

“We’re in a market at the moment where salaries are going just one way”

Law firm William Fry lost seven junior partners to rival firms earlier this year. Managing partner Bryan Bourke believes it was a sign of a strong economy and growing international influence in Ireland



Rosanna Cooney

He was just home from a family holiday in Sardinia when the news slid across Bryan Bourke’s desk.

Seven partners were leaving William Fry, in an exodus that became widely known as ‘Frytanic’.

The blue-chip law firm hovers just outside Ireland’s equivalent of the magic circle and rarely, if ever, have its internal workings captured people’s imagination.

But when three equity partners and four junior partners announced their intention to leave Fry’s in July 2019 – following a jump of three partners to rival firm Arthur Cox in 2018 – the firm found itself in the headlines.

Months later, Bourke sits in meeting room 15 of the William Fry building in Dublin’s silicon docks, takes a sip of his green tea and says he doesn’t have much to say on the matter.

“I think all firms go through phases where they lose people, I’m not going to name names. Everybody goes through phases.”

Though we are in an era of fluidity for jobs and careers, law firms have re-



FERGAL PHILLIPS

CV Bryan Bourke

Role: managing partner of William Fry

Age: 53 and sad about it

Family: husband to Martina and father of three teenagers

Lives: Ballsbridge, Dublin 4

mained places of stoic loyalty. William Fry boasts proudly of its 100 per cent retention rate of trainee solicitors and Bourke has been there for over 23 years.

Choosing a law firm to work for in 2019 can still be a career-long decision.

Frytanic, Bourke believes, although he does not acknowledge the name, is a reflection both of the strength of the economy and an increasing international influence in Ireland.

“It wasn’t this way in the past, but it’s incredibly commonplace in the UK to have lateral movement. There’s varied

reasons for those partners leaving,” he says.

Though exit interviews are conducted with all staff in William Fry, they are, Bourke admits, rarely done at partner level. “Sometimes,” Bourke says, “it is just about the money.”

Just as an increased presence of American firms in Britain has driven up salaries and increased movement of people between them, the pressure in Ireland comes from British firms establishing themselves in Dublin in what is seen as a clear pre-Brexit play.

DLA Piper, Lewis Silkin, Pinsent Masons, Simmons & Simmons, Fieldfisher, and Clyde & Co have all moved into Dublin since article 50 was triggered. Opening an office in this jurisdiction guarantees them access to their European Union clients.

“Some of the international firms found it hard to get people at the start,” says Bourke. “They’re offering people more to move and it’s become more tempting for people. So, yes, at all levels there are degrees of pressure being felt.”

Bourke believes there will come a time when these firms will have to review the investment they have in Ireland. And while their arrival has renewed upward pressure on salaries, the pressure has been there as long as Bourke can remember.

Qualifying as a solicitor with A&L Goodbody, Bourke accepted a job with them for IRE2,500 the going rate for the big firms at the time, but the day the Trinity graduate started work, another firm raised their starting salaries to IRE7,000 and Goodbody matched that in order to retain Bourke and his peers.

“We’re in a market at the moment where salaries are going just one way, which is challenging because we can’t pass it all on to clients unfortunately,” says Bourke. “So we have to find smarter ways of working and continuing to attract the best staff.”

Law firms are increasingly having to sell themselves to college students and graduates to attract them to their ranks. They are starting to recruit earlier and earlier. Once, internships were the first port of call, now college ambassadors for the big firms hold on-campus events for first and second-year law students.

Along with attracting great staff, achieving diversity and gender balance is important to Bourke, who says he regards an all-male dynamic as “not sensible”.

A quick trawl through the William Fry website shows that of the 80 partners listed, 30 per cent are female. What’s not specified is how many of these are equity partners and how many are junior partners.

Bourke says he doesn’t have these figures to hand, although he quickly points out that William Fry was the first top-tier law firm in Ireland to have a managing female partner in Myra Garret, his predecessor.

Women have been entering the legal profession in greater numbers than men for the past 20 years, and the number of women solicitors working across the entire profession has exceeded the number of men since 2015, figures from the Law Society of Ireland show.

But the majority presence of women in the profession has yet to result in partner parity.

