

Ministerial scandal in New Zealand ends Labour's media 'honeymoon'

John Braddock
10 July 2000

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark last week sacked Dover Samuels, the Minister of Maori Affairs in her Labour-led Government. The dismissal came a week after allegations were first tabled in parliament that he had 14 years earlier been involved in a sexual relationship with a teenage girl in his care, and that he had arranged for her to have an abortion after she became pregnant.

The scandal is the first major embarrassment for the Labour-led government, after its first six months in office which had been characterised by a long media “honeymoon” and high approval ratings. It is significant that the story was highlighted in the press at a time of increasingly intense pressure from business lobby groups which have become openly critical of aspects of Labour's legislative program and unhappy with the outcome of the budget, released last month.

The case is currently the subject of a police investigation, after being placed in their hands by Samuels himself on instructions from Clark. The police are seeking to establish whether the girl was over 16 years old, the age of consent, at the time the affair began, or whether Samuels had breached the law preventing adults entering into sexual relationships with young people in their care. While Samuels admits that he had a relationship with the young woman and that she did have an abortion, he claims that there was no illegality involved, nor was there an issue of his exploiting her because of the difference in their ages (he was in his mid 40's at the time). According to Samuels, the relationship “went both ways”.

The issue first surfaced in January of this year, when Beverly Rako, the girl's mother and now an ex-prison inmate with a history of drug and alcohol abuse, visited Auckland Labour MP Chris Carter with the information about her daughter. Rako claimed that her daughter, now aged 31, was less than 16 years old when Samuels had been involved with her. Carter relayed the information to the Prime Minister, who confronted Samuels with the allegations before accepting his word that nothing illegal had occurred.

The mother went on to repeat her allegations at a sexual

health centre and later at the electorate office of Health Minister Annette King in Wellington. She also sent a fax directly to Clark's office. On June 17, Rako's cousin, Rodney Tregetheran approached the prime-time current affairs television show “Holmes”, then two days later contacted the MP and leader of the ACT party, Richard Prebble about the allegations. Tregetheran claimed that the family was acting on behalf of the woman, who wanted Samuels to pay for her ongoing care and counselling.

Prebble wrote a letter to Clark setting out Tregetheran's allegations, and then a few days later brought the matter into the public arena by tabling his letter in parliament. Initially, Samuels voluntarily stood down as Minister of Maori Affairs, pending the outcome of the police enquiry initiated a few days earlier by himself and Clark. At this point, Clark indicated that Samuels would be able to return to his portfolio if he was cleared of the “serious allegations” against him.

However, over the following week there was increasing pressure, both inside and outside parliament, for Samuels to be sacked. Clark came in for particular criticism for not checking the veracity of Samuels' story when it was first brought to her attention in January. Clark, who until now had developed a reputation in the press for her assured handling of “difficult” situations, began shifting her position over Samuels, saying that whether the accusations were true or not, “mud sticks”. She began suggesting that Samuels' ability to be an “effective” minister would be compromised the longer the scandal dragged on.

Rumours of fresh allegations against Samuels, involving another sexual liaison and an incident of violence, surfaced in the press, along with more vehement calls in editorials that he should go. At this point Clark summoned him to a meeting in Wellington to urge him to step down. When Samuels refused to go quietly, Clark sacked him, claiming she did not know what she would be required to “defend next” on his behalf. Later, Clark maintained that her central consideration was that key government policies, purportedly aimed helping Maori people, would be harmed while

“allegations, controversy and public debate” swirled around the incumbent minister.

Clark's decision to sack Samuels was universally endorsed by the editorial writers, with the *Dominion* claiming that the result had confirmed her “authority” as Prime Minister. Of particular importance to Clark's position inside the coalition was that all Labour's Maori MPs except for one—John Tamihere—fell in behind her and meekly supported the sacking, despite some misgivings about the way it had been handled. The minor coalition party in the government, the Alliance, remained silent throughout the proceedings, only springing to life after the sacking to lobby for its own deputy leader Sandra Lee as the replacement minister.

After his sacking, Samuels expressed considerable bitterness at his treatment by both the Labour leadership and the media. Strenuously denying that he had done anything wrong, he said that if he was to be the “martyr” for a “new standard of morality” among politicians, then all should be “subject to the same scrutiny”. Claiming to be a victim of “sewer politics”, he said he had been denied natural justice. While there were suggestions that he would be under pressure from his Maori electorate to also step down as MP, a 70-strong meeting at the Waitangi Marae in Northland last weekend supported him and expressed hostility to Labour's handling of the affair.

Such scandals rarely acquire media prominence of their own accord. Rather they are often the means by which those in ruling circles warn, discipline or even remove governments if they stray from the required agenda. The sacking of Samuels should be seen against the backdrop of behind the scenes moves to ensure that the Clark government implements the economic policies demanded by big business.

The Labour and Alliance parties were elected last November by capitalising on the widespread hostility to the impact of the market reforms of the previous National government. At no stage did the incoming coalition government propose to undo the social and economic reversals inflicted on the working class over the past period. Indeed, Clark and other government spokesmen went to considerable pains to reassure big business that it was committed to “fiscal prudence” and that the election result was not a victory for “radicalism”.

Nevertheless, immediately after the elections, a series of government briefing papers exposed a stark picture of social and economic inequality, severe enough for even the Treasury, noted for its brutal pursuit of market policies, to indicate serious concerns about “social cohesion”. As a result, throughout its first six months in office, the government has been engaged in a delicate balancing act: trying to appear to be addressing the expectations of

ordinary people, while not upsetting the money markets.

Over the last month, however, big business has made clear that it is not willing to countenance even the most cosmetic of social reforms. Two weeks prior to the budget, a concerted media campaign claimed there had been a massive loss of business confidence, as a result of government policies to change the prevailing industrial legislation, to return accident compensation to a single state provider, and to make a minor increase in the top tax rate. Following the budget, business spokesmen complained that an extra \$NZ1.2 billion in social spending had not been matched by an equivalent provision for tax breaks for business research and development.

In the two weeks since the budget, the barrage of criticism has increased. International concern has been expressed over the country's credit rating and the New Zealand dollar has fallen to around 46 US cents. A survey released last week claimed that, despite efforts by the government to change impending legislation to accommodate business objections, most employers now think the government is doing a “poor” job, and many are threatening to move their operations to Australia.

After laying around for months the Samuels affair suddenly came to prominence largely because it was seen as a useful means of sheeting home to Clark that her position was by no means invulnerable. The involvement of Prebble, who has close links to big business, in pushing the affair into the media spotlight confirms that more was involved than the personal affairs of an MP over a decade ago. Moreover, the fact that Clark initially accepted Samuels' explanation only to rapidly withdraw her support and sack him when pressure was applied means she understood the warning.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact