New Zealand opposition picks new right-wing leader

Tom Peters
1 December 2021

On Tuesday, New Zealand's main opposition National Party installed Christopher Luxon as its new leader—the fourth person to lead the conservative party in the space of just two years. Since it lost the 2017 election, the party has been beset by crises and factional infighting, made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and another election loss in October 2020, when the party got just 25.6 percent of the votes.

MPs voted last Thursday to remove Judith Collins, who had led the party since July 2020. She was ousted the day after she suddenly demoted her factional rival, former leader Simon Bridges, stripping him of his portfolios. Collins accused Bridges of "harassment and intimidation" for allegedly making inappropriate comments to a female MP five years ago.

The #MeToo-style attack backfired, with MPs turning against Collins. Bridges told the media she was "truly desperate" and would "go to any length to hold onto the leadership."

Bridges was initially expected to contest the leadership, but stood aside, allowing Luxon to be elevated unopposed. Collins has also said she supports Luxon's leadership.

Luxon has only been in parliament one year. He is a significant figure in business circles, with close links to the tourism and travel industry as the former chief executive of Air New Zealand, the state-owned airline. He is also a close friend of former National Party leader John Key, a multi-millionaire banker who was prime minister from 2008 to 2016.

The new deputy leader, Nicola Willis, is a seasoned party operative and another protégé of Key. Her husband also held a senior position at Air New Zealand under Luxon from 2015–2018.

Luxon told a press conference after assuming the leadership that he saw his relative newness as an "advantage." "Today we are drawing a line under the events of the last four years, and we are putting them behind us," he said.

However, there is no reason to believe that his elevation will resolve the conflicts wracking the party. While media commentary generally attributes the party's turmoil to the personal ambitions of Bridges, Collins, Luxon and others, it has much deeper roots, reflecting conflicts within the political establishment over both domestic and foreign policy.

As is the case internationally, every party in parliament is under pressure from big business to ditch any public health restrictions and fully reopen borders.

In response to the demands of the corporate media and business elite, Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced in October that the government would abandon its elimination strategy for COVID-19, ignoring the warnings of scientists and public health experts. The lockdown in Auckland is set to end tomorrow, despite an ongoing outbreak with more than 6,000 active cases, centred in the city. Travel restrictions in and out of Auckland will be eased on December 15, and the government has declared that the Delta variant will spread across the country.

The Labour government has, however, been fiercely attacked for refusing to ease international travel restrictions until mid-January; the border will not fully reopen for tourists until May 2022. Just days before National MPs removed Collins, Air New Zealand announced the cancellation of 1,000 flights scheduled for December, mostly between Australia and New Zealand.

Tourism Industry Aotearoa (TIA) chief executive Chris Roberts told *Stuff* the government "failed to recognise the critical importance of visitors to re-establishing our connections with the world." The TIA and the Tourism Export Council both denounced the continued requirement for people entering the country to self-isolate for seven days once travel resumes.

While Collins pushed for an end to border restrictions, she was evidently seen as too hesitant and unreliable. In the lead-up to her removal, National lost support in the polls to the far-right ACT Party, which is heavily promoted in the media for leading the calls to end lockdowns. A recent poll showed National on 26.9 percent and ACT on 16 percent—double

© World Socialist Web Site

what it received in the last election. Collins' personal popularity as "preferred prime minister" sat at just 6.1 percent, well behind ACT leader David Seymour on 11.9 percent.

Collins' leadership was severely undermined in late September when former Prime Minister Key published an open letter, without consulting Collins, denouncing the Ardern government for creating a "smug hermit kingdom" and "ruling by fear." Key demanded the government set a date for international travel to resume and "reassure people that living with the virus is possible, as long as you're vaccinated."

While vaccination is essential, it is not enough to stop the pandemic and large numbers of deaths. This fact is underscored by the emergence of the even more infectious Omicron variant, which may have more resistance to vaccines.

Despite the risk posed by Omicron, Luxon told Newstalk ZB on Wednesday that the government should immediately reopen the border for New Zealanders to return from Australia, without any requirement for travellers to isolate in a quarantine hotel.

The leadership change also takes place amid widening social inequality and class tensions. On Sunday, 86-year-old former National Party Prime Minister Jim Bolger told TVNZ he was alarmed that "some are getting obscenely rich and others are going to food kitchens." Bolger, whose 1990s government slashed welfare benefits and attacked workers' rights, said the new party leader needed a "vision" to unite the country by "reimagining capitalism."

The installation of Luxon, however, makes clear that National's response will be a further lurch to the right. Asked what National would do about the housing crisis—NZ has some of the least affordable housing in the world, and more than one in 100 people are homeless—Luxon, who owns seven properties, said he did not want prices to fall significantly. This is the same position put as the Labour government, which is presiding over an out-of-control housing bubble, exacerbated by quantitative easing and low interest rates.

Luxon indicated that National wants a stronger state apparatus to deal with social tensions, calling for police to have "more access to firearms." Citing his Christian beliefs, he also made clear his "personal" opposition to abortion, confirming to *Newshub* yesterday that he viewed it as murder.

In foreign policy, the National Party has been attacked for years by academics, media commentators and Labour Party supporters for its promotion of strong economic relations with China. New Zealand's major imperialist allies, the US and Australia, are preparing for war against China, which the US ruling class views as its main global rival.

The leadership change is unlikely to resolve National's crisis over these strategic issues. Despite firmly supporting New Zealand's alliance with the US, the National Party lost power in 2017 because the right-wing, anti-Chinese NZ First Party decided to form a government with Labour and the Greens instead of National, which got the most votes.

Ardern's Labour Party-led government was formed with the support of Washington, which viewed Labour as a more reliable vehicle to integrate New Zealand into US war plans against China. It has further strengthened military ties with the US, and supported the increased US presence in the Pacific, to push back against China's influence.

Bridges, who led the National Party from February 2018 until being ousted in May 2020, was a particular target of the anti-China campaign. He was denounced by renegade MP Jami-Lee Ross for "corruption" for allegedly failing to declare donations from a Chinese businessman, and was attacked in the media for visiting China to discuss trade.

Collins sought to maintain a fraught balancing act. In a typical statement to TVNZ on April 21, she said China was "our major export market [and] crucial in keeping our economy going," while New Zealand's membership in the US-led intelligence network, the Five Eyes, was also "absolutely crucial."

Luxon will likely attempt the same precarious balancing act. On April 30, he told the bFM radio station that the relationship with China was "a difficult one for New Zealand because in many ways our values… sit with the West," but "our commercial interests sit with China." Luxon opposed the ACT Party's push for parliament to declare that Beijing was carrying out "genocide" against the Uyghur population, pointing out that there was no evidence for this.

Such positions will be deemed unacceptable by the Biden administration in Washington, which will not tolerate any wavering from its allies as it ramps up propaganda against China and prepares for war.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site