Ways of working

Working day: on the days I am being good I am in the office for 8am. I drive to the office more often than I should. A lot of my day is taken up with meetings. As managing partner, your diary is public property, everyone feels they can pop a meeting in, whether it is about operational issues, or strategic development. My average time leaving the office is 7.30pm, which is earlier than when I was a transactional lawyer.

My perfect weekend: often I attend dinners or events during the week and that makes me quite unsocial at weekends, so I enjoy being at home.

Twitter, LinkedIn or Instagram: LinkedIn, although I do sometimes watch Twitter.

Night owl or early bird: neither. I am a happy in between.

The secret to hiring great people: do your research, spend time with them, introduce them to your most energised people. Follow your instincts and above all, look for authenticity, empathy and a cultural fit as well as a great lawyer.

Bryan Bourke

various ranks.” Bourke pauses, before adding “but I don’t know when you flush through the stats how that will look.”

“It would be important” Bourke says, a little pointedly, “to demystify it with factual information so that people don’t make assumptions or draw conclusions that are incorrect.”

Though the idea of demystifying the potential gender pay gap in his business is one Bourke seems to like the sound of, he balks at the concept of internal or external transparency in relation to salaries and revenue.

Internally, Bourke believes pay is a private matter and perhaps something to be discussed between friends, but not information to be released, even if such a move would open up, and level out, the negotiating field for female, and male, employees.

Externally, law firms in Ireland are under no obligation to publish their accounts as they are not limited companies and no Irish law firm, bar one, does.

The Lawyer, Britain’s legal magazine, releases a European 100 Report each year and charts the finances of Europe’s largest independent law firms, excluding Britain.

The 2019 report put William Fry’s earnings at €95.1 million, making it the fifth biggest earner in Ireland, and estimated its equity partner revenues to be at €1.2 million.

Bourke says the decision not to release financial information was never taken jointly by Ireland’s law firms, but rather it evolved from a time when people didn’t ask and, with no particular requirement to, nobody felt the need to disclose.

“We are lawyers, and I suppose,” says Bourke, “if it is private, it’s private.”

Mason Hayes Curran broke the mould in 2005 when then managing partner Declan Moylan, a close neighbour of Bourke’s, released the firm’s annual revenue for the first time.

“Mason Hayes made a particular decision and I suppose this earns particular publicity for them when they do it. If that’s their way of getting that publicity, that’s fine. I just don’t think other firms felt the need,” says Bourke.

“I’m not sure knowing about what people earn necessarily delivers a better job,” he says, chewing over whether disclosure of revenue would benefit William Fry’s clients in any way.

“Ultimately, I suppose, clients are looking for the best job to be done and depending on what that is, they’ll be more or less cost sensitive.”

One of the key changes under Bourke’s tenure has been the firm’s change of office building.

Originally destined for Byrne Wallace, the building is distinctive for its twinkling exterior and prime location. The firm moved to the building, to much ballyhoo in 2015, a year after Bourke took on the managing partner role.

Although he says he took it on with enthusiasm, the job has clearly challenged him.

Before becoming managing partner, the Castlebar native struggled with public speaking and found the events he was required to speak at difficult.

“But with practice comes confidence,” Bourke says, adding ruefully that his now undetectable Mayo accent had earned him some grief over the years.



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Peter Bellew, Ryanair's outgoing chief operations officer, arriving at the High Court where he is involved in a case taken by Ryanair to prevent him going to rival EasyJet before 2021

Sam Boal/RollingNews.ie

O'Leary wanted me out, I was a dead man walking, says Bellew

Outgoing chief operations officer Bellew defends move to rival EasyJet in high stakes High Court case



Rosanna Cooney

As thousands of people across Europe waited to find out if their Christmas would be affected by Ryanair pilot strikes, Michael O'Leary made, in his words, a "momentous" decision.

He called two of his most senior executives home from London, and such was the urgency he sent the company Learjet to pick them up for an eleventh-hour meeting in Ryanair's head office.

The two men discussed the situation on the private plane back to Ireland. Eddie Wilson, the current chief executive of the airline, knew what was on his boss's mind, the High Court heard, and Peter Bellew, chief operations officer, could not believe what he was being told.

Back in Dublin, it took 40 minutes of deliberation, the court heard, before Ryanair's top team came to a unanimous decision, as O'Leary necessitated it must be, to recognise trade unions for the first time in the airline's 34-year history.

