities of the BNZ, Fay Richwhite or European Pacific’s Cook Islands tax avoidance schemes.

“There is an interesting little essay on populism, as part of an attempt to use a psychobiographical approach to portray Peters as a Narcissistic Populist pandering to popular prejudice in an obsessive drive to be Prime Minister. But Hames, who worked as an advisor for five years in the offices of Peters’ two most bitter critics, Jim Bolger and Ruth Richardson, is unconvincing in trying to explain why Peters sacrificed that objective by refusing to play by the rules,” wrote Gustafson.

In other words, if Peters was really the megalomaniac Hames was claiming, why did he give up his chance at absolute power by refusing to work within the system?

It is easy, with highly charged subjects like Winston Peters, to go all one-dimensional – ‘it’s either black, or its white, choose the biography colour that suits your view of the man!’

Somewhere in between those books, between *Winston First* at one extreme and *Winston Walks On Water* at the fictional other extreme, you’ll find a more accurate telling of the Peters story, the story of how one man and his beliefs and policies have impacted a generation and changed the course of New Zealand history in ways you may never have realised.

This is not an exhaustive political biography covering every meeting or minor dispute in intense detail. Rather, it’s a ‘greatest hits and misses’ package that covers the things that had a lasting impact on Peters and NZ First, helping determine the identity and direction of the man, and the party as it stands today.

It’s an entertaining, at times hilarious, account spiced with things the media never bothered to report or in many cases never even knew.

# I

## Humble Beginnings

*“The bulk of better reporting consists of information that does not meet the courtroom standards of proof. Journalism is not a court of law; it is a process of weaving together, often from necessarily anonymous sources, the strands of history. If legal standards were applied to news reporting, the public would have learned nothing of the Watergate scandal and President Nixon would not have resigned in disgrace”*

– William Pinwill, *National Times* on Sunday, 1988

The voice down the end of the phone sounds almost pained: “I can’t be interviewed for this book, I’m in the middle of preparing for an election campaign!” All politicians are addicted to publicity, and there’s no doubt Winston Raymond Peters is a consummate politician. One gets the feeling that asking him to be interviewed under these particular circumstances is like offering chocolates to a Jenny Craig member, or the squirrel-rat character ‘Scrat’ in the *Ice Age* cartoons desperately trying to choose between the tempting acorn or avoiding the avalanche hurtling toward him, eyes darting as he struggles to make a decision between desire and necessity. On this day, Winston Peters is that squirrel-rat.

“When you’ve got 58 boxes of documents in storage to back up what you’ve said, it takes time to go through them. I’ve got to concentrate on this election.”

Vintage Peters. Always on the go, always on the case, living for now and the future, not the past, but with the ever-present hint that he’s capable of drop-

ping a ton of evidence on someone, even after nearly four decades in politics.

An official biographer, sometime, will undoubtedly revel in the contents of Winston's treasure chest, but it will probably have to be posthumously and even then the spectre of a gnarled, skeletal hand punching through the turf and clamping itself around the wrist of anyone reaching for those documents cannot be ruled out. That's one thing about Winston Peters, he may be down from time to time but "out" is another matter entirely.

To truly understand the phenomenon of Winston Peters, one has to put aside the prejudices – one way or the other – and simply listen to the story unfold.

Born April 11, 1945 in Whangarei hospital, home was the tiny rural coastal settlement of Whananaki, 50km north east of Whangarei. Winston Raymond Peters (his birth was actually registered as 'Wynston'<sup>2</sup>) was a baby-boomer, the sixth of 11 children, with six brothers and four sisters. His parents Len and Joan (*née* McInnes) farmed the area and, like all rural kids in that time, young Winston was expected to help with the chores as he grew up. As he once told the *Herald*, as a boy he wasn't usually finished "milking the cows" until around 8.45pm.<sup>3</sup>

Father Len Peters was of Ngati Wai iwi with a measure of Ngati Hine and Ngapuhi – "his family had lived there for hundreds and hundreds of years," says Winston<sup>4</sup> – while Joan, as her maiden name suggests, was Scottish. Many have made the comparison between Scottish clan structure and Maori iwi and hapu, and when Joan passed away in 2008 in her late nineties, those paying tribute included Maori Party leader Pita Sharples:<sup>5</sup>

"Joan was such a driving force in the Far North, you'd never know she was not Maori. But her clear moral values, her hard work and thrift, and her ethic of selfless service is very much part of her Scottish background as well," he told journalists.

