

Crusher vs Kindness - Judith Collins resets the election campaign dynamic

The National Party is hardly more likely to win the Sept 19 election tonight, with its new leader Judith Collins, than it was a day ago. It is, however, in a better position to lose less badly than under either Simon Bridges or Todd Muller in his most recent, hapless incarnation.

At the very least, pitting a highly experienced, economically literate and unashamedly aggressive female leader against the gentler, more empathic style of Jacinda Ardern will create an election dynamic quite different from that which would have prevailed with either of National's two previous leaders.

Collins will face fewer constraints than her predecessors would have in attacking Ardern's shortcomings on policy detail and execution 'softness'. Collins eviscerated Phil Twyford over KiwiBuild and will use the same political instincts to make a contest that will also energise the political media, who thrive on election campaigns that pit big personalities against one another.

Unlike Bridges, Collins's toughness is not accompanied by a discernible brittleness. And unlike Muller, she had no difficulty saying the Prime Minister's name at her first press conference, just before 10pm at Parliament this evening.

"There is no chance at all that I am going to let Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern get away with any nonsense when it comes to the economy and doing her job," she said. That is vintage Collins, along with a sly self-deprecation that she uses to disarm difficult questions.

On her shadow portfolio and policy platform, she will keep Paul Goldsmith as finance spokesman.

The basic settings for the election campaign will also be as disrupted as little as possible. Gerry Brownlee, as the new deputy leader, will remain campaign manager - the position he moved to when Muller took over. It appears that Muller-appointed key campaign operatives Tim Hurdle and Matthew Hooton may also be kept on, although inevitably not every staffing decision is clear yet. Collins has a loyal coterie of staffers of her own that she is likely to draw on.

She was less forthcoming about the future of health spokesman Michael Woodhouse, whose receipt of private patient health records from former party president Michelle Boag were at the heart of the problems that precipitated Muller's sudden, stress-induced resignation, less than three months into the party leadership role he had spent a career working towards.

There is sympathy as well as deep frustration at how Muller's leadership played out and Collins's style is already more regimented and emphatic. Where Muller had just a few MPs with him when he held his first press conference as leader, Collins was flanked by the entire caucus in an effort to demonstrate not only unity, but a reimposition of party discipline. The line-up included Amy Adams, whose decision to retire from politics may now be reactivated after returning to assist Muller.

Where Muller removed the policy documents developed under Bridges from the internet, Collins said she thought many excellent, particularly her own on reform of the RMA and will not seek policy disruption.

While Collins can be polarising, her newly published autobiography suggests her biggest beefs were with John Key and Bill English, now departed. She can work with ACT as happily as any other National leader and has a reasonable relationship with Winston Peters, should NZ First start polling better.

However, a new Roy Morgan poll, taken in June and published last night, shows the scale of her challenge. It put Labour at 54.5% to National's 27%, NZ First at 1.5% and the Greens at 9%. ■