

NZ news

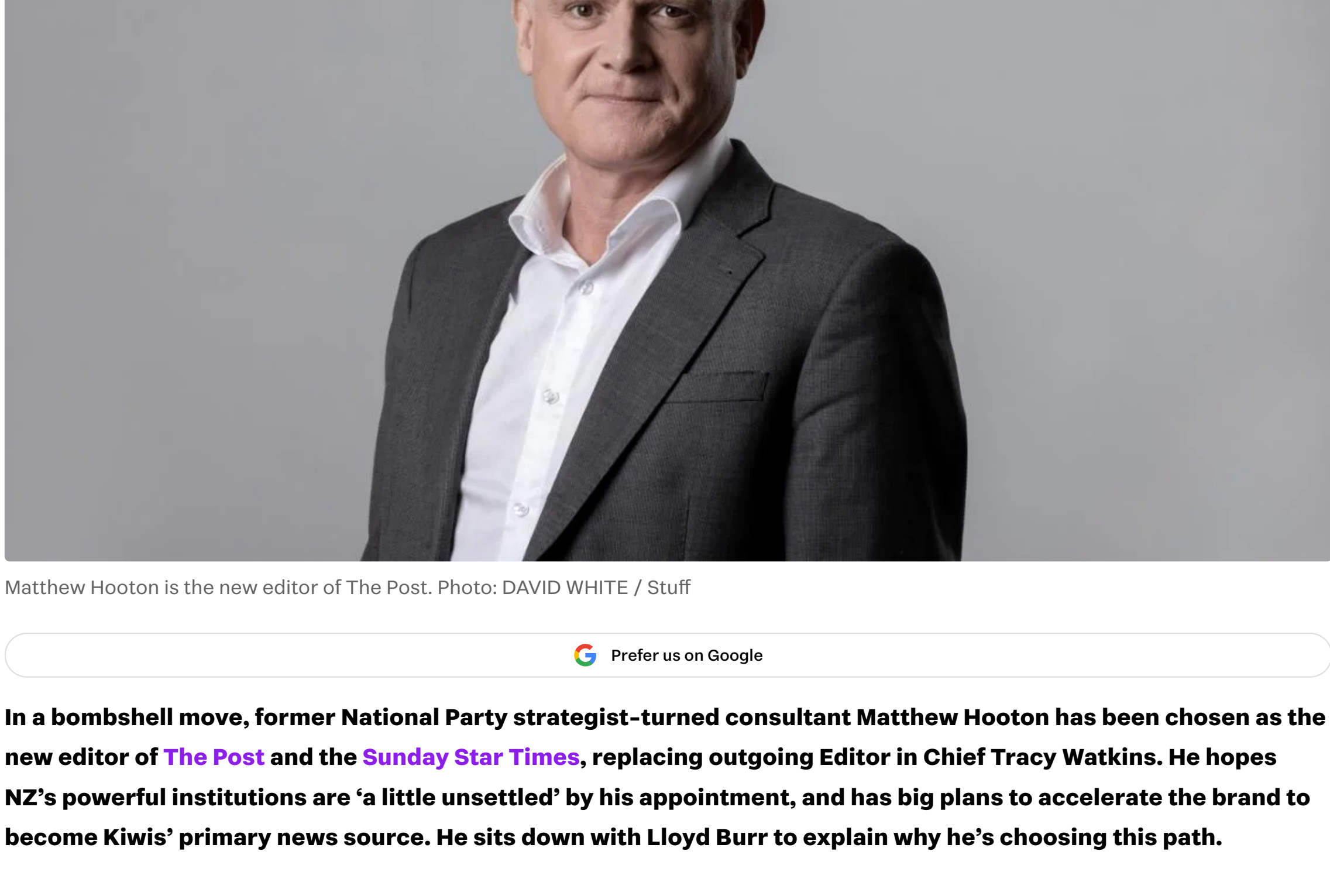
Media

Matthew Hooton appointed Editor of The Post and Sunday Star Times

Lloyd Burr

June 15, 2026 · 9:30am

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Matthew Hooton is the new editor of The Post. Photo: DAVID WHITE / Stuff

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In a bombshell move, former National Party strategist-turned consultant Matthew Hooton has been chosen as the new editor of [The Post](#) and the [Sunday Star Times](#), replacing outgoing Editor in Chief Tracy Watkins. He hopes NZ's powerful institutions are 'a little unsettled' by his appointment, and has big plans to accelerate the brand to become Kiwis' primary news source. He sits down with Lloyd Burr to explain why he's choosing this path.