Mana Party leader Hone Harawira was another remarking at the impact of Joan Peters and her family on New Zealand:<sup>6</sup>

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2 The 1945 microfiche index of births spells it "Wynston". "The registrar thought the spellings were interchangeable," says Peters.

3 "Dining with Winston Peters," by Jonathan Milne, NZ Herald, 21 August 2005

4 Interview with Mark Sainsbury, RadioLive, 29 June 2014

5 "Winston Peters' mother dies on eve of party conference," NZPA, 18 July 2008

6 Ibid

“Among Joan’s 11 children, Jim was a school principal and chaired the regional council before becoming an MP, Marie has been involved in tribal history and research, Wayne’s a well-known lawyer, David has managed the farm, Lynette has managed hauora services and chairs the Northland DHB, Heather’s the director of the Auckland University Teacher’s College Campus in Whangarei, Ian is a former MP, Winston needs no introduction – the list of achievements and Joan’s legacy goes on,” Harawira told NZPA.

“My mother died when she was 97,” Peters recalls, “my father when he was 85 and possibly would have gone much longer but he wouldn’t go to hospital. He could be pretty stubborn and the last thing he wanted to do was die in a hospital.”

To an outsider, life in Whananaki might seem idyllic. Nestled at the mouth of the Whananaki Inlet where the Te Wairahi stream drifts lazily, emptying itself into the azure Pacific, Whananaki is redolent of long, languid summers and kids playing in the shallows, catching flounder for the evening meal and kina in the rock pools.

Asked what he learned from his parents in such a big family, Peters remembered a childhood ruled by a work ethic.

“One needs to work to eat,” he told the *Herald*.<sup>7</sup> “The Little Red Hen story was often a parental parable. Saving leads to realisable dreams. Waste not, want not, which is why one becomes a bit of a hoarder. Timeless lessons.”

He added that his parents had the same aspirations for their children as many others of their generation:

“That we would all be successful and happy, safe and healthy. The greatest parent-taught ambition was that if we deserved it, we could be whatever we aspired to be; and never give up.”

In Maori, the word “whananaki” means “kicking”, and the village supposedly earned the moniker from no less a personage than the ancestral Ngapuhi chief Puhi, leader of the Mataatua canoe, on account of the restless night he spent at Whananaki being chewed on by mosquitos.

Evidently the mosquitos were no worse than anywhere else, because people stayed and have lived there for eight or nine centuries now. Today, the heart of this village is its school.

Founded in 1887 with an initial roll of just 23 children, Whananaki

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7 “Twelve Questions: Winston Peters”, by Sarah Stuart, NZ Herald, 18 April 2013

School is – like its most famous pupil – a survivor. Bucking the trend of rural school closures as a result of falling rolls, Whananaki found a novel solution when the threat of extinction raised its head:

“When faced with this dire possibility in the early 1970s,” Winston Peters told the school’s 125<sup>th</sup> Jubilee in 2012,<sup>8</sup> “the local people thought ‘outside the box’ and placed an advert in the *New Zealand Herald* newspaper published in Auckland, for solo mothers with children to come and live here rent free.”

The concept of a rural community luring new blood to their settlement by offering rent-free accommodation to mothers in need resulted not just in an advertisement but a front page story in the *Herald*.

“The Whananaki people had spruced up empty houses and set its mind to raising the school roll and keep the school open,” remembered Peters. “That has been the spirit of this school, teachers, dental and district nurses, and the local school board, parents and students.

“This place and this school is part of who we are. Or rather this school is the better part of who we are.”

As I said, to understand the man, you first have to understand his story. Winston was never a city kid; he was a country boy with old-fashioned values forged in a crucible of clan and iwi culture – a place where everyone had the right to get themselves a feed from their own hard work, and better themselves. It was a place where people helped each other – even strangers – as the solo-mums influx shows. Even so, it still had its boundaries:

“This of course was a most unusual community,” recalled Peters at the jubilee, “comprised of Maori and European, a significant number of which were members of the Exclusive Brethren Church, in which case most of us, whether Maori or European, had our noses pressed against the window because for this Church, the rest of us were all outsiders!

“We all remember that for many of us, our early days here were a time of significant hardship and economic deprivation, of rowing across the estuary or riding horses to school. But we all believed that tomorrow would be better, and it was.”

Horses were a mainstay back in the day; Winston was riding while still

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<sup>8</sup> “Whananaki School – 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary”, Winston Peters speech notes, 20 October 2012, <http://nzfirst.org.nz/speech/whananaki-primary-school-125th-anniversary>