

People's politician happy to muck in

Green MP KEITH LOCKE remembers his friend and colleague.

When the phone went, my partner Michele would call out, "That must be Rod", and it often was. He was constantly on the phone with a bright idea, or some encouragement. If he had read something from me in The Press he would jokingly start off: "Another leadership challenge, Mr Locke" before going on to enthuse over the coverage. It is hard to believe I won't be hearing his cheery voice again at the other end of the line.

Rod's death has struck a chord among New Zealanders because he was a people's politician, without any of the airs and graces that sometimes go with the job, and always happy to muck in with a good cause.

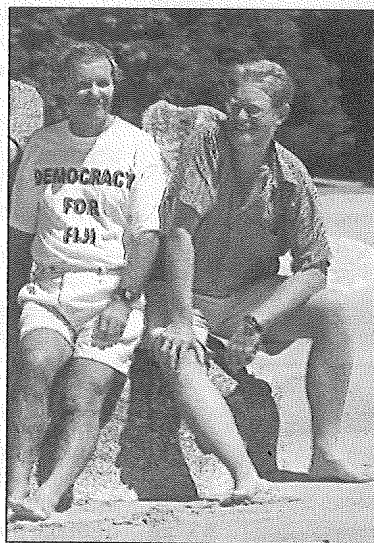
One time he got into trouble at caucus for taking his own pitchfork to a Christchurch anti-GE protest, where people were talking about taking direct action if there was any release of GE plants. Rod's view was that if it was good enough for the ordinary Kiwi, it was good enough for him as a Green MP.

Right from the time I first met Rod, in the late 1970s, he was heavily into community action and self-sufficiency. In fact, he was then a bit at odds with my parents, Elsie and Jack Locke, who had set up the Avon Loop Preservation Association to stop a motel development. Rod was one of a group of "hippies" who had moved into the Avon Loop and wanted to establish more of an "alternative economy" there than the older residents were prepared for. Compromises were reached, and the Avon Loop's organic shop, Piko Wholefoods, still prospers. It was always a pleasure for me to visit the Avon Loop recycling scheme, which Rod and my father worked on together.

From those days, Rod has been passionate about "buying local" and set an example in his own purchasing patterns. It is a tragedy that his life was cut short just as he was about to take delegated authority for the Buy Kiwi Made campaign agreed between Labour and the Greens.

Rod's enthusiasm for local production didn't mean he was a crude nationalist. Far from it. I first worked closely with Rod in the early 1990s when he was the national director of Trade Aid, which helps producer co-operatives in poorer countries sell their products in New Zealand. I was co-manager of a Trade Aid/One World Books shop in Auckland's Karangahape Road. Rod's energy and business sense helped Trade Aid survive and prosper, even if it meant ruffling a few feathers. I always find it odd when people label the Greens anti-business, when Rod and most of the Green caucus have run successful businesses.

Rod has sometimes been labelled as more pragmatic than other Green MPs, but he was no less principled. For example, he was determined the party shouldn't flinch from its support of marijuana decriminalisation just because it lost votes in some



United in activism:
Keith Locke and
Rod Donald.
Photo: Nelson Mail

quarters. You had to stand for what you believed in.

Where Rod was ahead of us was in his boldness to engage with all and sundry. Arriving in a new town he would immediately talk to the local mayor about "buying local" or the STV voting system, and then hop down to the local paper for an interview and photo.

Rod would have been a good mayor himself, with his energetic, hands-on community approach.

Rod was right alongside me on all my stands on peace and human-rights issues and he was proud when I introduced him to Ahmed Zaoui in the Mount Eden remand prison. We worked together on self-determination for Tibet, democracy in Zimbabwe and opposition to the United States-linked satellite communications interception station at Waihopai.

Rod and I had just been invited to participate once more in the protest at Waihopai this coming January. The organisers in the Anti-Bases Campaign cheekily asked Rod if he still would have come if he had become a minister. Rod's scrawled reply, the day before he died, was: "I sure as hell would have come".

Rod believed that people must participate at every level of the political process and will be much remembered for his contribution to our democracy. He led the successful campaign to bring in two proportional electoral systems, MMP at the national level and STV in several local bodies. He also defended minority rights in our Parliament and was dead against "party-hopping" legislation on the grounds that it gives party leaders too much power to eject dissident MPs from Parliament.

Like many others in the Green Party I will so miss my dear friend and colleague, but Rod's life and work will continue to inspire us.