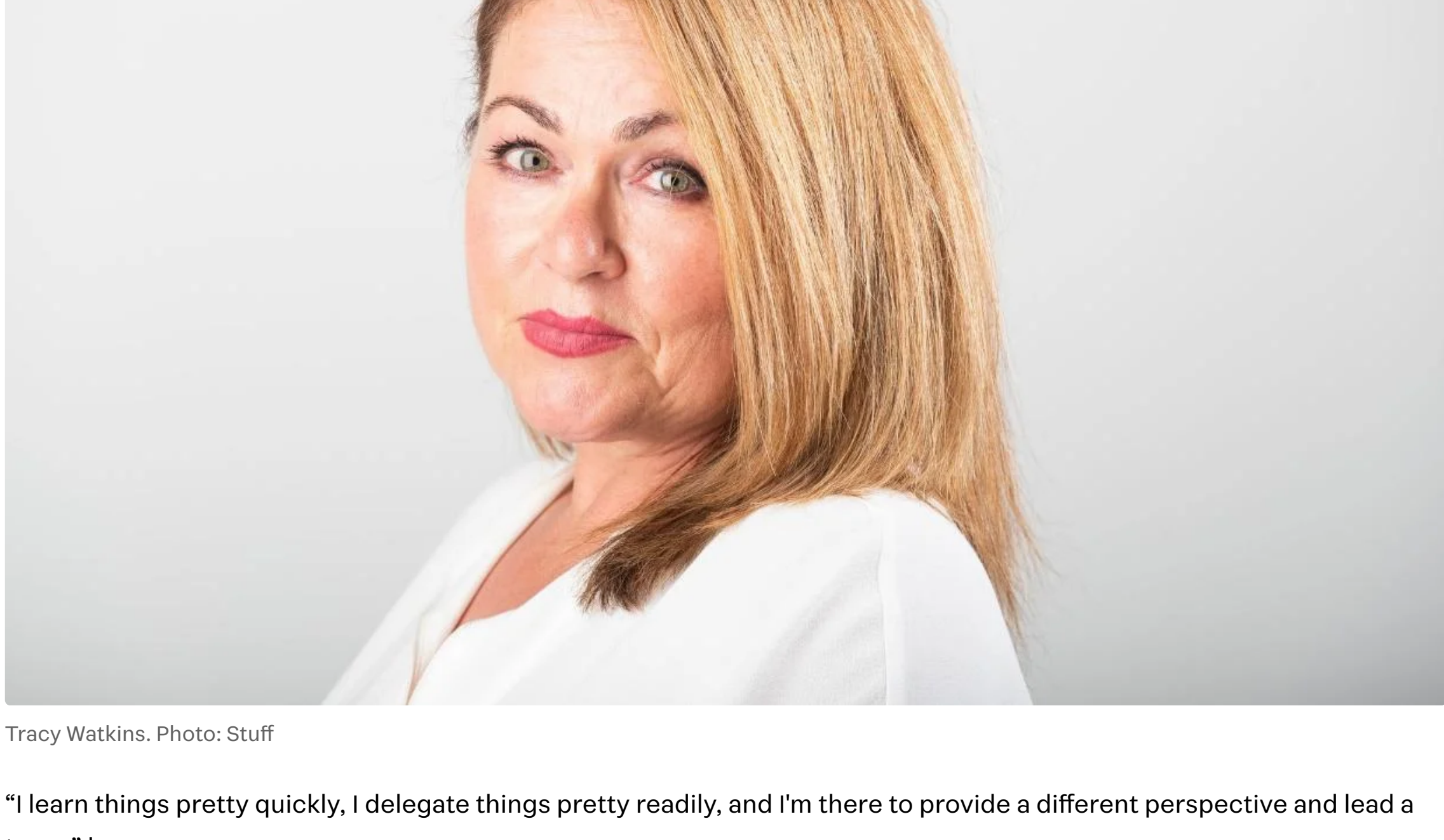
There are few people with such a broad and deep understanding of how New Zealand's powerful institutions work than Matthew Hooton.

His experience across politics, business, the economy, law and order, the arts, and Māoridom is pretty unrivalled - and he knows it, bluntly saying there's no one else with his credentials.

Hooton's CV includes being a Young Nat, a press secretary in the Bolger Government, a strategist for National during the Don Brash years (and a short time during Todd Muller's tenure), an advisor for ACT, a strategic consultant for iwi, banks, most corporate sectors, government departments, and the ultra rich - oh and a short-lived stint as Wayne Brown's advisor.

