

# Opinion

## THE PRESS

### A passionate Kiwi

From across the political spectrum tributes have flown in for Green co-leader Rod Donald, who died at the weekend. These tributes were deserved as Donald was among the most talented politicians in Parliament. Whether it be fighting for Green causes, such as the environment, students and fair trade, or hammering out support agreements with Labour-led governments, Donald was always in his element.

It was easy to paint Donald as simply a Green idealogue. With his trademark braces and his possum-covered seat in the House he personified his party's image. But for Donald these were no affectations. Even at school he was a Values Party activist and later he was a passionate advocate for Trade Aid and the rights of tenants.

But in a Green Party which has always seen itself as above politics, Donald was also a master of realpolitik; indeed the most common criticism of him was that he was too ambitious. He enjoyed a good working relationship with Deputy Prime Minister Michael Cullen, Labour's own political maestro, and proved adept at brokering deals, while not sacrificing Green policies.

Donald was an essential foil for his party co-leader, Jeanette Fitzsimons, and some of his ideological colleagues. Green MPs such as Keith Locke, Sue Kedgley or Nandor Tanczos could be portrayed as radical, unrealistic or even Luddite, but Donald's own political judgment was invariably well-grounded. For this reason the Greens have suffered a huge political loss, one which it is difficult to see any of their caucus membership filling. Even Donald's foes said that although they did not agree with his views, they respected his commitment, liked him personally and trusted him.

Donald's political career was a case of so near and yet so far. More so than most of his Green colleagues he appreciated that if his party's philosophies were to be implemented, it was vital to have a hand on the levers of power. He, along with Fitzsimons, came to Parliament as part of the umbrella Alliance Party in 1996 but had a strained relationship with party leader Jim Anderton.

Three years later the Greens seemed poised to join Labour as part of a governing coalition. But this hope proved forlorn when the so-called "Corngate" revelations hurt both parties. Again in this year's general election it appeared certain early on that the Greens would be part of a Labour-led government. But for want of a seventh seat the Greens were once more locked out of power.

During talks with Labour, Donald did extract a commitment for a "Buy New Zealand" campaign. This was another of the former MP's most heartfelt causes — and during the election campaign he joked that he would be the minister for "buy New Zealand".

Perhaps Donald's greatest achievement came even before he was an MP. In the late 1980s and early 1990s he was an indefatigable advocate for proportional representation, holding senior offices in the Electoral Reform Coalition. The success of the "mixed member proportional" voting system in 1993 was due in no small measure to Donald and he retained a special interest in electoral reform until his death.

Donald was above all one of Parliament's and Christchurch's greatest enthusiasts. What other politician could be found with a length of a cycling inner tube around his head to hold his cellphone next to his ear, so he could talk and do other tasks at the same time? His early death is a reminder that although it is fashionable to criticise the pay and workload of MPs, many politicians do put in the extra yards for the causes in which they believe. So when a politician such as Labour's Paul Swain decides to take time out from Cabinet for family reasons, that decision on his work-life balance must be respected.

Rod Donald will be remembered and sorely missed. He was a skilled politician but one who never forgot the issues which prompted him to seek public office. He was a battler for often unpopular causes but always retained a keen sense of perspective and humour. Above all, he was a passionate Kiwi who, had it not been for his untimely death, would have continued to play a significant role in shaping our nation.