No company had ever been so trenchant in its resistance to unions, Ryanair's outgoing chief operations officer told the court, but O'Leary could not see how else to avoid the strikes and the consequential compensation for 150,000 affected passengers.

It was decided that the news would be released via fax on December 15, 2017 and the reaction, was "extraordinary", Bellew told Justice Senan Allen.

Bellew was the final witness in a High Court case that has heard as much of the inner workings of Ryanair and its elite management, the Zs, as the intricacies of non-compete clauses and their legal enforceability.

Ryanair's case is against Bellew, to prevent him from moving to rival airline EasyJet, before 2021. Bellew is due to start at the London-based airline as their chief operating officer in two weeks.

Through the evidence of Michael O'Leary and the members of his Z team, a chink was opened in court, wide enough for the inside story of Ryanair's past two years to emerge, years which have seen unprecedented change at Europe's biggest airline.

The timeline of Bellew's recruitment to, and employment as, chief operations officer of Ryanair, coincides with the airline's "rostering crisis", unionisation of pilots and disputes with the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA).

On the same day Ryanair announced the cancellation of flights affecting around 400,000 passengers due to a "rostering crisis" in September 2017, Bellew was in the airline's canteen, he told the court.

The chief executive of Malaysian Airlines at the time and a former employee of Ryanair, Bellew was in Dublin briefly before flying on to Cologne to give evidence for Ryanair in a German court case involving the airline.

Quick decision

O'Leary saw Bellew in the canteen, and he made a "quick decision", immediately asking him to come back to Ryanair and be a face the pilots knew in the midst of the crisis, O'Leary told the court.

Bellew had experience in dealing with pilots from his ten years at Ryanair where he finished up in 2015 as head of pilot recruitment and training. He was seen as a "friendly face" and an "avuncular" character, O'Leary told the court.

After several weeks of back and forth, and the resignation of the chief operating officer at the time, Michael Hickey, Bellew accepted the same job, which was offered to him on a phone call by O'Leary, the court heard.

When Bellew returned to Ryanair in December 2017, the situation was more "critical" than expected, he told the court.

Ryanair said at the time the cancellations were the result of the rostering crisis, which was itself the result of poor planning of a regulatory switch, when the scheduling of pilots' 900 hours flying time changed from the financial year to the calendar year.

In court, O'Leary maintained this was the reason they had been forced to cancel 50 flights a day from October 2017 until the end of the year.

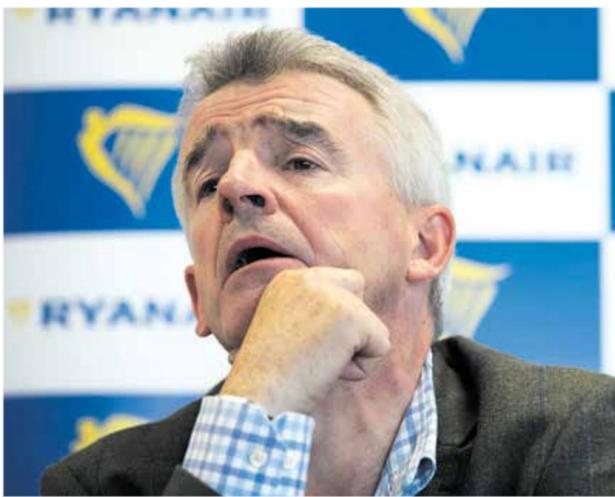
Bellew told the court in evidence that before he left the Irish carrier in 2015, this regulatory switch was already being planned for, and he was part of that process.

When Bellew arrived at Ryanair, he told the court, there was "aggressive poaching" of pilots by Norwegian Airlines, who fly the same aircraft as Ryanair, and by Chinese Airlines that were offering them larger salaries.

Bellew added that O'Leary saw him as the only person who knew how to get enough pilots recruited, trained and in the air.

It was a "fraught" time in the company, as the management team was trying to stabilise things, while also dealing with a potential pilots strike, Bellew told the court.

Ryanair pilots saw the balance of power tipping in their favour after the rostering crisis blew up, Bellew told the court. They felt they could negotiate new terms and conditions and were rejecting the pay increases of up to 20 per cent that Ryanair was offering them.



