

# Jacinda Ardern, Judith Collins and the looming glass cliff

## Today on Newsroom Pro

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By Stewart Forsyth | [Click here to read](#)



When the going gets tough, NZ political parties have turned to tough female leaders. But while Jacinda Ardern and Judith Collins' ascent to the leadership is similar, their personalities are quite different, Stewart Forsyth writes.

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It is a phenomenon identified by British psychologists Michelle Ryan and Alexander Haslan – women in leadership find themselves poised on the brink of the cliff more than their male counterparts. The business or political party is in existential peril. Taking on the top job is a seriously risky career move. What to do? Promote a woman to the top position!

While there is not good evidence that this does play out in business (or US business anyway), recent political history in New Zealand indicates that the glass cliff is a real thing here. For both of the big two political parties – several male leaders fail, and so – bring in either Jacinda Ardern on the left or Judith Collins on the right. In September one of them is going over that glass cliff.

This is not an attempt to predict who will win or not. More, a review of what these two leaders bring to the contest. Of course there are other leaders of other political parties. How they and their parties go may profoundly influence which of Ardern or Collins gets to form the next government. But, keeping it simple – what can we make of these two political personalities, and how might that shape the election?

Both leaders share a mix of pushiness – important in getting airtime, and a drive to get things done. This combination of 'extroversion' and 'conscientiousness' respectively is a common mix in leaders – think Ed Hillary or Te Paea Heringa for classic examples. What makes Ardern and Collins stand out, and makes the contest between them so interesting, is their different position on the agreeableness trait. Agreeable people are empathetic and collaborative, those at the other end of the scale are more competitive and tough-minded. You can see where we're going with this right?

Ardern combines agreeableness and extroversion as a warm political leader. She is good at listening and empathizing. Collins is low on agreeableness while also high on extroversion – charming, in the sense of getting her way, with a smile, but not necessarily with feeling for those she relates to. This ‘charming’ profile is typical of many effective politicians, including Collins’ nemesis John Key.

Both are talented. As Collins has noted, Ardern is an effective communicator. As Collins has also noted – she, Collins, along with her colleagues, is across detail.

Some relevant achievements – Ardern might not have developed the Covid-19 communications strategy but she combined clarity (“stay home and save lives”) with empathy (connecting with people in terms of the hardship they faced in taking on these changes). Collins, in choosing her shadow-cabinet has brought in experienced people, including frenemies, to consolidate her message of having the team that is across detail and can deliver.

Some possibly relevant, but less than brilliant outcomes. Ardern presiding over a government that failed to make progress on high-profile pledges (KiwiBuild missing the 100,000 houses target, limited reductions in child poverty, no light rail down Dominion Road). Collins losing her Ministerial warrant after John Key gave her a ‘resign or be fired’ ultimatum over perceived conflict of interest in her visit, while on official business, to a Chinese company where her husband was a Director, and her purported undermining of the boss of the Serious Fraud Office.

Ardern can wrangle people to get with the programme, indicating some ability to work in a collaborative way. Like many extroverts, she could be inclined to see the positives (glass half full of fairy dust?), and so risk over-promising.

Collins is clearly capable of establishing clear goals and maneuvering to achieve them. An issue she might have is the distinction between what is good for her and what is good for the party or the country.

What to expect? Collins has disavowed the label of ‘crusher’, but gone ahead and talked about crushing the current government. She will be strategic – while appearing to rule out New Zealand First as a coalition partner, not actually ruling them out. She will talk about the competence, detail-orientation, teaminess and traditional values of her colleagues.

Ardern will be demonstrating powerful compassion plus clear targets. She too will keep her options open and attempt to connect with a range of groups and emphasise values of safety and fairness.

How will that play out over the next weeks? We can, like a Hurricanes supporter – expect the unexpected in this election. What are some of the what-ifs?

If there is evidence of community transmission of Covid-19? Ardern would double-down on controls, emphasising her and our expectations around local lock-downs. Collins would be

quick to blame the government. A high risk , but tempting strategy for her would be to blame the people who brought the bug in – suggesting cutting arrivals from the ‘wrong’ countries. That would appeal to some of her conservative base.

If there is a suggestion of foreign interference in the election? Collins would be inclined to attack the sources of the story – the media particularly, but also other political competitors who might be attempting to capitalize on the story-line. Ardern would be more likely to go for a review by an independent authority.

A shocking rise in unemployment? Ardern would talk about government-funded initiatives that will produce jobs, sharing opportunity around. Collins would be inclined to support businesspeople – talking up lower taxes, looser employment law, emphasizing how that would help those showing competitive enterprise.

Politics is a tough game, and there are clear winners and losers. Ardern and Collins are two leaders showing that when the going gets tough, women are up to the challenge, even when facing the glass cliff.

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