

Media turns against New Zealand government ahead of election

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Five weeks away from New Zealand's election, the August 13 release of investigative journalist Nicky Hager's book *Dirty Politics* has thrown a spanner in the National Party government's re-election campaign.

For the past six years the government has enjoyed widespread media support, and until 10 days ago it was widely expected to win by a considerable margin. Since the book's release this mood has rapidly changed, with the media repeatedly attacking Prime Minister John Key, his staff and Justice Minister Judith Collins.

The book is based on thousands of hacked emails and Facebook chats, which were leaked to Hager. It reveals the close connections of Collins and Key's office with ultra-right wing blogger Cameron Slater, who runs the Whale Oil web site.

Dirty Politics has become Craig Potton Publishing's fastest selling book, thanks to a deluge of media coverage. The timing of its release is highly favourable for the opposition Labour Party and its allies, the Greens, the Internet-Mana Party and the NZ First Party, which have all made its contents an election issue.

The book reveals behaviour that is repellent but hardly surprising. Hager details how Slater, the son of a former National Party president, and his associates dug up dirt on their political opponents, including the opposition Labour Party, NZ First and figures in National who were deemed insufficiently right wing.

The book alleges that Jason Ede, one of Key's senior staff, helped Slater search through Labour Party computers after discovering a security breach. In 2011, Ede apparently helped declassify Security Intelligence Service (SIS) documents, which were then passed to Slater in order to publicly embarrass then-Labour leader Phil Goff.

Collins gave Slater the name of a public servant who she believed had leaked information to Labour about Deputy Prime Minister Bill English's accommodation allowance. The public servant was attacked on Slater's blog and received death threats.

The conversations quoted by Hager show Slater referring

to people whose houses were destroyed by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake as "scum." In another exchange Slater quotes Key describing the mother of a miner killed in the 2010 Pike River explosion, as a "feral f*****g bitch that screams at him [Key] when he goes to Pike River meetings."

Slater is currently visiting Israel, his trip funded by the Israeli government in recognition of his enthusiastic support for its murderous assault on Gaza.

However, Slater's vicious right-wing views and his links to the government cannot account for the media's attacks on Key and Collins. They have previously been open about their friendships with Slater, who has been promoted by TVNZ and the *New Zealand Herald* as a legitimate journalist. Moreover, all capitalist parties routinely dig up dirt on each other and leak information to generate media-driven scandals.

Over the past 10 days, the media has seized on *Dirty Politics* to effectively boost Labour's election campaign.

This includes prominent commentators who have supported National for the past six years, such as *Herald* columnist John Armstrong. He said the revelations were the "equivalent of the 1972 burglary of the [US] Democratic Party's national committee headquarters in the Watergate complex" and Key looked like the "Richard Nixon of New Zealand politics."

National Business Review columnist Matthew Hooton told Radio NZ he now expected Labour leader David Cunliffe to be the next prime minister. A *Dominion Post* editorial declared that Collins' "ministerial future is open to question." TV and radio presenter Duncan Garner joined Labour in calling for Collins to be sacked.

The criticism of the government takes place against a backdrop of increasing global economic instability, as well as a deep social crisis within New Zealand—the result of many years of brutal austerity measures under Labor and National governments and a wave of job losses.

The prices of dairy exports, on which the country's economy relies heavily, have dropped by 40 percent since February, mostly due to falling demand in China, NZ's main

trading partner. Economic growth figures remain inflated due to a temporary construction boom following the Christchurch earthquake, but in manufacturing and other sectors of the economy, job cutting is continuing.

Following the government's release of a pre-election fiscal update this week, which had a smaller budget surplus than previously forecast, a *Dominion Post* editorial said "even a cursory look at the books reveals plenty to worry about." It noted that the fall in dairy prices "will affect the tax take but nobody knows how steep the reduction will be."

New Zealand's ruling elite, like its counterparts internationally, is demanding deeper cuts to spending on health care, welfare, education and other services in order to make workers pay for the crisis of capitalism. Under conditions where National has carried out six years of attacks and is widely despised, Labour is putting itself forward as a more reliable means for imposing the next round of austerity.

In its election campaign, Labour is attacking the government from the right, calling for cuts to accident compensation levies on businesses and an increase in the retirement age—both measures being demanded in the media.

Historically the ruling class has relied on Labour to carry out its attacks, including the last round of privatisations and pro-business restructuring during the 1980s. Now the party is assisted by the Greens, the Internet-Mana Party and Mana's affiliated pseudo-left groups, which all fraudulently portray Labour as a lesser evil.

The criticisms of National are also bound up with rising geo-political tensions, inflamed by Washington's "pivot" to Asia—its military encirclement and preparations for war against China. National, while committed to strong military and intelligence ties with Washington, has been hesitant about explicitly embracing the US war plans. It has attempted to balance between the strategic partnership with the US and New Zealand's economic reliance on China.

A paper by former defence minister Wayne Mapp, published in May by the prominent US think tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is likely indicative of discussions within the government. Mapp argues: "The rise of China means that the era of US strategic dominance, at least in the Asia-Pacific, is coming to an end. Adjustments will have to be made by all nations in the region to reflect the new balance of power."

The Obama administration, however, will not tolerate such "adjustments" by its allies. In 2010, Australian prime minister Kevin Rudd was removed from office by operatives within the Labor Party who had close ties to the US embassy, after he advocated a policy of accommodating China.

Sections of New Zealand's ruling elite are undoubtedly

concerned about National's ambivalence toward Washington's "pivot," and consider that Labour is better placed to strengthen the interests of NZ imperialism in the Pacific through a more open alignment with the US against China.

Labour and its allies have been carrying out an aggressive anti-Chinese campaign since 2012. Earlier this month, before the *Dirty Politics* scandal erupted, the opposition and much of the media attacked the government for allowing the sale of farmland to a Chinese company.

Labour and the Mana Party have also joined the right-wing NZ First Party in making immigrants—who are largely from China and India—scapegoats for the social crisis. Labour is courting NZ First, which has a long record of opposing Asian immigration, as a potential coalition partner.

Significantly, the opposition and media are using *Dirty Politics* to pressure Key to sack Justice Minister Collins, who was previously attacked for being too close to Chinese business figures. Her husband is Chinese-New Zealander David Wong-Tung, a director of the dairy exporter Oravida. The opposition has accused Collins of using political connections in China to help the company.

The whipping up of anti-Chinese xenophobia parallels the steady stream of US denunciations of China as "aggressive" and "expansionist" as Washington prepares for war with China. Significantly, the last Labour government was responsible for strengthening the NZ alliance with Washington by sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. If it regains office, Labour will more closely integrate New Zealand into the US military build-up in Asia.

The public has been subjected to endless grandstanding and moralising by the opposition parties over the revelations in *Dirty Politics*. Labour leader Cunliffe said he felt "physically sick" reading the book. Mana leader Hone Harawira called it a "damning expose" of the government's "nasty and malicious" friends.

All this is intended to obscure the fact that the Labour bloc has no significant differences with the National government's right-wing agenda—or that of Cameron Slater, for that matter—which involves deeper attacks on living standards and preparations for war. The real "dirty politics" is that all the parties are involved in a conspiracy against the working class, which will be completely disenfranchised regardless of who wins the election.



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