

New Zealand opposition in crisis over links to Chinese businessman

Tom Peters

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Simon Bridges, leader of New Zealand's main opposition National Party, became engulfed in a political scandal this week after allegations that he concealed a \$100,000 donation to the party from Chinese businessman Zhang Yikun.

By law, the identity of political donors must be publicly disclosed if they give more than \$15,000. Bridges has denied any wrongdoing, but would neither confirm nor deny having received a donation from Zhang.

On October 16, National Party MP Jami-Lee Ross publicly accused Bridges of being "a corrupt politician" who had committed "multiple breaches of electoral law," including instructing Ross to help disguise the source of the donation from Zhang. On October 17, Ross presented evidence to the police, including a taped phone conversation with Bridges, showing that the National Party leader was aware of the donation.

Ross, a National Party whip, was reportedly angry that Bridges did not promote him to a more senior position after becoming party leader in February. Bridges suspected Ross of other leaks to the media over the past two months relating to the leaders' travel expenses. Last month, Bridges told Ross to take leave from parliament, saying he had received complaints from at least four women that Ross had behaved "inappropriately" towards them.

Whatever Ross's personal motivations, his public attack on Bridges indicates there are significant divisions within the National Party. Ross claims there are other MPs who oppose Bridges but are afraid to speak publicly. Following Ross's October 16 statements, the National's caucus voted unanimously to expel him from the party. Ross vowed to stay in parliament as an independent MP and to continue to "expose" Bridges.

Most significantly, Ross's claims have been seized on to intensify the right-wing campaign by sections of the media and the political establishment against supposed

"Chinese influence" in New Zealand politics, and, in particular, the National Party.

The donation scandal erupted in the context of the Trump administration's escalating trade war and military threats against China. Washington is placing intense pressure on all its allies, including Australia and New Zealand, to ensure that they are fully aligned with war preparations aimed at maintaining US dominance in Asia.

In the recording released by Ross, Bridges expressed excitement about Zhang's donation and the two politicians discussed Zhang's proposal to elevate a second Chinese member into the National Party caucus. Bridges said "two Chinese would be nice" and Ross added this "would be more valuable" for raising funds than having two Indian MPs.

New Zealand First Party leader Winston Peters, who is deputy prime minister and foreign minister in the Labour Party-led coalition government, said the recording revealed that National had a "cash for candidates" policy. Such statements are profoundly hypocritical. It is hardly a revelation that political influence can be bought with donations, or that the major capitalist parties, including National, Labour and NZ First, are composed of trusted and often hand-picked representatives of the business elite.

NZ First is a right-wing nationalist, anti-Chinese party, which has for years worked with the Labour Party to scapegoat Chinese immigrants and investors for social inequality and the housing crisis. Labour gave NZ First a major role in government, despite NZ First only receiving 7 percent of the votes in the 2017 election.

Peters has previously accused the National's Chinese-born MP Jian Yang of being a "Manchurian candidate," i.e. a spy for Beijing, and demanded that he be investigated.

The Ross-Bridges recording was also seized on by Anne-Marie Brady, who is widely promoted in the New Zealand

and international media as a “China expert” from the University of Canterbury. In fact, Brady is an anti-Chinese propagandist whose work has been sponsored by the US government-funded Wilson Center and the NATO military alliance.

Brady told Radio NZ that the revelations were a “real opportunity” for the government to address “China’s political interference activities in our country,” as other countries were doing. Early this month, US Vice President Mike Pence provocatively accused China—without any evidence—of seeking to “influence” the 2018 and 2020 US elections with the aim of removing Trump.

Zhang has interests in real estate and construction businesses. He moved to New Zealand in 2000 and has donated to Labour and National Party politicians. In June, Zhang was awarded the New Zealand Order of Merit by the Labour government for “services to New Zealand-China relations and the Chinese community.”

Brady accused Zhang’s Auckland-based Chao Shan General Association, which supports business links between New Zealand and China, of being a “front” for the Chinese Communist Party.

Like NZ First, Brady has also accused Yang of being a Chinese “agent” in parliament. In the lead-up to the 2017 election, she alleged that several National Party politicians, including former Prime Minister John Key, were in thrall to Chinese interests. She also demanded that New Zealand’s Security Intelligence Service be empowered to spy on Chinese community groups, student associations, newspapers and businesses.

Among Brady’s most vocal supporters is the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, which publishes frequent nationalist rants depicting China as a neo-colonial threat to New Zealand. The blog’s editor Martyn Bradbury said the alleged donation from Zhang showed the “Chinese Government” was trying to “buy” National MPs, which he claimed was a “direct threat to our f—ing sovereignty.”

The 2008-2017 National Party government expanded trade and investment ties with China, which became New Zealand’s number one trading partner, overtaking Australia. National also strengthened the military-intelligence alliance with the United States, including by sending troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. Washington, however, has made clear that it will not tolerate National’s continued ties with Chinese business leaders.

Former Republican Senator James Talent told a US congressional hearing in May that Chinese donors with links to the CCP were “buying access and influence” with

both major parties in New Zealand. Former CIA analyst Peter Mattis told the hearing that if no action was taken, NZ should be removed from the US-led Five Eyes intelligence alliance.

Direct or indirect US involvement in the National Party’s infighting cannot be ruled out. Earlier this month, US ambassador Scott Brown hypocritically attacked Beijing’s military build-up in the South China Sea, and warned New Zealand not to trust China.

During the coalition talks that followed the inconclusive 2017 election, Brown publicly criticised then-National Party leader Bill English for refusing to fully endorse Trump’s threats to annihilate North Korea. Following the US ambassador’s intervention, NZ First formed a coalition with Labour and the Greens instead of National, which got the most votes.

Since then, the Labour Party-led government has significantly strengthened New Zealand’s integration into the US war drive. In July, it released a defence strategy that named Russia and China as the main “threats” to the international order, echoing the language of the Pentagon. Last month, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern sent New Zealand air force personnel to Okinawa to join the US-led encirclement of North Korea, signalling that if war breaks out in the region, New Zealand will be involved.

The scandal over Zhang’s alleged political donations and the ongoing attacks on Jian Yang, are being used to shift the entire political establishment even further to the right and onto a war footing. The aim is to demonise Chinese migrants and politicians in order to prepare New Zealand to join a potentially catastrophic conflict involving nuclear-armed powers.



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