

Prominent pundit pulls back over Muller link

[Colin Peacock](#)

Prominent political pundit Matthew Hooton has withdrawn from commentary for the time being because of a conflict caused by his link to the successful leadership bid of National MPs Todd Muller and Nikki Kaye.



Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

On most Mondays in recent years, Matthew Hooton's been on RNZ's Nine to Noon to talk politics with Kathryn Ryan - alongside an opposing pundit who leans to the left.

The lobbyist and former National Party staffer also has a weekly column on Fridays in the *New Zealand Herald* and he's been a familiar and frequent voice on many programmes wanting his insight and opinions on politics.

As the leadership contest played out during the week, Matthew Hooton appeared on RNZ's Checkpoint and he was on Morning Report [on Thursday](#).

and [on Friday morning](#), the day of the vote.

Matthew Hooton's preference was scarcely a secret: the headline on his Herald column that same day was [National's only choice - Muller for Leader](#).

In the column - written the previous day - his personal connection to the leadership contender was acknowledged in a footnote which said he and Todd Muller had been friends for 30 years and "had spoken during recent events." He also pointed out he'd known Nikki Kaye and Simon Bridges for 13 years too.

"Heaven knows how RNZ chose repeatedly to use lobbyist Matthew Hooton as a commentator . . . when most journalists know that Hooton has been working on Muller's behalf to help achieve this outcome," BusinessDesk editor [Patrick Smellie wrote](#) in a piece re-published [by the Herald](#) late on Friday.

After that circulated on social media, it was clear many journalists didn't know if Matthew Hooton was part of Todd Muller's leadership campaign or not. Matthew Hooton's own Twitter account - which had been pretty active in previous days - disappeared from the platform on Friday.

But was he effectively a spokesperson for the Muller campaign without actually saying so ?

Mediawatch asked Matthew Hooton if he had advised or worked on behalf of Todd Muller - or any other National Party MPs - on the party's leadership contest.

He said Todd Muller contacted him last Wednesday to say he was challenging for the leadership.

"I gave him personal support as a friend," he said.

Hooton said that during the interview on Morning Report on Thursday "it became obvious to me I should make clear my friendship with Todd Muller

and also Simon Bridges."

"I made this even clearer in a second interview, and in a couple of other interviews. I put very significant disclaimers into my Friday Herald column written on Thursday," he told *Mediawatch*.

He then responded to a request on Thursday night from Kaye to travel to Wellington the next day to help Muller.

"I was later asked to help Todd on an unpaid basis through Friday afternoon, and advised RNZ and the Herald that I could no longer do my usual Nine to Noon and Business Herald slots under these circumstances," he said.

"I am still in Wellington helping with various things and don't know what the future holds beyond the next few days," he told *Mediawatch*.

"Obviously I am too conflicted right now to do any political commentary," he added.

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Politics Opinion
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National's only choice: Muller for leader

Under Bridges, party is heading for an even worse collapse than 2002's disaster

National MPs flying to Wellington this morning for their high noon leadership spill may think they have a choice between Simon Bridges and Todd Muller – but, in reality, they have no choice but to back the challenger from Te Puna.

National's private and public polling is disastrous. It is further behind the Labour Party than it has ever been before. And that was before the events of the past 48 hours.

Vengeance is mine saith the Lord, and were Bridges to prevail, his supporters would demand he despatch Muller and his running mate, Auckland Central MP Nikki Kaye, to the last two seats in Parliament.



Parliament would be lost, including those of some of the party's most important rising stars.

National's optimists say the gap is bound to narrow as the election nears, the depression bites and unemployment soars.

But no less than in equity or currency markets, past performance is no indicator of future results, one way or the other. There is no guaranteed rule of reversion to the mean.

As in 2002, once National is quite obviously facing a debacle, it risks a further flight of its supporters to smaller parties. Liberals who want to give it a kick risk ticking Act. Grumpy conservatives might flow to the New Conservatives. National supporters who want to place a brake on the Labour-Green alliance would quite rationally vote for NZ First. Some may even go to TOP.

It does not take large numbers of each to drive National down to the low 20s. Losing 16 seats on election night risks being just the start.

Muller, of course, might completely fail, in which case the leadership would pass before the en-

Matthew Hooton nailed his colours to the mast in The Herald the day the leadership vote took place. Photo: photo/ RNZ Mediawatch

RNZ's head of news Richard Sutherland confirmed that Matthew Hooton had advised Nine to Noon of the conflict on Friday and that he would be

unavailable for political commentary.

"That was mutually agreed . . . and given the circumstances we wouldn't use him as a general political commentator," he told *Mediawatch*.

Sutherland didn't believe Friday's *Morning Report* interview was compromised by the lack of an explicit disclosure that Hooton had accepted an invitation to help Muller and Kaye the day before.

"It was pretty clear to anyone listening to Mr Hooton on RNZ over the last few days that he was a Muller supporter," he said, noting that the friendship with Muller had been disclosed to listeners on air.

"Given that he didn't have an official position with Muller's office I don't think he needed to disclose it at that point," Sutherland said.

"I'm comfortable we disclosed to the audience Mr Hooton had close links to Mr Muller and we have served the audience well," he said.

Now the leadership is settled, can Hooton return to commentary on RNZ if he is not holding any official position with Muller or the National Party?

"That's a question we will leave until we know exactly what his position is going to be," Sutherland said.

"Until that is clarified I don't know that we would be using him for political commentary in the way we have in the past."

Hooton declined to be interviewed on *Mediawatch* but in his statement he also said:

"I believe I am possibly one of the few political commentators in this country who has always clearly disclosed conflicts both to producers and editors - and to listeners and readers. I think there is greater focus on me because I am from the political right than on people with similar issues from the political left"

"Political commentary from people with historic involvement in politics and

friends currently in politics is an issue that needs to be handled with care, but overall I believe it leads to a better informed public than were only academics and completely apolitical people to appear in radio, TV, in print and on the internet."