

Interviews: Members of New Zealand’s newly formed Animal Justice Party AJP

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In this series of articles May Safely Graze editor Sandra Kyle interviews the leadership team of the newly-registered Animal Justice Party of Aotearoa New Zealand:

***Rob McNeil
Danette Wereta
Karen Singleton***



‘Research Strategies and Go!’ An interview with AJP Aotearoa NZ Executive President Rob McNeil



1 Tell us a bit about your background Rob.

I grew up in West Auckland, with many family companion cats at times, and eventually became a Chartered Accountant. My real loves were languages and music, but a job in numbers gave me security and paid the bills. This career path led me to a 3-month job in Canada, where I oddly stayed for 32 years, discovering veganism and activism seven years ago, before returning to New Zealand in 2022. My guitar and my music are never far away from me.

Luckily the area I was in in Canada was home to Anita Kranjc and the Save Movement, and I learned a lot from them. I was also lucky enough to attend multiple Animal Liberation Conferences in California, be engaged (allegedly) in direct animal rescues, lead an activism tour across North America, support farm

sanctuaries, develop campaigns and run various grassroots activist groups. Along the way I learned a lot about campaigning, social movement change theory, empathy and movement building. I still have much to learn.

2 How has your path so far helped you to do the job you do in the AJP?

Everything I've done has helped me develop my skills and keep my focus through various trials. I've learned both from successes and failures. Successes include stopping a backyard chicken initiative, managing undercover ag workers, and helping defeat an ag-gag bill. Setbacks were watching the world's biggest chicken slaughterhouse built locally, despite our campaign, being arrested and facing a 10-year maximum sentence for duck rescue (no conviction yay!), and, tragically and unforgettably, seeing activist Regan Russell's blood washed off the streets after she was callously killed outside an Ontario pig slaughterhouse.

3 Do you have a personal philosophy? What drives you?

Knowing that whatever struggles and human setbacks we have, nothing compares to the suffering of the animals on a daily basis. "Find a small aligned crew, research a goal and strategies, and go. Rinse and repeat."

4 What do you consider your main strengths are?

Great mentors in my life (mostly women) have taught me about empathy, speciesism, my privilege, theories of change. I am grateful for all the mentors in my life so far.

5 You have been there from the start of the AJP. Why did you want to help form a political party?

It was an obvious next step for animals in Aotearoa – a party that could be a clear voice for animals, without compromise. I've been here since the start, although it's the excellent team that has made it great. Watch what we can do – stay tuned!

6 What does your position in the AJP entail?

I'm Executive President (2nd term). Sounds fancy but I'm really just here to serve the Executive Committee and the Members, trying to push the agenda forward strategically to help build an organization to do great things as capacity builds. We are all unpaid volunteers – join us!

7 Are there any AHA moments you have had on your vegan/animal rights journey you want to share?

There was an accidental trip to a farm sanctuary in 2017 where I met the late, great Mr Dusty Miller, a rescued turkey who was proud, fierce and gorgeous. It was definitely an 'AHA' moment as he stalked me, and taught me he was an individual and worthy of my respect and adoration.

8 Do you think a single issue party like AJP has any chance being a part of the government?

Definitely – when we win just one seat we could hold a balance of power. Before special votes were counted, in the 2023 election it was quite possible had we won a seat. We just need some great strategies, and some candidates with charisma and experience.

9 How do you think AJP can make a difference for animals if it remains small?

There are city elections to potentially contest, committees to attend, MPs to engage with, and policies and submissions that can influence other parties' actions and the fate of animals. We can also reach many kiwis with strong campaigns and social media.

10 Is there anything else you'd like to say?

The animal movement has all the values and willpower it will ever need, but we lack capacity and sometimes long-term planning to become bigger and more influential over time. We can learn through training how to improve the plight of vulnerable animals. I'm also hopeful that we can learn and share empathic listening and non-violent communication to better understand ourselves and the challenges we face, as we work together to achieve justice for our fellow animals.

'We need to start being honest'. An interview with AJP Aotearoa NZ General Secretary, Danette Wereta



1 Tell us a bit about yourself and your background, Danette.

I was born in New Zealand and lived in Melbourne, Australia for 10 years in my 20's. My son was born in Australia and we moved back when he was little. My work background is in leadership, strategy, culture, change management, and customer engagement, with over 18 years experience working in numerous industries in New Zealand and Australia, including financial services, government, energy, sales, and distribution.

I have an MBA from Canterbury University. I have been in Senior Leadership for over six years, and am the Board Chair for Ao Tawhiti and the Climate Action Campus.

2 How has your background helped you to do your job in the AJP?

My studies and career path have all been helpful and pertinent. In particular, in 2022 I worked in a start-up, which was completely different from my previous roles (in which I led large operational teams of 100+ people). I learned a lot piloting a new business, and found that a new Party has many similarities. You need to get the basics right, be clear on your purpose and position, have goals and planned pathways to achieve them, and set up repeatable processes to ensure they're scalable. The "*so what*" becomes very important.