Michael O'Leary, chief executive of Ryanair Holdings, opted to leave Bellew out of the 2019 share options scheme

Bellew's style of negotiation, tried and tested over his decade with the company, he told Judge Allen, was put to the test the first week on the job, as he travelled to town halls with pilots in Spain, Portugal and Britain. Bellew said it was amazing that the pilots were voting against such big increases.

Bellew had never seen people so angry, he told the court, at the Stansted town hall where himself and Wilson were when O'Leary called and brought them back to Dublin for an emergency meeting.

But the recognition of the unions did not herald the end of Ryanair's troubles with pilots. In fact, 2018 began with difficult union negotiations and a lost defamation case, that Ryanair had taken against three pilots, Bellew told the court, adding that "Michael O'Leary was very upset" during that time.

It wasn't to end there. In February, Ryanair was threatened with the grounding of 162 aircraft by the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA), because the deficiency of safety paperwork for their aircraft was so severe, Bellew told the court.

Ryanair's share options scheme

The share options scheme in Ryanair is awarded to up to 100 senior managers in Ryanair, and it is key to the dispute between the airline and Peter Bellew.

Share options are long-term incentives provided to senior management to retain them in a company, the High Court heard.

Peter Bellew's inclusion in the 2018 share options scheme was finalised in June 2018, when he signed a contract that included a 12-month non-compete clause and accepted 100,000 share options.

Bellew's defence in this case is that the 2018 share options be-

came "obsolete and worthless", so his non-compete clause is null and void.

For managers to be able to cash in the 2018 options, Ryanair would have to reach the profit margin target that was set at €1.75 billion for the year ending March 31, 2020.

Due to the unexpected Boeing 737 Max 200 aircraft delays, Ryanair was forced to rein in its growth plans meaning the 2018 share options would never vest, the court heard.

In order to correct this, Ryanair started a 2019 share options scheme, offering managers the

opportunity to be a part of it only if they surrendered their 2018 options.

Ryanair's remuneration board had approved Bellew for inclusion in the 2019 scheme, and it was O'Leary who decided he would not be included due to his poor professional performance, the court heard. O'Leary told the judge he had that power because he was the chief executive officer of the company.

Ryanair's case is that because Bellew accepted 100,000 share options in the 2018 scheme, the contract and non-compete clause is valid.

Bellew's defence is that the 2018 share options were never intended to be exercised, and that the 2019 scheme was a way to circumvent the non-compete clause.

Bellew said he was "a dead man walking" when he signed the 2018 share options scheme, and that he was "a dead man walking" when he signed the 2019 share options scheme.

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floor office and runs through their performance and their objectives for the following year.

In March 2018, Bellew had been chief operating officer for four months. His review, opened in court, acknowledged the work he had done and the work he had yet to do. The court heard he was awarded 90 per cent of his performance bonus, which Bellew was happily surprised about.

The court heard evidence from Ryanair and Bellew about the events between Bellew's first and his last performance review and how the relationship changed between O'Leary and Bellew following a cabin crew incident in July 2018. Bellew said it then became "formal".

"Michael O'Leary called me when I was on holidays in Orlando, he was the duty executive that weekend," Bellew told the court, relaying how in his recollection O'Leary screamed at him down the phone about a cabin crew that had refused to fly from Cologne to Palma, as they were scheduled to do.

The court heard the four employees involved were sacked by Ryanair, which led to the airline being threatened with a level one safety finding by the IAA.

Bellew told the court, that he had never heard a regulator "scream" at an airline before, but the IAA were angry about the cabin crew, as there is not supposed to be any cumulative action following a commander exercising his discretion not to fly.

Ryanair told the court, the reasons given by the cabin crew were without foundation and it was not the commander that exercised his discretion in this case.

The level one safety finding was averted by an agreement to establish a new protocol for future incidents, Bellew told the court.

O'Leary was unhappy with the "complete lack of discipline" among employees, Bellew said, recalling a conversation the two men had had after the cabin crew incident and a monthly meeting was set up to tackle pilot absenteeism.

These meetings, Ryanair told the court, were chaired by O'Leary and consisted of going through a list of pilots called "MOL Top 70" who were being tracked to recognise suspicious patterns of pilots

calling in sick either side of their four-day leave blocks.

