



## Waring, Marilyn (b. 1952)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Marilyn Waring.  
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Marilyn Waring.

Provocative, intellectual, and earthy, New Zealand's Marilyn Waring has had a richly varied career. She has been an effective Member of Parliament, a respected academic, an innovative economist, and a contented goat farmer. This combination of interests seems appropriate for the lesbian feminist economist who has worked hard to interpret and redefine complex concepts of economics in order to make them accessible to ordinary people.

Waring's ability to value the concrete practicality of the farmer's life as highly as the cerebral world of academia is consistent with the major focus of her economic philosophy--the idea that the current market system is fatally flawed because it does not reflect what people really value in their lives.

Waring was born on October 7, 1952, in the North Island town of Ngaruawahia. The daughter of a butcher, she had a working-class childhood in an area known for its dairy farms and coal mines.

Waring attended college at the Victoria University of Wellington, where, in 1974, she was awarded a B. A. in political science and international politics. She intended to continue her studies, and applied to enter the doctoral program. However, because she was so young, the university required her to do field work and present a "participatory paper."

As a Parliamentary election process was just beginning then, Waring decided to run for the House of Representatives as her academic project. Somewhat surprisingly, she was elected in 1975, and at the age of 22, became the youngest member of New Zealand's Parliament and its only woman. Somehow she never got around to writing the paper about it.

Waring remained in Parliament for the next nine years, serving three terms. Though she was an ardent and progressive feminist representing a conservative region, Waring's heartfelt respect for the working people who were her constituency earned her their votes. However, she had no such respect for the hidebound bureaucracy of government, and in her maiden speech to the legislature she reproached her colleagues for being "out of touch, backward, and conservative."

During her tenure in Parliament, Waring chaired the Public Expenditure Committee, served as Senior Government Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and worked on the Disarmament and Arms Control Committee.

In 1980, she struck a blow for women internationally by adding an amendment opposing sexism to the United Nations World Plan of Action to improve the condition of women.

However, Waring's most dramatic moment in Parliament came in 1984, when she voted against her own government in favor of a nuclear-free New Zealand. Her decision to "cross the floor" and vote in favor of the nuclear ban prompted Prime Minister Robert Muldoon to call for a snap election.

Muldoon's government lost the election, and the new government passed the nuclear-free resolution, making New Zealand the first nation in the world to refuse entry to U.S. nuclear ships.

In 1976, only a year after she was first elected, Waring had been outed as a lesbian in the newspaper *N Z Truth*. Waring had never been closeted and did not deny that she was a lesbian. Though many in her party stood behind her, Muldoon later lashed out with a homophobic slur, calling Waring a "perverted little liar" in a private meeting the night of the snap election.

Waring's service as Chair of the Public Expenditure Committee, which reviewed parliamentary budgets and expenditures, led her to become quite wary of mainstream economic theories and contributed to her decision to pursue a doctorate in economics.

After leaving Parliament, Waring returned to her studies and also began to farm angora goats. While working on her Ph. D. in political economy, she began to apply her principles of feminism and human rights to the field of economics. It soon became apparent to her that the prevalent theories of economics did not ascribe sufficient value to most of the work done by the women of the world. Not only was child-rearing and home-tending work undervalued, but so was agricultural work and sheer hard labor, such as carrying water from distant wells. Such work became invisible to the world's economists when it was done by women for no pay.

Waring began by seeking a way to place a market value on women's work, but she soon realized that the real problem was the acceptance of market value as the standard of worth. She wanted to demystify economics, and present the case that women's unpaid work was a breach of human rights.

The groundbreaking book that resulted from Waring's studies was *Counting for Nothing: What Men Value and What Women are Worth*, published in 1988. It was later retitled *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* and reprinted more than seven times.

Waring's achievement in *Counting for Nothing* is to demonstrate that the devaluing of women's work is woven into the very fabric of contemporary economic theory and practice. The book points out that environmental concerns and subsistence work are not included in the calculations of a country's Gross National Product unless they create surplus value; otherwise, they count for nothing.

Waring ridicules mainstream economic analyses that count oil spills and wars as contributors to economic growth, while regarding child-rearing and housekeeping as valueless. At the same time, however, she rejects "environmental accounting," which assigns cash values to mountains, wildlife, air, and water.

For Waring, the most essential elements of life cannot be reduced to a budget line. "I don't want to see the things I love," she says, "appearing in national income accounts, called valuable, along with nuclear bombs, nuclear power stations, toxic wastes, female sexual slavery, trade in drugs and everything else. This is the invitation that is being extended to us, and we have to stop it, right now."

Waring's work is the subject of a 1995 film, *Who's Counting? Marilyn Waring on Sex, Lies and Global Economics*, directed by Terre Nash and produced by the National Film Board of Canada.

Waring left her goat farm in 2002 and moved back to the city, where she has continued to explore and publish her economic ideas, while teaching at various universities. She is a respected academic who has won fellowships from Harvard University and Rutgers University, worked as Senior Lecturer at the University of Waikato, and headed the Public Policy program at Auckland's Massey University. In 2006, she will begin working at the Institute of Public Policy at the Auckland University of Technology.

Waring has written many articles and books, including *Three Masquerades: Essays on Equality, Work, and Hu(Man) Rights* (1996) and *In the Lifetime of a Goat: Writings 1984-2000* (2002).

She is a member of the Board of the Reserve Bank of New Zealand and has served as a consultant for such organizations as the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and the United Nations Development Fund for Women and for a number of countries in South East Asia and the Pacific.

Waring also works for gay and lesbian rights. While fighting to legalize same-sex marriage in New Zealand, she has become an outspoken critic of civil unions, calling them discriminatory and a form of "separate but equal" oppression.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.