

New Zealand: tragic deaths of baby twins used to foment anti-welfare campaign

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The tragic deaths in New Zealand last month of 11-week old Maori twins is being used to justify a wide-ranging campaign by the media, police and political establishment against the most oppressed and impoverished layers of the country's Maori population.

On Tuesday June 13, Chris and Cru Kahui were taken to Auckland's Middlemore Hospital with multiple injuries—both had severe head injuries and one a broken leg. Tests for brain function taken on admission were negative. The babies did not recover. Five days later they died in Starship Children's Hospital, having been diagnosed with brain damage caused by extreme violence.

The Kahui twins were the children of a young Maori couple. The father, Sonny Chris Kahui, 21, and mother Macsyne, 27, are separated, but both live in the working class area of South Auckland. Press reports claimed the babies had been left overnight by Macsyne Kahui at their father's place, dubbed a "party house" by reporters, with a floating population of unemployed adults and allegedly used as a centre for alcohol and drug use.

The immediate circumstances suggested that one or other parent, a family member or someone else in the house was most likely responsible for the terrible injuries inflicted on the babies. However, no sooner had the deaths become public than the media, prompted by the police, began a witch-hunt. The chief investigating officer rapidly designated it a case of murder. The combination of infant deaths, apparent Maori culpability, drugs, alcohol and welfare dependency became the ingredients used to whip up strident demands for the culprits to come forward and "take responsibility".

From the outset, both parents denied any knowledge of what caused their children's fatal injuries. The police publicly charged that even before the twins had died, the wider family had met and entered a pact to "stonewall" any investigation. According to inquiry head Detective Sergeant John Timms, the family had decided to thwart the investigation by choosing not to come forward and assist the investigation "until they were given the go-ahead by a spokesperson and a lawyer".

In fact, within hours Chris Kahui, while still in a state of shock, gave a lengthy statement to the police without being represented by a lawyer. After he obtained counsel, it was the lawyer who advised him not to say any more until she was given a transcript of his interview. The police consistently refused to hand it over, claiming that since Kahui was deemed a "witness" and not a "suspect", they were not obligated to do so.

The press needed no encouragement to stampede public sentiment into calls for vengeance. The parents' basic legal rights to remain silent, take legal advice and not incriminate themselves were ignored. Susan Wood, television anchor for the prime time "Close Up" program, pursued Macsyne Kahui into the public area of a police station, where she was waiting to be interviewed by police. Wood demanded Macsyne "front up" before the camera and the "New Zealand public".

According to a *Weekend Herald* "inquiry" into the deaths, an element of suspicion fell on Maksyne Kahui because, when asked by the hospital authorities what had happened to the babies, "she immediately requested a patient advocate"—implying it was altogether dubious for someone facing criminal suspicion to insist upon their legal rights. Maori Affairs Minister Parekura Horomia joined the chorus, suggesting it was time the police put aside any remaining legal niceties: "I think quite bluntly they've got to go and get 'em," he declared.

As soon as the twins' funeral was out of the way, Prime Minister Helen Clark weighed in. The family, she said, were similar to the violent and brutal characters from the film *Once Were Warriors*, opening the door to a broadside over so-called "welfare dependency" from all quarters of the political establishment. Twelve recipients of unemployment benefits were reported to have been living in the same house as the babies, and five at the house where they were fatally injured. Leader of the right-wing anti-welfare ACT party, Rodney Hide, declared in parliament that more than \$2,000 a week in welfare benefits was going into the two state-subsidised houses.

Clark directed that a formal investigation be undertaken into whether the identified people were receiving benefits legally. The households of all so-called "hardcore" welfare beneficiaries were also to be closely scrutinised. Social Development Minister David Benson-Pope instructed the Department of Work and Income to analyse and identify beneficiaries living together. Measures put in place in 2003 to intensify case management of individuals who were long-term unemployed would be applied to target "clusters" of claimants from one household.

John Tamihere, former Labour cabinet minister and spokesman for the National Maori Urban Authority, demanded that welfare benefits be paid direct to Maori social service agencies, such as his own Waipareira Trust, which would then pay beneficiaries' household bills such as rent, electricity and food. "Benefits are for those who experience tough times. They are not to reward a

lifestyle”, he intoned, adding that welfare should be cut to those refusing to use family support services or addiction treatment.

