

## English takes a leaf from Key's exit playbook

Bill English has staged a **similarly classy exit** to his predecessor, John Key.

Granted, the drum for replacement had begun to beat. It wasn't going to stop. But English had already decided to move on. Part of this calculus was that National's polling was unlikely to hold up as well as it has since the election and he would take the rap for that. Having performed well enough in the 2017 election campaign to dictate his own timing, he decided to go sooner rather than later.

Early departure could suggest National believes it could win the next election. We are not bold enough to suggest that, but have **some sympathy with English's analysis that this is a "structurally weak" govt that will "struggle to maintain momentum", making it highly dependent on Jacinda Ardern's popularity.**

Before Christmas, the Beehive was understandably disorganised, seeking key staff and with Ministers still getting over their surprise at winning. Six weeks into the new year, **the executive wing remains disorganised and is showing early signs of drift.** Studies are being ordered up on numerous subjects, policy initiatives are often symbolic rather than transformative, and in critical areas where portfolios are shared with NZ First, particularly transport and regional infrastructure, **a lack of clarity is emerging over who the lead Ministers are.** In education and in running the House, **Chris Hipkins** is showing a tin ear. Elsewhere, the **Greens** face a messy co-leadership battle which, if it delivers hard-left **Marama Davidson** as **James Shaw's** new equal, will be a headache for a Labour administration that must seek the middle ground of politics to succeed.

However, **there is plenty of time to correct all of that** and the history of political defeat and leadership renewal suggests that **whoever emerges as National's leader in the next fortnight is unlikely to lead National into the next election.** While there are several likely contenders, none has a clearly articulated political philosophy that responds effectively to the sense of rejuvenation that underpins Labour's support.

Likewise, it **remains to be seen how much of National's post-election polling support – Labour has yet to overtake National in a nationwide public poll – was about support for English.** He was an unusual National Party leader because of his ability to articulate a compelling social policy agenda and, unlike Steven Joyce, had enormous mana as an economic manager.

Whoever National's next Prime Minister – as opposed to leader – will almost certainly come from a younger generation of MPs, so we don't include Steven Joyce among them. The contenders we expect to see are:

- **Amy Adams** – ferocious intellect and work-rate; robotic and cautious in public; more a deputy than a leader, but may appeal as a placeholder;
- **Judith Collins** – strong Opposition/attack skills, but she is the wrong generation, polarising, and her political strengths are in negativity. That makes her another possible placeholder, but not a future PM;
- **Simon Bridges** – right generation, nakedly ambitious. Proved a cautious and somewhat uninspired transport and economic development minister. Why would he put his hand up now?
- **Jonathan Coleman** – has wanted the leadership but done almost nothing to justify it. May be a place-holder, but hard to see where support comes from;
- **Nikki Kaye** – still the most obvious long term prospect, although **Mark Mitchell** is one to watch as a recent entrant to the leadership aspirant stakes. Unless pressed, neither need apply for the job now;
- **Paula Bennett** – promoted by John Key as a future leader, but judged by her caucus to have fallen flat when in govt, she is re-energised in Opposition. However, as current deputy leader, she may be **at risk of the caucus choosing a full clean-out at the top.** 