

Third parties even more in play as Labour changes leaders

By her own admission, **Jacinda Ardern has been thrust “at short notice into the worst job in politics”**, meaning Leader of the Opposition rather than of the Labour Party, a distinction she was quick to make. She is the **fifth leader since Helen Clark stepped down** after the 2008 defeat and the most promising since David Shearer in terms of her current preferred PM ratings, which level-peg Little’s at around 6%. She is also **by her own admission unambitious for the role** and is not resiling from comments in the recent past reflecting on the anxiety of high office and her desire to start a family at some stage.

At her first press conference as leader today, she came across as a warmer, more potentially inspiring leader than Andrew Little, but **not yet carrying the title ‘future Prime Minister’ credibly**. However, **her only task now is to ensure that Labour does better than Little’s 24% poll nadir**.

But **the odds of a fourth term National Party-led government have inevitably improved**. Voters tend not to reward political parties in disarray, although Little’s unexpected demise has been swift and as positively handled as a leadership spill so close to an election can be. **At the very least, it has gained Labour media attention**, which the party has struggled for with its recent string of worthy and detailed policy launches.

And assuming Ardern survives past the election, **the swift changeover has handily circumvented the party’s cumbersome constitutional processes** for leadership changes. Reform of that constitution, **including the influence of trade unions in that choice**, is a live issue but for another day. It carries the seeds of bloodletting between party activists and the parliamentary party machine, which many Labour supporters are already criticising along with the news media for Labour’s dismal poll ranking.

National Ministers are not allowing today’s developments to dent their sense of purpose going into the election campaign. The polls are still tight and NZ First is an unattractive choice, but there is little sense that they see Ardern as a substantial new threat. The Todd Barclay affair has washed out of the most recent polls and **the volatility in latest polling is all in the share of vote that Labour is losing to third parties**.

TVNZ’s Colmar-Brunton poll showed a swing from Labour to the Greens, while TV3’s Reid Research poll showed a similar swing to NZ First. Both polls were taken at much the same time and at the height of coverage of Metiria Turei’s admission of benefit fraud. They can’t both be right, other than to suggest there are Labour voters looking for a new home.

Will Ardern’s appointment be enough to bring former Labour voters back or attract new voters? We are skeptical. Ardern’s TV performances have improved and she is a natural, authentic campaigner, and a fresh face in NZ politics. She has, however, done very little policy development in her nine years in Parliament and has never been in govt.

She is now taking 72 hours to reassess the Labour campaign, where precious funds will have been wasted and new spend will be required. She is indicating she will make it her own campaign as well. Aussie-based ad agency Moss Group will be in overdrive rethinking what has already been created.

NZ First vs TOP

However, we believe the most interesting place to focus now is on whether The Opportunities Party is full of hot air or can make a run for 5%, having scored 2% in both last weekend’s polls. The party’s strategists scent 3% and dare to hope that momentum will carry to 5% on election day. That would give it six seats and make it an alternative king-maker to NZ First for National.

TOP will go all-out now to portray itself as the only credible alternative coalition partner for National to NZ First. If it gets nowhere, then the rational expectation is to prepare for a National/NZ First govt after Sept 23. ■