

New Zealand opposition tries to shut down scandal over alleged links to Chinese businessman

Tom Peters
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New Zealand's opposition National Party remains in crisis over allegations that its leader Simon Bridges concealed a \$100,000 donation from Chinese businessman Zhang Yikun. By law, political parties must publicly declare donations over \$15,000.

MP Jami-Lee Ross was expelled from the National Party after making the allegation on October 16. He then released a recorded phone conversation showing Bridges was aware of the donation. The party has denied receiving \$100,000 from Zhang.

Ross vowed to stay in parliament and release more evidence of Bridges' "corrupt" behaviour. Police are investigating whether the party filed a false donations return with the Electoral Commission.

The dispute has lifted the lid on sharp divisions within the political establishment over business links with China, NZ's largest trading partner. As the Trump administration escalates the US trade war and military threats against China and Russia, US allies like New Zealand are coming under immense pressure to fall into line and prepare for war.

The Labour Party-NZ First-Greens coalition government has strengthened ties with the US and officially labelled China and Russia the main "threats" to the global order. The 2008-2017 National Party government, while fully supporting the US alliance, also developed close ties with Chinese business, which it is seeking to maintain.

Bridges and other National politicians have tried to shut down the donations scandal by painting Ross as unstable and abusive. Four unnamed women, including a National Party MP, have accused Ross of inappropriate conduct and "misogyny."

In an extraordinary development, on October 21

police took Ross to a mental health unit in Auckland, where he remained for three days before being discharged.

According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Ross was issued a compulsory treatment order, also known as being sectioned, after members of the National Party apparently contacted medical personnel and triggered a police hunt on the night of October 20. People can be sectioned only if medical authorities believe someone is a danger to themselves or others.

Far-right blogger Cameron Slater, a friend of Ross, wrote on October 25 that National's MeToo-style accusations had made Ross suicidal. Ross may have been suicidal, but questions remain about what the National Party said to police and medical personnel. If sectioning was considered as a means to silence or discredit Ross, this would set a dangerous precedent for further attacks on democratic rights.

The fact that Ross is supported by Slater and his collaborator, far-right political advisor Simon Lusk, suggests that the allegations against Bridges are part of an attempt to shift the National Party further to the right.

Lusk and Slater have previously promoted National MPs Judith Collins and Mark Mitchell, who both contested the party leadership in February against Bridges. Collins is a hard-line ex-police minister, while Mitchell is a former defence minister who, before entering parliament, worked as a private security contractor in Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion.

The xenophobic NZ First Party, which plays a major role in the government, has continued to attack "Chinese influence" in the National Party. On October 23, NZ First leader, Deputy Prime Minister Winston

Peters told RadioLIVE he sympathised with Ross. Zhang's donation, he said, showed some politicians were not acting "in this country's national interest."

Peters, who previously attacked long-standing National MP Jian Yang, accusing him of being a Chinese Communist Party (CCP) agent, has denounced the National Party for considering installing a second Chinese MP based on Zhang's recommendation.

The media has given extensive coverage to Anne-Marie Brady, a University of Canterbury professor, who is playing a key part in the anti-China campaign. Brady is presented as an impartial "expert," but her research, including policy advice to the Labour-led government, has been funded by the NATO military alliance and the US government-backed Wilson Center.

Speaking to TVNZ's "Q and A" program on October 21, Brady declared that Zhang's donations were part of a CCP plot to influence New Zealand politics. She called on the Ardern government to investigate "China's political interference activities ... as the Australian government did, as the United States government is now doing."

In the US, Vice President Mike Pence made an inflammatory speech in early October promising to intensify the US military build-up and take other steps to counter China, including monitoring Chinese students in the US. Since Pence's speech, the Trump administration has pulled out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, enabling the US to develop mid-range nuclear missiles to attack China and Russia.

Echoing Pence, Brady told TVNZ the CCP was seeking to "manipulate and control" the New Zealand-Chinese community. Brady has repeatedly called for the Security Intelligence Service to investigate China's "influence" throughout NZ. This means students, journalists and activists opposing US military threats against China could be deemed to be under the CCP's "control."

Brady praised the US-led Five Eyes intelligence sharing network, which includes New Zealand, for holding discussions in September on measures to specifically counter "Chinese influence operations."

Without any evidence, Brady has also accused National MP Jian Yang and Labour MP Raymond Huo of being CCP "agents" in parliament and called for them to be investigated.

In a statement in November, Brady said one aim of

China's "influence" campaign was "getting New Zealand to agree to stop spying on China for the Five Eyes." Whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed in 2015 that the US National Security Agency highly values the intelligence provided by NZ's Government Communications Security Bureau.

Significantly, numerous commentators who falsely present themselves as "lefts" have hailed Brady—an enthusiastic supporter of New Zealand's military-intelligence alliance with US imperialism. These include the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, liberals such as Bryce Edwards and Chris Trotter, and pseudo-left commentator Branko Marcetic.

Marcetic is a New Zealand-based staff writer for *Jacobin* magazine, which is affiliated with the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party. In an article on the *Spinoff* website on October 19, Marcetic called for New Zealand to "start taking [China's] influence campaigns seriously," citing Brady's allegations.

Marcetic also noted that members of the US Congress and the Canadian intelligence service had expressed concerns about Chinese activities in New Zealand. The article made no mention of Washington's war preparations against China.

The aim of such articles and Brady's statements is to cement NZ's alliance with Washington and other Five Eyes partners as the US prepares for military conflict against China.



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