He's also a doctor of philosophy, and a guest professor at a Mongolian university (more on his Mongolia obsession - and baubles - later).

But there's one thing missing from his list of credentials: journalism. Hooton has never trained as or been a journalist, yet he's now the new Editor in Chief of The Post - one of the country's top news sources and home to many of the country's best journalists. He replaces outgoing editor [Tracy Watkins](#) who is moving to Business NZ.



Tracy Watkins. Photo: Stuff

"I learn things pretty quickly, I delegate things pretty readily, and I'm there to provide a different perspective and lead a team," he says.

"The Post is not one person, The Post is not one generation of people, The Post is its whole history," Hooton says. "You've got pre-existing institutional frameworks that ensure the highest standards of ethics, and the highest standard of balance and rigor".

That's not to say he's a stranger to the world of news. He's been a serial commentator and panelist for television and radio over the decades, and until last week had a weekly column in The New Zealand Herald.

So why is he making such a bold and surprising leap into the hotseat of such a political and business-focussed publication?

"It's an opportunity you can't turn down and it's an opportunity to make a difference," he says. "New Zealand has major entrenched problems that have been emerging over at least 20 years which the political and business classes have struggled to develop a coherent solution for".

How does he reckon his new role will go down with those political and business classes?

"I'd hope that the powerful institutions of New Zealand - whether that's the government, the opposition, union bosses, business leaders, sports administrators, or arts administrators - are a little unsettled by the appointment," he says with a glint in his eye.

Why? Because he has such a deep knowledge of how they all work because he's worked in many of them. In essence, he knows how and where they bury the (metaphoric) bodies.

"Knowing how institutions like that tend to work, I think that's of enormous value to The Post and its team. Without betraying any long-term commercial secrets, I hope to add some value by saying, 'On this story, why not go a little more in this direction', because I suspect that's where the real story will be hiding," Hooton says.

His appointment to the role has been pretty quick in the scheme of things, with Stuff Ltd owner [Sinead Boucher](#) revealing Hooton was only approached a month ago with the help of a mutual friend.

"I thought, 'if I could have anybody I wanted for that role, who would I like to see? What kind of person would I like to see leading it?'. Then I wondered if Matthew Hooton would be interested so a mutual friend dropped him a line, asked whether he would be, and he was," Boucher explains.

"Matthew came in straight away with a really strong ambitious vision for The Post, and clearly sees it as playing a really important role in that world where politics, policy, economics and public institutions all intersect," she says.

Is she concerned that Hooton's vast history of connections with powerful people, companies, and entities could be - or be perceived as - a conflict of interest? Will that make it hard for him to lead a publication that so rigorously holds the powerful to account? Has she let the fox into the hen house?

"I'm obviously aware that there may be some discussion about that, but the proof will be in the pudding," she says. "Our role is to hold the powerful to account, no matter who the government is, who's sitting in the corridors of power, who's sitting in those corporate offices".

"He really understands what the role of an editor is, as very different from the role of being a columnist. We have a really strong code of ethics and conduct that's core to everything we do and Matthew absolutely understands that and is committed to it," Boucher says.

Are radical changes on the way for The Post? Not radical ones, no. But he does have big plans.