It also has the same energy and feels like, as the old saying goes, you are "building the plane while flying it".

My governance experience from being on Boards also helps, and of course, years of leadership means different tools in the belt can be applied in different situations.

3 Do you have a personal philosophy? What drives you?

My philosophy is that we aren't here to get big mortgages, fancy cars, or race to the bottom – consuming unnecessarily, causing irreparable harm and damage. We have a lot to learn from the animals who exist alongside us, who are also themselves, who are also connected. It makes you question – what in fact is success? What brings joy and happiness? How do we find balance – giving and taking the way our mother earth intended it.

4 What do you consider your main strengths are?

I am an extremely curious person who is both strong and compassionate. My childhood was difficult, and that has given me much empathy. Growing up, my companion animals never let me down, and I've always had a strong connection to all animals.

5 Why did you become a part of the AJP?

The animal rights movement is huge, and we are all doing critical work. I have always admired and supported different NGOs, advocacy groups, and communities.

I saw AJP step into a vital swim lane that was empty in NZ, and it was the opportunity to use the skills acquired in my career in a super meaningful way. It feels corny saying this, but it really felt completely aligned. For the first time, I could really make a difference by taking everything I know and applying those skills to create value in a space I care most about.

We need people to shine a light on what is wrong, to bring awareness, and also solutions. We need people championing change, and we need AJP working in Parliament to ensure that our laws provide the proper protection and support animals deserve. We need to ensure that laws are in place to help the incredible people in the field do their job when things go wrong, and we also need to be upstream to mitigate things going wrong.

What is right and wrong is often compared to what is legal and illegal, so it's easy to think that how we treat animals is ok. We need an independent Commissioner for Animals to give animals a voice against

abuse, exploitation for entertainment, and harm to their natural environment. We need systemic change to **re-evaluate our understanding of animals, and to treat them as individuals.**

6 What does your position in the AJP entail?

General Secretary. I was lucky to be voted into this position. I have big shoes to fill, and I am trying my best. There is lots to learn! Luckily, I am surrounded by a helpful and experienced team.

In a nutshell, a political party's general secretary is a key administrative role, responsible for overseeing day-to-day operations, implementing strategic goals, fostering communication, and ensuring compliance with political regulations. It's a varied and extensive position, entailing working closely with the other party leaders and officers.

7 Are there any AHA moments you had on your path towards veganism?

I grew deeply frustrated with speciesism; to me it is stating the obvious that it is wrong to treat one type of animal one way, and another so very differently. We all feel fear, pain, and joy. I am certain that if most people bore witness to what actually happens in slaughterhouses, and imagined their dog in that position, they would want them all shut down. Language has been used to disconnect from the truth of how we treat animals, and we need to start being honest.

Animals' lives are theirs, not ours. Humans are the biggest pests on the planet and when we look at history, you can see how the way we live directly impacts animals. We must take responsibility and stop the industrialization of animal farming. We are in a crisis that continues to grow more serious with each passing year. We have to make better choices.

I have always felt intuitively connected to animals and felt like we understood each other. Over the years, I have relied on a sixth sense and often end up where an animal needs help. Unfortunately, a lot of that is providing love and light as they cross over the rainbow bridge. It's been very heavy and extremely difficult. However, I spoke with someone who explained that it's a gift, and I need to lean in. I should see it as an honor and embrace the role. So, I spend a lot of time helping animals! And, thankfully, it doesn't always end sadly.

8 Do you think a single-issue party like AJP has any chance of being a part of the government?

It will be very hard. However, I have hope! Hope is important. Hope is powerful. And the wave of change happens so fast these days. While it is easy to get bogged down in the horrific cruelty that we inflict upon animals, there are many beacons of light.

9 Do you think AJP can make a difference for animals, even if it remains small?

Yes. Everyone can't do everything, but if we join up and work together, we can make a difference. AJP is needed on the scene to drive much-needed political action for the animals.

10 Is there anything else you'd like to say?

I feel extremely privileged to work alongside my colleagues at AJP, and to be learning from everyone. We're all here to make change for animals. We have grit and determination and nothing is impossible.

John Feldmann said: “I believe animals should be respected as citizens of this earth. They should have the right to their freedom, their own families and their own life”.

This is what I believe too.

‘We Will Always Speak Up For Animals.’ An interview with AJP Aotearoa NZ Policy President Karen Singleton



1 Tell us a bit about yourself and your background, Karen.

I have had the opportunity to have a number of different careers, across 3 countries! Born in the North of England to a meat-eating, working-class family, I was lucky enough to study fashion and work as a designer and a lecturer before giving it all up to live in rural France for almost ten years. I loved learning the language, and teaching others English. I worked for a French software company supporting training and the help desk, which was great fun with my improving French language skills! I moved to New Zealand about 10 years ago and have worked as a civil servant in a number of roles, from Capability building in Emergency Management, to Strategic Policy.