O'Leary wanted pilots to be subject to the "strictest" discipline, Bellew said, adding that he didn't agree with this approach and thought it could lead to further disillusionment with Ryanair during a period where pilots were threatening to strike.

These meetings resulted in "bad outcomes", Bellew told the court, adding that he regretted not standing up to O'Leary more when he would "scream and roar" intensely.

O'Leary called Bellew's recollection of these meetings "dubious" in his evidence and said Ryanair was doing what "any good employer" would do by monitoring pilots' sick days.

Style of management

Details of O'Leary's style of management in relation to Bellew were heard by the court. Every Monday in Ryanair's head office, Ryanair's Z team would meet at 8.30am, the court heard.

It was in these meetings O'Leary would allegedly bellow "you're fucking useless" at Bellew, who, began his evidence on Friday morning with an impression of Ryanair's chief executive that reverberated around courtroom five.

Bellew told the court O'Leary told him on multiple occasions that Bellew was "a lover not a fighter" that he was "too nice" for Ryanair and that "he just sat there like Buddha".

In March 2019, Bellew again sat in front of O'Leary for his performance review, and this time, Bellew told the judge, it was shock and devastation he felt, not only by O'Leary's negative appraisal of his work, but by the decision that was taken not to include him in the 2019 share options scheme.

To Bellew that decision meant that O'Leary wanted him gone, he told the court.

While the news was sinking in, O'Leary, Bellew said, answered his phone to his son and talked at length about tee times in Quinta de Lago, an exclusive golf resort in Portugal.

"I was a dead man walking," Bellew told the judge, adding that it was clear to him that O'Leary wanted him out of the company, but would not fire him until after the agm in September 2019 as it wouldn't look good to the shareholders.

"If I had wanted Bellew gone, he would have been gone," O'Leary told the court.

The end came for Bellew, who was in negotiations with EasyJet from April 2019 onwards, in early July.

O'Leary told him, Bellew recalled, that he was moving him to Vienna, the "Siberian front", in Bellew's words, and that his chief operating officer duties would be taken over by someone else in Dublin.

Two days later, Bellew handed in his resignation to O'Leary, who said he was "taken aback" at the news.

Prior to EasyJet's public announcement of Bellew's appointment, Bellew called O'Leary to tell him he was moving to the rival airline and litigation was threatened immediately, Bellew told the judge.

The defence has rested its case and the counsel for Ryanair will continue its closing argument before Christmas.

The Profile Jacinda Ardern

A woman of substance

BY ROSANNA COONEY

Jacinda Ardern is winning. She has the “formula and it’s working”, as Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand, puts it.

The 39-year-old leader of New Zealand adopted a zero-tolerance strategy towards Covid-19 that has set the country apart from the rest of the world. Rather than trying to flatten the curve, she set out to squash it – and appears to have succeeded.

Ardern’s leadership style and ability to unify a nation through symbolism has repeatedly won international attention; her response to the coronavirus has now cemented her as one of the world’s most effective leaders.

Earlier this month, along with her government’s highest-paid politicians, Ardern decided to take a 20 per cent pay cut for the next six months, a move that will personally cost her NZ\$47,000 (around €26,000). It was a decision taken not out of necessity, but as a demonstration of solidarity with those affected by the coronavirus outbreak.

“Jacinda has tremendous empathy and deep compassion,” Clark says on a late-night WhatsApp call from her home in Auckland.

Clark was the country’s second elected female prime minister, from 1999–2008, and often speaks in glowing terms about Ardern who got her start in politics as a researcher in Clark’s office in 2005.

“She is clever, empathetic and she is an excellent communicator and these skills have all come together during this crisis. She has been stepping up every single day and she’s been able to do this because of the dreadful events that preceded it,” she says.

Since Ardern became the country’s youngest-ever prime minister at the age of 37, she has had to contend with a pandemic, the White Island volcanic eruption that killed 21 people and the Christchurch massacres on March 15, 2019.

“For three catastrophes to occur in her first term as prime minister is extraordinary, but each time she lifts her leadership to a new level,” Clark says.

It was Ardern’s response to the Christchurch terror attacks, when a white supremacist killed 51 Muslims who were worshipping in two mosques, that earned her world-leader status and made her name familiar to billions.

The day began with Ardern telling a small group of students in New Plymouth who were taking part in the global climate strike, “We know we need to act.”

