

# As it selects a new leader, National needs to remember one thing – confidence doesn't always equal competence

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## Disclosure statement

Suze Wilson does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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Many will know the definition of insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result”. It’s a caution the National Party caucus would do well to bear in mind when choosing their fifth party leader in just four years at Tuesday’s caucus meeting.

They might also consider what research has shown are the warning signs that someone is not well equipped to lead or is fatally flawed in some way. The last thing they need is another derailment after the party’s recent disasters.

While we ought not to expect perfection from leaders, National has clearly had a dismal run since May 2020 when Simon Bridges was dethroned off the back of poor polling, having misread the public's mood about Labour's early handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

His successor Todd Muller resigned after just 53 days, leaving Judith Collins to take the helm, leading the party to a humiliating defeat at last year's general election.

Throughout 2021, National continued to struggle under Collins' leadership, with a recent poll reporting she had a net negative disapproval rating of 31%. Well known for her divisive style, Collins overplayed her hand last week by demoting rival Simon Bridges over a years-old misconduct allegation and was ousted by her caucus in an historic no confidence vote.

## Candidate selection problems

The problem affects not only the top echelons of the National party, however. Chris Finlayson, a former senior minister from the John Key era, has also lamented the calibre of MPs and candidates, arguing recent scandals such as those involving Jamie Lee Ross, Andrew Falloon, Hamish Walker and Jake Bezzant point to problems in the party's selection process.

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Finlayson is also on record describing those entering parliament in National's ranks in 2008, 2011 and 2014 as "amateurs and lightweights" driven by personal ambition but lacking the necessary character and skills to be effective.

Yet it is these – now in their third parliamentary terms at least – who number among the more experienced in National's caucus.

With the stakes so high for the party as it selects its next leader, perhaps research can help inform its decision. Researchers do vary greatly in what they say great leadership requires. However,

when it comes to poor leadership the consensus is much stronger.

## **Balancing confidence and competence**

A fundamental mistake the National caucus must not make is to conflate confidence with competence. While confidence certainly is important in a leadership role, it does not automatically make someone competent.

Confidence is basically about self-belief – but such beliefs can be wildly out of touch with reality. Indeed, a common characteristic of failed leaders is a narcissistic and hubristic belief in their own brilliance.

This can frequently cause them to be rude, dismissive of the advice and concerns of others, and impulsive in their decision making – all tendencies that undermine their competence.

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Confidence not grounded in actual proven competence, then, raises the risk of a leader performing poorly. Competence, on the other hand, involves mastery of the skills and knowledge required for a given leadership role.

Because of this, the caucus ought to seek objective, independent evidence of competence and be alert to any indicators of confidence that exceeds it.

## **Leadership traits to avoid**

A 2011 review of earlier studies of promising leaders whose careers derailed also offers useful guidance. It found the inability to effectively manage relationships with others was the core cause of leaders failing.

Essentially, leaders who lack interpersonal sensitivity, who use their power to dominate others, or cannot win the trust of their

followers, are at high risk of flaming out. Relationships matter because when leaders make mistakes – which they inevitably will – they cannot expect support when their relationships with others are scarred by conflict and mistrust.

The study also identified various other “habits of the unsuccessful”, including:

- overestimating strengths and underestimating the competition
- putting personal interests ahead of the collective
- arrogance and recklessness in decision making
- eliminating potential rivals and those who challenge them
- excessively focusing on issues of image rather than actual work
- underestimating difficulties in achieving goals and failing to plan for what could go wrong
- using outdated strategies and tactics.

Had previous leaders been mindful of such concerns they might still have their jobs. What now matters for the National party caucus, however, is that it learns from its past mistakes and doesn't vote for more of the same while hoping for a different outcome.

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National Party interim leader Dr Shane Reti, flanked by colleagues, prepares to announce Judith Collins has been removed as party leader. Gettyimages



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The image is a screenshot of a tweet from RNZ News (@rnz\_news). The tweet text reads: "'Disappointing' National Party needs 'new vision' - Former PM". Below the text is a link preview for an article on mz.co.nz with the title "'Disappointing' National Party needs 'new vision' - F..." and a snippet of text: "Former Prime Minister Jim Bolger has weighed in on the National Party's leadership race, saying that the ...". The tweet is dated 5:14 PM · Nov 28, 2021 and has 11 likes. Interaction options include Reply, Copy link, and a button to Read 5 replies.

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