

New Zealand opposition leadership change reflects tensions over social unrest and drive to war

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's opposition National Party elected a new leader, Simon Bridges, on February 27, to replace Bill English, who announced his retirement from politics on February 13.

It was the conservative party's second leadership change in less than two years, indicating considerable perplexity and turmoil within the party—especially over how to deal with rising working class anger over falling living standards, and the global drive toward economic nationalism and trade war.

Former National Party Prime Minister John Key resigned suddenly and unexpectedly in December 2016, after eight years in office, giving no explanation apart from wanting to spend more time with his family. His replacement, English, similarly declared his own resignation was “a purely personal decision.”

After the National Party failed to form a government following the September 2017 election, English gave no indication he would step down. He trumpeted the fact that National secured more votes than any other party, albeit not enough to govern alone. In January, English reportedly dismissed rumours of his impending resignation as “gossip.”

There are undoubtedly divisions and recriminations within the National Party over its failure to form a government. After the September 23 poll, the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, which received only 7.5 percent of the vote, negotiated with National and the Labour Party for a month and then announced it would form a coalition government with Labour and the Greens, ending nine years of National Party rule.

Significantly, NZ First leader Winston Peters announced his decision after US ambassador Scott

Brown made a series of extraordinary public statements calling for a government that would strengthen the alliance between the US and New Zealand. Brown criticised English's government for failing to fully endorse President Donald Trump's threat to annihilate North Korea. English had described Trump's statements as “not helpful.”

The National Party also came under sustained attack in the lead-up to the election, and in its aftermath, for its alleged close diplomatic and business relationship with China. Academic Anne-Marie Brady, from the US government-funded Wilson Centre think tank, denounced the National government for failing to sufficiently condemn China's “expansionism.” She alleged that National Party MP Jian Yang was a Chinese Communist Party agent—a claim echoed by New Zealand First and much of the media. The Labour-NZ First government has ordered an investigation by the country's intelligence agencies into Brady's allegations of Chinese “interference.”

The direct rebuke from Washington unquestionably played a part in English's demise. Successive National and Labour Party governments have strengthened military and intelligence ties with Washington, sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, while at the same time rapidly expanding trade and investment with China. National government ministers repeatedly said they did not need to “make a choice” between the US and China, even as the Obama administration began its military build-up against China.

The Trump administration has indicated that it will not tolerate such equivocation from New Zealand, a partner in the top-level, US-led Five Eyes intelligence network.

New leader Simon Bridges entered parliament in 2008, the same year as Labour's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, and only became transport minister in 2014. Before that, he worked as a crown prosecutor and a lawyer at the elite Auckland commercial law firm Kensington Swan. Bridges defeated more senior contenders for the party leadership—Steven Joyce, Amy Adams and Judith Collins. The latter has been attacked repeatedly by the Labour Party and the media for her relations with Chinese business.

Media coverage of Bridges' elevation focused on the fact that he is part-Maori, as is deputy leader Paula Bennett. Bridges told Radio NZ he felt "very proud" of his Maori heritage and it was a "great privilege" to be the first indigenous person to lead one of the two main political parties.

The obsession with Bridges' ethnicity and Ardern's gender (and her pregnancy) is intended to obscure fundamental class divisions and divert rising social discontent. Neither leader represents, in any way, working class Maori or women, who are suffering record levels of inequality. Maori are over-represented in all statistics relating to poverty, including homelessness, mental health, suicide and incarceration.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, the National Party government slashed government spending on essential services and enacted austerity measures, with Labour's support. Both parties have encouraged property speculation which has driven up house prices and rents, producing a social disaster. More than one in 100 people are homeless. A recent report on housing and homelessness found that 80 percent of people seeking emergency shelter were being turned away because of a lack of beds.

Many people cannot afford food. One week after Bridges' installation as leader, the Ministry of Social Development released figures showing that in 2017 it made almost 498,000 food grants to desperate welfare recipients and low-paid workers—an increase of close to 100,000 on the year before.

Bridges described himself as politically "moderate" and made vague pledges to "modernise" the National Party. In media interviews he said there was a housing crisis "for those who don't have houses." Bridges has previously defended the severe cuts to welfare and other attacks by the 1990s National Party government, which deepened the previous Labour government's

sweeping privatisation of public services, and the removal of national protections from industries in the 1980s.

Significant divisions remain within the political establishment, exacerbated by the Trump administration's announcement of trade war measures. Sections of the ruling class are still striving to maintain an unsustainable balance between economic relations with China and the military alliance with the US.

Bridges said he opposed Trump's tariffs and economic "protectionism." He told TVNZ the government should "raise these issues" with Washington through the World Trade Organisation.

Bridges also expressed concern over anti-Chinese statements by Foreign Minister Peters, the NZ First leader. Peters last week described China's economic activities in the Pacific region as "not helpful" and hinted that the government was considering withdrawing from Beijing's One Belt One Road (OBOR) international infrastructure and development scheme.

In response, Bridges told Radio NZ Peters' statements had a "negative and sceptical tone." Bridges noted that he personally signed New Zealand up to OBOR as transport minister and said it would bring significant economic opportunities for New Zealand investors throughout the world.

At the same time, Bridges told Radio NZ the National Party agreed with Peters' announcement of a renewed push to counter Chinese economic influence in the Pacific. The previous National government participated in numerous US-led military exercises, aimed against China, and increased New Zealand's military presence in the Pacific region, which the NZ ruling elite regards as its colonial back yard.



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