The entire Maori political establishment—including the so-called “lefts”—rapidly rose to the forefront of the campaign to demonise the Kahui family and Maori welfare recipients. Matt McCarten, a prominent trade union official and former chairman of the Alliance party, used his column in the *Herald on Sunday* to deny there were systemic social and economic causes behind the killings. He lambasted one “well-meaning academic” who had been reported as saying that the issue had to be “tackled in tandem with the way society is violent to Maori”. McCarten called for support from all those “appalled at this sickness” to join a torchlight vigil during the Maori New Year celebrations and pledge an end to “Maori violence”.

Maori Party co-leader Pita Sharples played a key role in emphasising that family violence was a problem for all Maori to “own”. This represented a significant shift. The party’s other leader, Tariana Turia, a former Labour cabinet minister, had blamed previous abuse and deaths of Maori children on the legacy of white colonial rule. Now, Turia fell into line with Sharples, a point not lost on the *Dominion Post*, which editorialised that this proved “welfare” and not colonialism was to blame for “the plethora of issues low-income Maori families face”.

Sharples, who has a close relationship with law enforcement agencies in Auckland, interceded with the family at the behest of the police. Following his uninvited visits to the Kahui house, Sharples labelled them “dysfunctional”, providing graphic descriptions of their drunkenness and apparent indifference to the situation. Sharples’ intervention has served to boost the stocks of the Maori Party in official political and media circles. He was soon being dubbed as the “nation’s Kaumatua” (Maori elder).

The purpose of this vicious campaign has been to avoid any probing of the deeper social causes of the tragedy. While the violence committed against the Kahui twins was particularly horrendous, so too are the social conditions under which the most vulnerable are forced to live their lives. The hysteria is aimed at directing any real examination away from where the real responsibility lies—with successive governments of all stripes and their social agendas.

Class divisions in New Zealand are generating a form of social existence characterised by extreme tension and destructiveness. Since 1994, the country has fallen from sixth to third worst in the OECD for child deaths. According to police figures, there were 103 children killed in the 12 years to 2001, the overall rate of deaths equating to 12.2 per 100,000 children. The rate was double for Maori.

Over the past six years under Labour, social and economic conditions for the majority of people have deteriorated sharply—while record business profits and a share market boom have seen an unprecedented transfer of wealth to the rich. A Ministry of Social Development report released this week found one million people—a quarter of the population—living in hardship, with 250,000 facing “severe hardship”, the most extreme category.

Not only has there been an increase in the proportion of the population living in poverty since 2000, but those at the bottom have become even more impoverished. Nearly two-thirds of

beneficiary families with children reported suffering severe or significant hardship, a 20 percent increase in four years. The number found in severe hardship was up from 5 to 8 percent of the population. More than a third of the country’s children, or 380,000, are being brought up in hardship. Pacific Island, Maori and sole parent households are disproportionately affected.

The pervasive and intensifying immiseration behind these statistics exerts a deep corrosiveness on daily life. In South Auckland, the number of family violence emergency calls has doubled in the past four years, with more than 10,000 in the past year alone. In 2005, nine out of 12 murder victims in the district were killed by the people closest to them.

The figures further underline the bankruptcy of the entire perspective of Maori ethnic “empowerment”. Under this program, which was initiated two decades ago by the Lange Labour government, hundreds of millions of dollars were handed over in land settlements to establish tribally-based Maori business enterprises. The outcome was that the struggles of working people against the government’s assault on jobs and social conditions were divided along ethnic and racial lines.

Since then, the mass of ordinary Maori, who make up some 18 percent of the population, have seen their living standards decline, while thousands now live in grinding poverty and increasing desperation. Meanwhile, a thin layer of middle class entrepreneurs, community leaders and politicians has been nurtured to prevent any development of the unification of Maori with the rest of the working class in a common struggle against the government, and the profit system itself. Its role is to keep the vast majority of Maori tied to the existing political set-up—as the Kahui case demonstrates.

With the police investigation still proceeding, the government is moving to establish a cross-party conference on family violence. Such an initiative would only provide a reactionary platform for further assaults on public services and basic rights. The Maori affairs minister has already foreshadowed the agenda by declaring that the problem of Maori child abuse must be addressed “as a culture” rather than “rely on government agencies”. The Maori Party has concurred, with Turia indicating she supports any move “to reduce welfare dependence”, as long as Maori—that is, the privileged layer for whom she speaks—are “involved in decision-making”.

Far from tackling the terrible social problems that lie at the heart of the Kahui twins’ death, these “solutions” will simply create the conditions for more such tragedies. They will serve to further brutalise the most oppressed sections of society and to create even more intolerable pressures on their daily lives. At the same time, they will be used to drastically reduce government expenditure on social programs—a key demand of New Zealand big business.



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