**Dignified to the end**

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Public servant.Those two words best describe, it seems to me, Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s prime minister who announced her shock resignation earlier this week.

I think Prime Minister Ardern would welcome being acknowledged for having dedicated herself to the humble proposition that politicians – whatever their title or party – should serve the public, rather than any petty, parochial, interest.

In her deeds and words, Ardern confirmed that while she enjoyed the lofty title of prime minister, she was, at her core, a public servant who tried, as best she could, to exercise her important duties and responsibilities with one aim: to attend to the concerns and promote the welfare of millions of ordinary people who entrusted her with high office.

Did she sometimes fail? Yes. Could she have done more? Of course. For six challenging years, Ardern said, “hand on heart”, that she had given New Zealand her “all”. Only partisans or cynics could doubt or question her sincerity.

Ardern’s defining devotion to public service was on poignant and forthright display throughout her eloquent and, at times, emotional announcement when she explained why she was leaving behind the “privilege” of being prime minister.

Ardern said that after a summer and Christmas time spent reflecting upon her past, present, and future, she no longer had enough “in the tank” to continue. It was a rare admission for any prime minister to make. Usually, the intoxicating perks and privileges of power are difficult to forego – voluntarily, at least.

But true to her authentic nature, Ardern told her countrymen and women the truth, that the burdens and demands had taken a toll. Ardern was tired, perhaps even spent. And, as such, she would be doing them and the country she had long led a grave disservice if she remained prime minister to contest the next federal election in October.

While Ardern has earned near-universal praise for her gracious, albeit surprising, decision to know when to quit, a few, less charitable commentators have accused her of betraying New Zealand and the Labour Party she leads.

“Labour MPs and supporters have every right to be furious. Ardern was facing a very steep hill at the October election, which explains more than any other reason her decision to leave,” one scribe wrote.

Wrong. Ardern made it plain that she was not giving up the job because it was too hard or that she faced turbulent political headwinds on the eve of another vote. Rather, Ardern said she was “human” and, in her heart and soul, she knew it was time to go.

“I’m not unusual,” Ardern said. “I am a politician who is first and foremost human. And so, leadership means willing to sit back and recognise when, actually, it’s time for someone else to do the job.”

Ardern’s frankness and introspection are a refreshing and welcome antidote to a gallery of, by now, familiar career politicians who – blinded by ego and hubris – stay on for too long and, inevitably, are humiliated by ambitious colleagues or angry voters eager to show them the exit door.

Ardern has opted, instead, to pick the time of her departure from public life on her own, touching terms – to tend to herself, her marriage and her young daughter. Only the selfish and shortsighted would begrudge her making such a wise and loving choice.

Ardern’s short speech was, as well, a signature reflection of an elegant, accomplished woman who often reminded us that kindness and empathy could not only be guiding, but governing, principles in the unforgiving, hurly-burly of politics.

“Unless you can at least work to comprehend the experience of others, [it’s] very hard to deliver solutions and respond to crises without that starting point,” Ardern said. “That has been a very important principle for me. Empathy.”

Asked how she wanted to be remembered as prime minister, Arden said: “As someone who always tried to be kind.”

Unlike Canada’s Prime Minister Justin Trudeau – who confuses staged, performative acts of contrition and solidarity with genuineness – Ardern’s simple, impromptu expressions of empathy and kindness rang true.

Indeed, the prime minister of a small, distant island nation was a balm to the sinister politics of division and seething grievances practised by preening buffoons in much larger and more prominent places across a tumultuous globe.

Ardern’s grace and humanity catapulted her and New Zealand to the forefront of the world’s consciousness at a time when so much ugliness and inhumanity dominates the news – day after grinding day.

Still, beyond the taxing cut and thrust of political life, Arden was tested by a stubborn pandemic, the urgency of the climate crisis, a lethal volcanic eruption, and the vile attacks on two mosques in the capital, Christchurch, by an “Australian terrorist” who murdered 51 innocents in March 2019.

For outsiders like me, Ardern’s moving response to the premeditated massacre of Muslims established her as a leader who met the awful moment with the compassion and decency it demanded.

Wearing a hijab, Ardern spoke of her fidelity to, and kinship with, the grieving victims of hate – her fellow New Zealanders.

“They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not,” Ardern said. “They have no place in New Zealand. There is no place in New Zealand for such acts of extreme and unprecedented violence, which it is clear this act was.”

She refused, quite rightly, to utter the attacker’s name.

“Speak the names of those who were lost rather than the man who took them,” she said. “He may have sought notoriety but we in New Zealand will give him nothing, not even his name.”

Excerpted: ‘Jacinda Ardern, the public servant’.

Courtesy: Aljazeera.com