

New Zealand's opposition National Party in turmoil after another leadership change

John Braddock, Tom Peters
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In the latest sign of growing instability in New Zealand's political establishment, the main opposition National Party installed a new leader this week following weeks of inner-party turmoil. The change occurred just 10 weeks before the scheduled September 19 general election.

Former cabinet minister Judith Collins won the leadership ballot at an emergency caucus meeting on Tuesday night, following the sudden resignation of the incumbent, Todd Muller, earlier in the day.

Muller cited unspecified health issues and declared he was "not the best person" to lead the party. In May he had replaced Simon Bridges in a leadership spill triggered by the party's slump in the polls.

Muller's 53-day leadership term was the shortest of any parliamentary leader in New Zealand's history. Media commentators said the trigger for his resignation was the revelation that National Party MP Hamish Walker and former party president, Michelle Boag, leaked private medical details of COVID-19 patients in an attempt to embarrass the Labour Party-led government.

The media attacked Muller's inability to control his MPs and his failure to gain political traction from the government's mismanagement of quarantine hotels, which prompted the resignation of Health Minister David Clark earlier this month.

The persistent crisis within the National Party, however, has deeper roots than the scandal surrounding Walker and Boag. Collins is the third person to lead the party this year and the fourth since the shock resignation of Prime Minister John Key in 2016.

The National Party's turmoil stems partly from its lack of any significant differences with Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's main response to the crisis. This has consisted of handing tens of billions of dollars to big

business in the form of subsidies, bailouts and tax concessions, even as companies like The Warehouse, SkyCity and Air New Zealand have sacked thousands of people.

For now, Labour appears to be the ruling elite's preferred party to oversee the savage pro-business restructuring that is already underway. The media in New Zealand and internationally has lavished praise on Ardern's handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

A more fundamental source of political instability is National's foreign policy differences with the Labour government. While both parties support close military and intelligence ties with the United States, including NZ participation in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the National Party remains anxious about alienating China, New Zealand's main trading partner.

The 2008–2017 National government's attempt to balance between the US and China became increasingly untenable as President Barack Obama, followed by Trump, ramped up the military encirclement and economic pressure on China.

Ardern's coalition government, which includes the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party and the Greens, was formed in 2017 with the support of Washington. During the coalition talks that followed the inconclusive election, US Ambassador Scott Brown publicly criticised the National Party for failing to support Trump's threat to "totally destroy" North Korea. He indicated that the next government should take a firmer stand against China.

The drive towards war is now accelerating sharply due to the unprecedented health, economic and social crisis created by the pandemic. Washington aims to reverse its long-term economic decline and assert its global dominance, and divert working-class anger over the rising US death toll.

The Ardern government has strengthened New Zealand's integration into US war preparations. A 2018 defence policy statement labelled China and Russia the main "threats" to the global order, echoing the Pentagon. It has also ramped up military spending and recruitment.

Meanwhile the government's supporters in the media, along with the prominent pro-US academic Anne-Marie Brady, have sought to portray the National Party as compromised because of its links with Beijing. This anti-Chinese campaign, which began before the 2017 election, is now bearing fruit.

Muller's resignation followed a surprise announcement on July 10 by National's Chinese-born MP Jian Yang that he will retire after the election. Brady, NZ First, the trade union-backed *Daily Blog* and the fascist group Action Zealandia have all accused Yang—without any evidence—of being an agent of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Yang is a significant fundraiser for the National Party. He also helped to organise a delegation to Beijing last year led by Bridges, who was attacked in the media for praising the Chinese government.

As leader, Muller argued for further trade with China; he also defended Yang and promoted him in the National Party parliamentary rankings, from number 33 to 27.

The ousting of Bridges, Yang's retirement and Muller's resignation suggest growing divisions within National over its links with China. *Stuff* also noted: "Roughly a third of the National MPs elected at the last election have either departed or are about to leave," including leading figures in the 2008–2017 government: Bill English, Paula Bennett, Nikki Kaye, Amy Adams and Nathan Guy.

Notwithstanding the foreign policy differences which exist between the National Party and Labour there is complete agreement with the Ardern government's continued assault on the jobs, wages and the living and working conditions of the working class.

The installation of Collins will not resolve the party's crisis. Notably, Collins has returned Bridges to her front bench with the key portfolios of foreign affairs and justice. Her own business connections with China will be of considerable concern in Washington. In 2014, Collins was admonished by Prime Minister Key for using an official trip to Beijing to endorse milk

products exported by the NZ company Oravida, of which her husband is a director.

Collins' leadership represents a further lurch towards right-wing authoritarianism. In the Key government, she was a hardline police minister, overseeing increased access to tasers and firearms for officers. The media dubbed her "Crusher Collins" when she proposed legislation to crush the vehicles of illegal street racers.

Journalist Nicky Hager's 2014 book *Dirty Politics* revealed that Collins was a confidante of prominent right-wing blogger Cameron Slater. In one of her messages to Slater, Collins summed up her approach to politics as: "If you can't be loved, then best to be feared." She was temporarily removed from cabinet over her alleged involvement in Slater's efforts to smear the Serious Fraud Office head on behalf of an investment banker who was under investigation.

Alongside Collins, Gerry Brownlee has been made the new deputy leader. Brownlee is widely despised for his role as minister in charge of the Christchurch earthquake recovery following 2011. This was a disaster for tens of thousands of people whose houses were damaged or destroyed and who faced endless delays and shoddy repairs from government agencies and insurance companies.

The National Party was founded in 1936, following the election of the first Labour government, as a regroupment of pro-business forces determined to suppress rising working-class opposition to capitalism. Amid the most severe crisis of capitalism since the Great Depression, all the major parties are once again preparing to brutally confront mass opposition to job losses, austerity and militarism.



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