I've always been passionate about the environment and living in a harmonious, and sustainable way with animals and the planet. I am filled with a sense of wonder of all the amazing creatures alive today, and a deep sadness for all those extinct today due to human activity.

Simple things bring me pleasure; being in Nature, helping animals and giving rescue cats and chickens a happy home, growing veggies, and always increasing my knowledge so I can help more animals.

2 So you've had plenty of experience working in diverse, complex, fast-paced and high-pressure environments. How would you describe your leadership style?

Probably that it is based on relationship building and mentoring. In 2021 I became an online mentor for the Vegan Society 21 day Vegan Challenge. I have a calm nature, a strong work ethic, and a strategic and analytic thinking focus, and I think my leadership models all of this.

3 How has your background helped you to do the job you now do in the AJP?

When I first started volunteering for AJP my former organisational and leadership experience enabled me to apply some structure to the work required, and help the team progress. It was an intensive time, with a heavy workload, and my emergency management experience certainly helped!

Since then I have supported AJP as Head of Comms, my analytical and writing skills helping to identify what we wanted to say and how best to say it – whether on social media, press releases or emails to members.

Strategic thinking has been key throughout, questioning what are we doing, why, and what the impact is we're trying to create for animals.

My skills enabled me to work collaboratively with a wide range of people, who were strangers at first, but many are now respected peers and friends.

Understanding leadership, project management and how government works provides a good underpinning for the Policy President role.

4 Did you have any AHA moments that led you to veganism and your work for animals?

I've always shared my adult life with other animals. Each individual has had a huge impact on me. However, it is the rescue dog who was part of the family when I was a child who started me on this journey of reflection. As a teenager I became aware that in some countries people eat dogs, and in others they don't eat cows or pigs, which was part of my normal world. This made me reflect on the different societal norms, and how arbitrary they are. And if eating cows was socially acceptable in the UK why wasn't eating dogs? The solution seemed to me to either be ok with eating all animals or eat none. I choose none at all as a teenager. While I lived a vegan lifestyle, I ate a vegetarian diet. Unfortunately it took me decades to commit to a fully vegan diet but it just felt so right when I did as it fully aligned with my lifestyle and beliefs, and I wish I'd done it sooner. I've followed a vegan diet for about 9 years now.

5 Do you have a personal philosophy? What drives you?

Compassion and wonder. For each other, the planet and all who share this amazing world with us. My vision is of a habitable planet with a peaceful civilisation.

I want everyone (including non-human animals) to be happy and kind to each other. We are all here for a short time. Let's help each other, and protect the precious home we all share.

6 What do you consider your main strengths are?

Calm, organised, flexible. I get on with things and do them!

7 Why did you become a part of the AJP?

I wanted to find a channel where I could use my transferable skills to help animals.

While I would donate, sign petitions and attend a few marches, I never felt like I was doing all I could to help animals.

Being involved in the AJP is such a pleasure and a privilege. I feel, as part of a political party advocating for animals, we have an opportunity to directly influence legislation, shape national policies, and bring about systemic changes which could be transformational. To be able to use my skills to support this is incredible.

8 You are Policy President. What does that entail?

It's a one-year term, elected annually at the AGM. My duties include serving as Chair of the Policy Committee, and ensuring it operates effectively and efficiently, as well as acting as spokesperson for the Party on matters of Party Policy. I also serve on the Executive Committee of the Party.

9 Do you think a single-issue party like AJP has any chance being a part of the government?

I do. I am a believer in the power of democracy and what dedicated individuals can achieve. Society changes, and norms with them. We're now seeing political polarisation happening here in NZ, as we've seen happen in the UK and US, and I feel single-issue parties will gain more traction as people lose faith in parties seemingly seeking to tear apart our society, setting one group against another in one culture war after another.

In the meantime, AJP is creating a vision for the future for all of us and while single-issue parties might not often form the government, we can still play a role in shaping the political agenda and influencing policies. We can negotiate with larger parties to advocate for animals. Everything we do will raise awareness about animals and contribute to public discourse on them, and how they are treated.

10 How do you think the AJP can make a difference for animals if it remains small?

By influencing public discourse, raising awareness, and leveraging our presence. While our legislative impact might be limited, we can collaborate with larger parties, form alliances, and mobilise public support to gradually build momentum and influence towards more significant changes in the long run.

We also have the agility to focus on particular issues for specific animals to make a real difference to their lives.

As our purpose is "to work towards a society that recognises and protects the rights and well-being of animals" we won't compromise our message. We will always speak up for animals and seek to improve their lives.

I think the Climate and Environment debate shows that more education doesn't change people's behaviour. We need to target people's hearts and values. We need to provide a clear, holistic vision that people can see and desire.

To do this it is vital we are seen as a professional organisation that can be trusted in the information it shares and provides, and, of course, through our actions.

11 Is there anything else you would like to say?

Only that I am very grateful for the support of my partner, who is also a vegan. Without him I wouldn't be able to give so much time and energy to AJP! Helping animals is both an individual and a community activity, and we all benefit.