



Election will be crush vs smile

It was fashionable at one point in the last generation and a half for some men to refer to their inner feminism. I was one.

But past performance notwithstanding, I must still be viewed as a male chauv...or worse, an old male chauv.

There, I've said it. The risk in what follows seems less: I'm delighted the leadership of the country will be contested by two women, Jacinda Ardern versus Judith Collins.

How appropriate, given we were the first to "allow" women to vote. Notwithstanding further accidents, we're headed into an election in which a woman is guaranteed to be Prime Minister.

I must have had an inkling about this, because last week I went along to see Collins for myself.

A self-declared good mate of Johnathan Young's, she turned up in Taranaki to speak at his election launch, visit around, promote her recently published memoirs, et cetera.

I was one of 110 people keen enough to brave a freezing night to observe this politician with a long game; good sense told us she was probably positioning for a post-election leadership run after Todd Muller was sacrificed on the altar of Ardern.

Even if Collins can't out-Ardern her opponent come September, she'll hold on. Her strategy is one based on people's short memories for her missteps since she got into parliament 18 years ago.

The National Party also seems temporarily to have lost its appetite for the youngish and the novel. It's hoping the unfortunate experiences she and her deputy, Gerry Brownlee, endured over time have taught them more guile, less arrogance.

The only lingering memory is Collins' "Crusher" nickname, more through its alliterative resonance than the appealing thought of police reducing boy racer cars to metal saucers.

What I saw the other night was intriguing; not her politics (none of them are embraced by me, remember) but her persona. She approached the stage casually,

eschewing the microphone stand. She said she doesn't like being (hiding?) behind things when she speaks, which suggests she isn't hung up about appearances.

Any smart person can do that in front of a friendly audience, but I'm guessing it's her approach to every crowd.

It's a personal touch that can never be fully achieved on TV, with its tendency to flatten or exaggerate personalities.

In person, Collins doesn't look like she does on the telly. She seems friendlier, self-effacing in that way all successful politicians must project to New Zealanders, with our neuroses about skites. Her jokes are cleverly on her.



She summed up her opposition in a few sentences: Ardern has a massive international profile, but can't hide from mistakes being made back home.

She declared that Labour has only three capable ministers - Megan Woods (minister of everything that goes wrong), Chris Hipkins (now minister of health and headed the same way George Gair went when Muldoon sidelined him there in the 70s), and Minister of Finance Grant Robertson. The words in brackets are mine.

Robertson is important in the scheme of things. A firm hand on the purse strings has been the common feature of governments in our recent history.

Muldoon had himself, David Lange had (to his regret) Roger Douglas, Jim Bolger had Bill Birch, Helen Clark had Michael Cullen, John Key had Bill English and Steven Joyce, Ardern has Robertson.

So, who's Paul Goldsmith, the finance spokesman favoured by former leaders Simon Bridges and Todd Muller, and now Collins?

In February, a profile by economics writer Rod Oram cast him as an historian and traditionalist, a man who favours continuing the work of former economic development minister Joyce, "a framework to... generate...synergies from hundreds of government initiatives...(related to) infrastructure, exports, innovation, capital markets, natural resources, and skilled and safe workplaces."

Oram asked him how doing more of what we've done for the past three decades could finally make us wealthy? Goldsmith offered no explanation.

Will Collins have one? Not if Steve Braunias' review of her book is accurate. He dismissed it as a load of tosh, although that harsh message didn't penetrate the public market, which is buying the book.

Perhaps I'm obliged to read it, too, to see if it contains clues to Collins' economic nouse, something she is going to need.

Her sense of humour will see her far, though. If she's wise, she'll ask Paula Bennett back to add hers. We're all going to need one.

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