The day ended with her speaking to a distraught nation from a repurposed hotel room. “They are us,” she said, three words that quickly reverberated around the world.

That day and in all of the ones that followed, Ardern rewrote the playbook of how a leader can respond to a terror attack. She spoke without a desire for vengeance and without the bellicose rhetoric that so often is employed in the wake of terror.

Notably, Ardern refused to grant notoriety to the gunman by never saying his name in a decision that jolted domestic and international media to do the same.

Within a week, a defining image of Ardern wearing a headscarf and hugging a Muslim woman in Christchurch was projected onto the Burj Khalifa, the world’s tallest building.

Within a month, she had passed legislation banning the sale and possession of semi-automatic weapons.

Within two months she had acted on her statement that “no one should be able to broadcast murder” and had spoken to Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey and Emmanuel Macron putting in motion the Christchurch Call, an initiative to stop terrorism finding any platform on social media.

Though Ardern has frequently said what happened is not her story but that of the Muslim community, the victims and their families, her response mattered.

“Just before the anniversary of the terror attack, I spoke to her. I told her I lost my brother. She was very engaged in the conversation and her empathy is evident,” Aya-Al Umari, whose brother Hussein was killed in the attacks, told the *Business Post*.

“The work she had done post the terror attacks had consequential effects on us as a family – we felt supported and looked after, not only physically, but mentally. I feel that no matter what religion the attack was against, she would have reacted the same way.”

Such a display of extraordinary empathy and decisive action advanced Ardern’s policy of global diplomacy, which first began when she walked onto the United Nations floor with her infant baby, Neve.

Ardern was there to deliver a speech restating her commitment to ending child poverty and making her country the best place in the world to be a child.

The move created ardent fans around the world, of a woman – crowned the anti-Trump by the US media – who upended motherhood from career liability to political power, even if it was only for a moment.

For Ardern, the personal is political and the political personal. Where she can use her own circumstances to an advantage, she does.

As she said in her speech to the UN, “If I can do one thing, and that is change the way we think about these things, then I will be pleased we have achieved something.”



“

Voted by her classmates in 1998 as most likely to become prime minister, Ardern quickly found her way to the Beehive, New Zealand’s seat of political power

It was an escalation to the big leagues of the same soft power she displayed when she met Queen Elizabeth II, who is the sovereign and head of state of New Zealand, in Buckingham palace.

Ardern, an unmarried woman who was heavily pregnant at the time, knew she would be photographed from every angle and arrived wearing a kahu huru, the feathered cloak bestowed by Māori on people of honour.

Again, the image was a striking inversion of traditional gender roles and power and it caused New Zealand to light up online with pride and support for the prime minister.

Ardern has long used different media channels to her advantage, frequently using Face-

book and Twitter to make announcements or “check in” with New Zealanders, as she has done nightly during the coronavirus lockdown.

“She prefers to communicate directly through Facebook and social media platforms where she has complete control,” Audrey Young, political editor of the *NZ Herald*, says.

“There has been some resentment in New Zealand media at a perception that she has been keen to cultivate her international profile at the expense of local media,” she says.

Ardern has countered this and emphatically said in an interview with the *NZ Herald* that the international circuit is done for the benefit of New Zealand alone and not, as has occasionally been suggested, as profile-building for a future international role.

A recent visit to the country by Stephen Colbert, the US talk show host, came off the back of two guest appearances by Ardern on *The Late Show* and was estimated to be worth \$5 million to the country in advertising. A magazine profile in the Rupert Murdoch-owned *Sunday Times* was said to be done with the intention of softening up its conservative readership for a possible free trade agreement with New Zealand.

Ardern’s beginnings were a far cry from the cover of *Vogue* and the upper echelons of political society where she is now a desirable photo-op for the leaders of other nations.

The daughter of a policeman and a school catering assistant, she grew up as a Mormon (she left the church in 2005) in Morrinsville, a small town on New Zealand’s north island, that boasts it has more cows per acre than anywhere else in the world.

Her period in London as a policy wonk included working under Sir William Sargent, the Trinity College Dublin graduate and now two-time Oscar winner as co-founder of creative studio Framstore, and Sir Ronald Flanagan, the former chief constable of Northern Ireland’s police service, all the while keeping in touch with Helen Clark, and by her own account, avoiding Tony Blair.

