

PROFILE



DAME KERRY PRENDERGAST

Dame Kerry Prendergast was one of Wellington's most successful mayors. In the New Year's honours 2019, she was one of four women to be made a Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit. As a director and board member for many high-profile organisations, including the Environmental Protection Agency, Tourism New Zealand and New Zealand Film Commission, Dame Kerry shares her insights on successful governance, international relations, women in senior management and more.

As Mayor of Wellington City for three terms, from 2001 to 2010, what achievements of the Council over that period that are most memorable for you?

I'd say that there are several things that I'm very proud of, but if I had to narrow it down they would be, in no particular order: Driving the Indoor Sports Stadium at Kilbirnie and making it happen; I'm delighted to have played a role in Wellington becoming known as 'The Coolest Little Capital in the World', according to Lonely Planet; I'm very happy to have cemented Wellington's brand as the cultural capital of NZ; lastly, the Pohutukawas, which were planted all the way along the harbour from the stadium to Taranaki St, and are now looking absolutely wonderful.



Tourism is New Zealand’s largest export industry in terms of foreign exchange earnings. As Chair of Tourism New Zealand, do you see any constraints to ongoing growth in the sector?

Absolutely, it seems pretty clear to me that the biggest constraint to ongoing growth in the tourism sector is an infrastructure deficit. It’s an issue for the private sector in terms of accommodation and activity product. It’s also a local government issue in terms of public facilities, including toilets, camping facilities, roads and more hold us back. If we want to grow the sector to we need to sort this out.

You are a member of the New Zealand-China and the New Zealand-United States Councils. Can New Zealand have a role in strengthening the relationship between the world’s two largest economies?

Yes. It’s essential to understand that relationships between countries are not driven only by trade and business, tourism and education. Personal relations and diplomacy are critical because they build trust and respect between nations. The basis of sister-city relationships at the local government level is similar – and both councils play similar roles by fostering improved understanding.



You have extensive governance experience, not only as a Director but as Chair of various Boards. In your opinion, what are the main hallmarks of a well-functioning Board?

Over the years, I’ve learned that several vital ingredients go into a well-functioning board. For a start, a board must have a good mix of skills. That’s essential. Its members need to get on very well together so that most recommendations are agreed by consensus. It’s also imperative to understand what is the board’s role and what is the management’s role. The most important job of a board is to employ the right CEO and then support that person in their role and evaluate and monitor the business on an ongoing basis.

The 2018 Grant Thornton International annual Women in Business Survey found that women fill only 18% of senior leadership roles in New Zealand. Have you experienced discrimination in your professional career and if so, how did you manage the experience?

When I was a nurse, and subsequently a midwife, I didn’t notice any discrimination. However, I saw some when I worked in local government politics. It’s true to say that society expects its leaders to be strong. The problem with that is that strength can be mistaken as aggression in women in leadership roles. That’s why I always try to guard against this by being assertive, but also being as inclusive and collaborative as possible. It’s a careful balancing act.

What are the main barriers to women attaining senior management or governance roles?

To my mind, there is no doubt that taking time out for pregnancy and raising children can hold women back in their careers. That's why I believe it's very important that companies should seriously look at offering development opportunities to women during maternity leave, so that seniority is not lost when they return to the workforce. The way women make decisions is also very different from their male counterparts, and I think that it will take many years for men to realise that the way women make decisions is more inclusive and collaborative.

Your roles with the New Zealand Film Commission, New Zealand International Festival of the Arts and Wellington Jazz Music Festival Trust have directly exposed you to the creativity of New Zealanders. What stands out to you as the essence of that creativity?

It's very difficult to boil it down to 'the essence of creativity.' However, I do believe the fact that we're a long way from the rest of the world has meant that we've become generalists. We're able to do many things, and this has driven our sense of innovation and creativity. Our diversity, and in particular, our indigenous culture and our many migrants, have added a unique, utterly different dimension to our culture.

Sport and business both feature prominently in your governance experience, what are the similarities between the two?

Working as a team is very important in both sport and business, and both can learn from each other. The sum of a team is much more the sum of the individuals. I thought that an interesting learning from my MBA study is that one person never has all of the answers – so my advice to is to surround yourself with people who have the skills you are not strong in or do not possess. A good team is made up of people with different and complementary skills.



Our current Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, recently spoke of "well-being" as central to Government policy. Can more be done to integrate environmental and social considerations into good governance practice?

We should not favour environmental considerations over social concerns, or vice versa. In fact, both things are extremely important. Inequity in New Zealand is seen as worsening. To reduce this, I believe that we need to look at social, cultural, economic and environmental measures, and use our learnings to make improvements across the whole spectrum.



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