

# Colin James: This election is Key's to lose and Clark's to win

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By [Colin James](#)

Sir Robert Muldoon had to wait 15 years after coming into Parliament to make Prime Minister. Jim Bolger took 18 years. So did Helen Clark. Can John Key do it in a bit over six and set a record?

First, Key has to see off Clark.

Clark has already shown her fighting spirit: impeccably groomed and magisterial centre stage at the Hillary funeral, thereby stating her identification with "the nation". And her decision, after years of rejecting advisers' urgings, to do an "Orewa" scene-setting speech this year, a day after Key's own "Orewa".

In 2004 the polls flipped after Don Brash's "one-law-for-all" speech to the Orewa Rotary Club on Treaty of Waitangi issues which resonated with an electorate edgy over the foreshore and seabed. Last year Key hoovered up headlines and poll support with his "underclass" invasion of Labour's heartland territory.

Each time Labour was off guard and complacent. Not this January.

Clark will attempt a trademark underpromise-in-advance, overdeliver-on-the-day speech tomorrow to lift her Government after a bad 2007 which left too many voters with a vague impression she was trying to undermine their democratic rights.

In his "Orewa" speech in Auckland today Key will outline a carrot-and-stick "voucher" initiative on youth education and training. But actually he doesn't need a big splash this January. The election is his to lose and Clark's to win. His need is to hold his advantage.

That sounds simple but it is not. The good news for National is that most of the strategy is in place. First, discipline. Not for decades have National MPs been so concerned to be on message. They want to win, sense they are going to and accept the necessary self-restraint. The parallel is the iron unity Kevin Rudd instilled in his Australian Labor Party.

Second, paralleling Rudd again, no targets for Labour to score easy points. Nuclear ships, a critical turning point in 2005, have gone. Iraq has gone. "Privatisation" (of state-owned enterprises) has gone. The Exclusive Brethren have been sent to purgatory. Maori-bashing is out. Climate change is in.

Even the usual Labour clincher that National will cut social services carries less weight after a year of damaging attacks on the Clark regime's public health services. Labour's "eviction" notices which swung state house dwellers' votes in 2005 will cut less ice now that National is led by a onetime (brief) state house tenant.

Third (Rudd again), three or four distinguishing points, preferably painting Key and National as the future and Clark and Labour as the past.

Tax is one by default. Though National is likely to offer little more than Labour immediately, to block charges of fiscal irresponsibility, it will be more credible to voters as offering lower taxes over time.



The other distinguishing points have yet to be fined up. Law and order is an obvious candidate, given Simon Power's destructive success. Education (today's focus) and infrastructure are other candidates.

Fourth, a positive, prime ministerial Key. That requires Bill English and other MPs to do most of the attacking. It requires Key to work (and he has been, a little) on his sloppy elocution and over-folksy general presentation, in order to project gravitas.

It requires Key to sweat at swotting policy – he spent part of the Christmas break reading the departmental briefings to incoming ministers issued after Clark's October Cabinet reshuffle. He has to be able to demonstrate depth and breadth.

And it requires Key to shuck the Merrill Lynch legacy, the "rich prick" image Michael Cullen yearns to pin on him, the currency trader who was only as good as his last deal. With investment banks up to their ears in shonky debt, his past vocation is potentially a tender spot.

Fifth, a credible front bench. There is work to do and the word is it will be done. Some on the front bench cannot expect to be there in a Key Cabinet.

Sixth, good relations with small parties.

Clark's evolving skill in working with small parties has been a hallmark and there is an outside possibility she could stay in office after the election even if Labour has fewer seats than National.

Key starts ahead. But this is a far bigger deal than any he did at Merrill Lynch. And on the other side of this deal is a powerhouse who hates to lose even more than he does.