Ardern was still in London in late August 2008 when she was placed on New Zealand’s Labour Party’s list for the forthcoming general election. She returned home and entered parliament as the country’s youngest MP in October 2008.

Once in parliament, she made her mark outside of the Beehive as well as in. She met and fell in love with celebrity fisherman and TV presenter Clarke Gayford, who still appears to laugh gamely every time he’s asked whether Ardern is “his greatest catch”.

While an acting MP, Ardern had a DJ slot on a radio show where she told listeners about going to her first gig, Portishead, and accidentally losing her bra. It was the kind of candour she would retain as prime minister, announcing her pregnancy with detailed anecdotes of FaceTiming her partner from the toilet and consistently giving details about her life that make her relatable and human, an ever-elusive quality for politicians.

Though steadily cultivating a media persona with different TV slots, Ardern for years professed no interest in leading the Labour Party, or becoming prime minister, but then came 2017.

It was an extraordinary year which she began as a list MP and finished four months pregnant and the youngest-ever prime minister of New Zealand.

It was an unlikely win, as Labour was polling a dismal 24 per cent when the then leader, Andrew Little, stepped down, creating the opportunity for Ardern to take over the campaign with the slogan “Let’s do this” 54 days before New Zealanders went to the ballot box.

It was not an easy decision for Little but, as he tells the *Business Post*: “Jacinda is a world-class communicator. I knew then, as I do now, that she had a distinct ability to communicate with New Zealanders, not as a politician, but as a leader.”

Little, who is now Minister for Justice, describes Ardern’s “own style of empathy, compassion and humility” as the qualities that have since convinced him he made the right choice.

Though there were barely any policy changes between the Little and Ardern leadership, the “Jacindamania” effect was immediate. Polls showed Labour shooting to 37 per cent and donations began to flood in.

“Jacinda Ardern’s 2017 election victory was an electrifying experience,” says Stephen Levine, professor of political science at Victoria University of Wellington.

“Even though she had been a member of Parliament for eight and a half years at that point, for most people she was ‘new’, an overnight sensation.”

Until Ardern took over, the election seemed locked up by the incumbent Conservative Party. It too had had a recent change of leader from John Key, an ex-Merrill Lynch financier who had a fondness for tugging women’s ponytails, to Bill English, who called Ardern’s popularity boost nothing but “stardust”.

Ardern’s Labour Party won, but was forced into a coalition with the centre-right New Zealand First party, led by Winston Peters, which is in many ways diametrically opposed to Labour. Now, Ardern faces another general election in September 2020 – and before the coronavirus, her re-election to the top job was far from assured.

KiwiBuild, designed to deal with New Zealand’s astronomically high prices by providing affordable housing, has so far been a failure. Child poverty and climate change, two of Ardern’s campaign promises, are still works in progress and, as the economy will now take a hit, it is uncertain how voters will react.

“New Zealanders often vote based on economic wellbeing, and the election will be influenced both by the state of the economy in the post-virus environment and the ‘high marks’ Ardern receives for her management of this crisis”, Levine says.

Though New Zealanders may be proud of their prime minister and her international star could continue to shine, there is still a chance Ardern could be a political one-hit wonder in her own country.

Factfile

Age: 39

Occupation: New Zealand prime minister

Appearance: Youthful, well turned out

News-worthiness: appears to have quashed the coronavirus in her Pacific Island nation, a feat that has yet to be accomplished anywhere else in the world

Ardern was politically active and progressive from a young age and was elected to her school’s board of trustees, campaigning on the “weighty issue”, as she described it, that girls should be allowed to wear trousers to school.

Voted by her classmates in 1998 as most likely to become prime minister, she quickly found her way to the Beehive, the circular building that is New Zealand’s seat of power, to work under Helen Clark’s premiership.

She moved to New York in 2006, but after a brief stint volunteering in a soup kitchen and without a work visa, she found herself skint and on the phone to the British Civil Service, successfully interviewing for a senior policy role in Tony Blair’s administration.

“I was absolutely gutted. I felt this real dilemma, which was absolutely about Blair,” Ardern told an interviewer in 2017. “It was totally pragmatic. I wanted to live overseas. I wanted to have that time and experience abroad. I was doing amazing voluntary work that I loved, but I needed to live, so I took the job.”