New Zealand opposition leadership change points to political instability

Tom Peters
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A simmering crisis in New Zealand's opposition National Party came to a head last Friday, when MPs voted to replace Simon Bridges with Todd Muller as leader, just four months before the country's election. Paula Bennett also lost her job as deputy leader, replaced by Nikki Kaye.

Muller is the third National Party leader since Prime Minister John Key's sudden resignation in 2016. Bridges, a former crown prosecutor, took the leadership from Bill English following National's 2017 election defeat.

Muller entered parliament in 2014 and last year became National's agriculture spokesman. He has previously held senior roles in dairy company Fonterra and kiwifruit marketer Zespri, but is relatively unknown to the public.

Muller told Radio NZ he only decided to contest the leadership following a Newshub poll on May 18 showing the party's support had dropped to 30.8 percent, from 43.3 percent in February. A second poll by TVNZ on Thursday showed National with 29 percent and Labour on 59 percent.

The media highlighted Bridges' dismally low rating in the "preferred Prime Minister" category—just 4.5 percent in Newshub's poll, compared with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's 59.5 percent. The government currently enjoys broad support in the ruling elite and has been glorified by the local and international media for its pro-business response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The National Party's worst poll result in 15 years provided the opportunity to seal Bridges' fate. Larger political issues, however, underlie the leadership change. In country after country, politics is being profoundly destabilised by the unprecedented health, economic and social crisis triggered by the pandemic.

Whichever party leads the government after the September election will confront an upsurge of working-class anger and opposition over job cuts and attacks on wages and conditions, which are already well underway. New Zealand is also facing intense pressure to support US imperialist threats against China, NZ's biggest trading partner.

Powerful sections of the ruling class evidently concluded that Bridges was incapable of dealing with these explosive domestic and geopolitical crises. In recent weeks Bridges has been attacked in the media and inside his own party for criticising aspects of the government's response to the pandemic.

MPs reportedly questioned Bridges' leadership after an April 20 Facebook post which said "businesses will suffer" from a five-day extension to the country's lockdown. In reality, the government's decision was calculated to appease businesses; it was less than the two-week lockdown extension recommended by health experts.

The Facebook post received thousands of negative comments and media criticism. Pro-National Party commentator Ben Thomas described it as a "giant misstep."

Muller has promised not to criticise the government's COVID-19 public health measures.

More fundamentally, under Bridges' leadership sharp divisions erupted within National over New Zealand's relations with China. MP Jami-Lee Ross resigned from the party in October 2018 after accusing Bridges of "corruption" for failing to disclose political donations from Chinese businessman Zhang Yikun.

Bridges tried to shut down the scandal, but the National Party was continually attacked as part of the anti-China campaign by sections of the media, Labour and NZ First supporters, and pro-US academics such as

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Anne-Marie Brady. Vehement denunciations followed Bridges' visit to Beijing in September 2019, where he talked up the trade relationship and expressed support for Chinese "sovereignty" in Hong Kong.

The Labour-led government that includes NZ First and the Greens has strengthened military ties with the United States. Its 2018 defence policy statement echoed the Trump administration's denunciation of China and Russia as the main "threats" to global stability. The government has called for more US forces to be sent to the Pacific to push back against Chinese influence.

Foreign Minister and NZ First leader Winston Peters has deliberately stoked tensions with Beijing, most recently with inflammatory claims that the Chinese government tried to dissuade New Zealand from locking down in March.

The 2008–2017 National Party-led government also boosted the alliance with Washington, sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan, while simultaneously building strong trade and investment ties with China.

This fraught balancing act, however, cannot be sustained. The Trump administration is demanding unwavering loyalty from its allies, including New Zealand, as it seeks to scapegoat China for the COVID-19 pandemic and to ramp up preparations for war.

In the lead-up to the National Party's leadership spill, Trump threatened to cut all ties with China and compared the pandemic to an act of war "worse than Pearl Harbor."

Todd Muller's installation, however, will not resolve the divisions in the political establishment. Muller's former employers Zespri and Fonterra, New Zealand's biggest company, both rely heavily on exports to China.

Asked by *Magic Talk* on Sunday whether he had "concerns about our reliance on China," Muller replied: "I see China as an opportunity." He said China had "a massive interest in what we produce" and New Zealand needed to build "deep relationships" with the country. Muller told the *Sunday Star Times* the government should consider reopening the borders to China.

At the same time, Muller represents a further lurch to the right. He has described himself as an "American political junkie" and defended his prominent display of a pro-Trump "Make America Great Again" cap, acquired during a 2016 visit to the US, in his parliamentary office. A Catholic, Muller voted against recent legislation which fully decriminalised abortion.

As the election approaches, the National Party is cynically using the government's failure to alleviate skyrocketing poverty and inequality to push for more pro-business policies. Muller has taken on his party's small business portfolio, saying that this showed his "commitment to keeping people in jobs and helping businesses invest and grow."

In a *Stuff* column on May 24, Paul Goldsmith, National's finance spokesman, denounced the recent increase to the minimum wage—a meagre $1.20 extra an hour—and said the National Party would "reduce regulation" of businesses.

While feigning sympathy for people losing their jobs, National agrees with the Labour-led government's main response to the pandemic: billions of dollars in subsidies primarily for big business. None of the established parties has proposed anything to stop hundreds of thousands of layoffs and the destruction of living standards on a scale unseen since the Great Depression.

The next government, whoever leads it, will continue the massive transfer of wealth to the rich, while ramping up the exploitation of the working class.

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