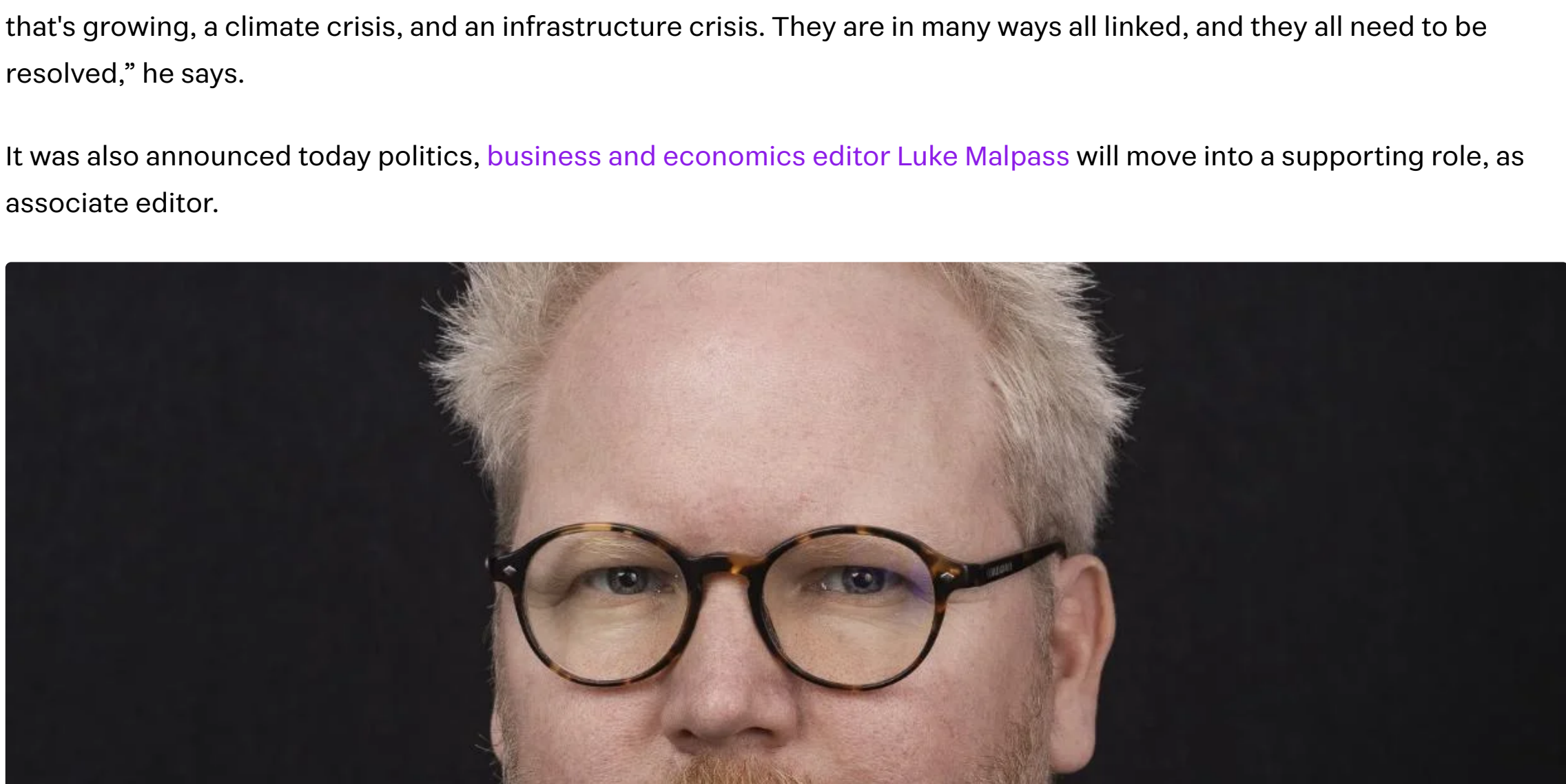
"There will be some changes and we will move fast," Hooton says. "But I suspect they're going to be ones that the existing team and the existing readers would say 'Yes, that's that's the way to go'.

"This isn't some turnaround or fix it job. This is an acceleration job," he says. "We're not going to take a position on certain things, but we'll have broader, more rigorous, and challenging content".

After the many decades working dozens of different roles across nearly every sector in the country, Hooton summarises New Zealand's problems like this:

"We have six crises. We have a productivity crisis, a fiscal crisis, a crisis of entrenched poverty, a race relations crisis that's growing, a climate crisis, and an infrastructure crisis. They are in many ways all linked, and they all need to be resolved," he says.

It was also announced today politics, [business and economics editor Luke Malpass](#) will move into a supporting role, as associate editor.



Luke Malpass. Photo: ROBERT KITCHIN/STUFF / ROBERT KITCHIN/STUFF

Hooton will have to give up his strategic consulting business while at the helm of The Post, but there's one role he says he will not be giving up: being honorary consul to the government of Mongolia.

He's taught philosophy there, he helped found the Green Party of Mongolia, he's a guest professor at its national university, and even helped organise Winston Peters' visit to the capital Ulaanbaatar (where he was gifted a horse named Stamina).

Why the unusual fascination with Mongolia? It started with a world map on his bedroom wall as a kid, and he was obsessed by a wee country sandwiched between the Soviet Union and China.

"You can imagine how unknown Mongolia was to a five-year-old in New Zealand in 1977. So when I was about 24 I was in Beijing, and I thought 'f..k it, I should go up to Mongolia'. So I bought a ticket. I ended up loving it and spent a month there," he says.

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