

Smells like team spirit

There is a whiff of opportunism at Parliament right now. Suddenly, thousands of votes are up for grabs. **by DANYL McLAUHLAN**

They have known each other for most of their adult lives. New Prime Minister Chris Hipkins and former prime minister Jacinda Ardern were staffers in Helen Clark's office during the fifth Labour government. They worked alongside Grant Robertson, who was then Clark's deputy chief of staff.

Each of them was conspicuously clever, each marked for great things – although Robertson was regarded as the most charismatic and Machiavellian, and the one most likely to become PM. Now he's the only member of the troika who hasn't, seemingly content with the enormous power he already wields.

All three were elected to Parliament in 2008. Nine years later, they ran the Labour Party, and the country. Clark sometimes issued them commands on Twitter, which they dutifully obeyed.

We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, that the transfer of power from Ardern to Hipkins was so seamless. Nor should we be surprised if Hipkins ditches unpopular policies and focuses on the economy. Contrary to the party's spin, it won't be a bold and radical departure, as Ardern was poised to do exactly the same things.

The new leadership will mostly be a matter of branding; instead of speeches about visions and dreams, Hipkins will reference DIY and sausage rolls. He'll post social media clips hamming up campaign billboards. He's unlikely to appear on the cover of *Vogue*.

The tone of our politics will change. Ardern wanted to make Parliament a kinder place. There was a certain cynicism to this: Hipkins and Robertson often

attacked her opponents on her behalf. But it is easy to forget how ugly our politics was prior to Jacindamania. History has cast John Key as a permanently relaxed goofy dad, but he was often savage in Parliament. There was a reason Ardern's way of doing politics resonated when it first appeared.

It is unlikely to last beyond her departure. Hipkins is more aggressive, and Labour regards National leader Chris Luxon as weak and inexperienced; a

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man who often avoids taking positions, and stumbles when the media pushes him. His deputy, the vastly more experienced Nicola Willis, is sometimes left to crisply explain what her leader meant to say. Labour may believe that it's cruel to keep being kind, and it's time to publicly demolish this pretender to the political throne.

National also relishes a more confrontational campaign, although Luxon himself may not. The opposition were infuriated by the politics of kindness. It's their job to hold the Prime Minister to account but even mild criticism of Ardern triggered a backlash, sometimes from their own supporters. Now that Saint Jacinda has gone, they may

feel they can speak more freely, and will be keen to tell the public just how empty the politics of wellbeing and empathy were all along.

While the political temperature inside Parliament is likely to rise, the rest of the nation might cool. Since the occupation of Parliament's grounds in early 2022, the spectre of violence has haunted our politics. The public breakfast at Waitangi was cancelled this year because of security concerns. Many politicians dreaded mobs of Covid conspiracy protesters invading campaign events, screaming over their speeches, attempting citizens' arrests and fighting with police.

Much of the conspiracy movement's energy focused on Ardern. Despite – or perhaps because of – her charisma, she became one of our most divisive prime ministers since Robert Muldoon. For a very vocal minority, her stardust turned into radioactive particles, and now thousands of New Zealanders openly detest her. With Ardern gone, these people may lose interest in politics altogether, or they may simply turn their sights on Hipkins, given that he was the one in charge of the government's Covid response.

Politicians are opportunistic creatures, who quickly perceived both advantage and threat in Ardern's exit. They can smell votes: large numbers of them. Like a malfunctioning slot machine spraying coins across a casino floor, tens of thousands of votes are suddenly up for grabs. Pollsters have identified a cohort of women deeply loyal to Ardern who are also deeply worried about the cost of living. There is also a group of mostly younger male



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voters who disliked Ardern but connect with Labour's policies and values. They live in the suburbs, or larger provincial towns, are on low- to middle-incomes, and rent rather than own. Back in the 20th century, you might have called them working class.

Left-wing political parties are very worried about class. Ever since the Trump victory of 2016 and Boris Johnson's landslide victory in 2019, they've struggled to understand why they're losing lower-income working men to their enemies on the right. Some political scientists refer to this as the great realignment: a slow yet deep shift in democratic politics that is transforming the traditional left into parties dominated by educated urban elites. The right, meanwhile, are reinventing

themselves as coalitions of a multi-ethnic working class.

Labour is fiercely proud of its working-class history: its origins in the 1908 Blackball miners' strike; its links with the unions; the construction of the post-war welfare state. It also loved Ardern. But it may have worried, quietly, that it was losing so many lower-income male voters to National. It may also have wondered, during Ardern's tenure as a global celebrity who once led a New Zealand trade delegation to BlackRock Capital, whether it had lost sight of its roots.

Hipkins and his new deputy, Carmel Sepuloni, have been quick to identify themselves as working class; ordinary folks from Waitara and the Hutt; middle New Zealanders from the world of freezing works, utes and Swanndris. It's always risky when politicians who've spent most of their adult lives near the apex of power present themselves as men and women of the people but, compared

with both Luxon and Ardern, who aren't averse to a bit of glamour, Labour's new leaders are positively proletarian.

Behind every prime minister is a cabal; a conspiracy of mentors, advisers and lieutenants. These people provide counsel, enforce discipline, control the party and run the country while maintaining the illusion that the leader is singularly powerful. When the leader departs, this team can carry on for a surprisingly long time, like a jet on autopilot.

It was three and a half years between John Key's resignation and the coup against Simon Bridges that sent National hurtling into the sea. But sooner or later, the centrifugal forces of politics will drag at Hipkins and his party. If Labour loses focus on climate change, the Green Party will capture voters on the left. Winston Peters may collect enough votes to destabilise the centre. Hipkins' keenness to play down co-governance could upset members of his Māori caucus competing for seats against Te Pāti Māori, and they will quickly make their dissatisfaction known.

Slowly and terribly, the coalition that ruled Labour for five years could come apart. Perhaps Hipkins can resist these forces and fashion a new and successful team around himself, but no political party since World War II has changed leaders in government and won re-election.

For Ardern herself, the future seems simpler and hopefully happier. Time with her family; a post-political career in the international civil service, or an NGO. Directorships. A memoir. The Ardern Foundation. Perhaps all of the above.

But when she leaves Parliament for the final time, another version of her will detach and stay behind. It will step out of time and into history, which will break her down with its usual indifference, just as it has with all the leaders before her.

It will flatten her complexities and contradictions into a handful of phrases, a rapid sequence of silent images: a billboard slogan, a campaign speech, the Covid briefings and the empty streets and towns of the lockdowns. The riot at the end of the occupation. A woman in a headscarf beamed onto a building in the desert, looking back at New Zealand from the far side of the world. ■

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