

Barton Deakin Brief: Swearing in of New Zealand Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister

5 December 2016

Today, Rt Hon Bill English was sworn in as the new Prime Minister of New Zealand and the Hon Paula Bennett was appointed as Deputy Prime Minister. Both Mr English and Ms Bennett were unopposed after other candidates for the leadership withdrew from contention last week. They were elected by the National Party caucus this morning and Prime Minister English was sworn in by the Governor-General Dame Patsy Reddy at Government House this afternoon.

Bill English

Bill English first entered Parliament in 1990, representing the rural Southland seat of Wallace (later Clutha-Southland). Since 2014 he has been a list-only Member of Parliament, meaning he does not hold an electorate seat. This is enabled by New Zealand's mixed-member proportional (**MMP**) electoral system.

As Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister, English was regarded as a driving force behind many of the Key Government's successes and its strong economic management. He has also held posts in regulatory reform, education and health.

As Finance Minister he focused on limiting increases to government spending, reducing debt, and returning the Government books to surplus. He has pioneered the "investment approach" to spending, which utilises data and information to better target government services, and refocused the public sector on achieving long-term results.

English has also taken a leading role in social policy, particularly in housing. He stated today he is "firmly of the view that the Government can do a better job supporting the most vulnerable," signalling a continued focus on social issues.

He has led the National Party before, from 2001-2003, including an unsuccessful election campaign in 2002.

English was raised in a farming family in Dipton, Southland; has degrees in commerce and English literature; and worked as a Treasury analyst prior to running for Parliament.

Paula Bennett

Paula Bennett entered Parliament in 2005, and represents the Auckland seat of Upper Harbour. Following the election of the Key Government in 2008 she was appointed as Minister of Social Development, where she saw through significant reforms to the welfare system, including work requirements for beneficiaries and job subsidies for young welfare recipients. She also led the development of policy surrounding child abuse and protection of children.



Since 2014 she has held the Climate Change, Social Housing, State Services, Associate Tourism and Associate Finance portfolios.

Bennett grew up in Taupo, and became a solo mother to her daughter Ana at the age of 17. She moved to Auckland in 1992 where she graduated in social policy before working as a recruitment consultant. She is of Tainui descent, and has cited her background as a Maori teen mother on welfare in her hopes to inspire other young women from similar backgrounds.

Policy direction

The English Government is unlikely to make any dramatic departure from existing policies. However, English has refused to repeat his predecessor John Key's commitment to maintaining the age of superannuation, currently set at 65.

The Government has previously indicated the possibility of tax cuts in 2017, and the Half Year Economic and Fiscal Update last week showed surpluses increasing over the forecast period to 2020/21. However, the cost of the earthquakes in the South Island last month will reduce the Government's headroom for new spending, and it remains to be seen whether tax cuts will be a priority for the new Prime Minister.

English is conservative on social issues such as euthanasia and abortion; however, he says he would vote to support same-sex marriage if a vote were held today, a reversal of his previous position when same-sex marriage was legalised in 2013.

Cabinet reshuffle

Prime Minister English has indicated further changes to the Cabinet will be announced before the end of the Parliamentary year.

Hon Steven Joyce, currently the Minister for Economic Development, will be the new Finance Minister. English has indicated he will not hold an additional portfolio of his own (John Key previously held the Tourism portfolio in addition to his Prime Ministerial responsibilities). Other changes are as yet unknown.

Election date

No election date has been set for 2017. The selection of a new Leader does not necessarily mean an early election will be called. The new Prime Minister will determine the election date and inform Parliament of this decision in due course.

Further information

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