

New Zealand police embroiled in major corruption scandal

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Fallout from a scandal involving a group of senior New Zealand police officers is continuing despite the political establishment seeking to limit damage after a damning report found “significant failings” in the handling of sexual complaints against a former high-ranking officer.

The National Party-led government is to establish a new position of Inspector General of Police, with powers to investigate police conduct, following the release of the 135-page report by the Independent Police Conduct Authority (IPCA) on November 11. The report detailed serious allegations against former Deputy Police Commissioner Jevon McSkimming and a years-long cover-up by senior staff.

McSkimming earlier pleaded guilty in a Wellington court to accessing child sexual exploitation and bestiality material on his work computer and had resigned. Police Commissioner Richard Chambers claimed the outcome “showed all police, no matter their rank, are accountable to the laws that apply to us all.” McSkimming’s behaviour, Chambers said, “goes against the core values of police” and he would not allow the episode to “tarnish” his staff.

But the IPCA report exposed a systematic cover-up by multiple senior officers of other serious complaints. The allegations arose from a sexual relationship that began in 2016 between McSkimming, then aged 40 and a superintendent, and a “Ms Z,” a 21-year-old unsworn police staffer. In 2018, McSkimming informed his seniors of the affair, which he claimed had ended, but accused the complainant of threatening and blackmailing him.

Ms Z allegedly sent hundreds of emails to McSkimming and the police, posted on social media and lodged complaints with the police hotline. Her allegations included sexual interaction without consent and threats by McSkimming to use intimate video recordings against her. The IPCA found that instead of investigating the woman’s allegations, police charged her with sending harmful digital communications.

Chief among those who subverted any investigation was then Police Commissioner Andrew Coster. Coster not only

failed to take the allegations seriously, he covered up for McSkimming during the selection process for the latter’s appointment as Deputy Commissioner. Coster then sought to limit the scope and accelerate the IPCA investigation to ensure it did not interfere with McSkimming’s job application.

Coster was appointed Commissioner in 2020 by then Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who declared that he would lead the police force “with positivity, inclusion and integrity.”

In the wake of the IPCA report, Coster finally resigned last week as chief executive of the Social Investment Agency, which he took up after quitting the police in late 2024. Others identified as culpable were two former Assistant Commissioners of Investigations, a Deputy Commissioner responsible for Police Integrity and Conduct and a female Deputy Commissioner.

Over six years, police brass who knew of Ms Z’s allegations “seriously” failed, the IPCA declared, to make “sufficiently robust enquiries” and relied too heavily on accounts given by McSkimming and other officers. Instead, an investigation into Ms Z was launched and in May 2024 she was prosecuted under the Harmful Digital Communications Act. The charges have only recently been withdrawn.

The IPCA’s findings were deliberately circumscribed. While the report found “significant misconduct” and a “massive failure of leadership” at the top of the police, no officers had “set out to undermine the integrity” of the organisation. Their response, the IPCA deemed, was simply one of “inaction and an unquestioning acceptance” of McSkimming’s narrative.

The IPCA and others have sought to suppress accusations of corruption. Police Minister Mark Mitchell mentioned corruption during one interview but later declared; “on reflection I misspoke.” Thirty-six emails were sent to Mitchell’s office by Ms Z. Mitchell claims he did not receive them because Coster had instructed police officers working in Mitchell’s office to redirect them to Coster.

Speaking to the *New Zealand Herald* on December 12, 2022, Ms Z called on the government to launch a wider investigation into police culture. She said comments by Commissioner Chambers about wanting to “move on” were concerning and argued that there is “behaviour in the wider police that needs more scrutiny.”

Ms Z emphasised that senior police ignored or dismissed her allegations for years while McSkimming continued to rise through the ranks. “I’ve been bullied into silence,” with no interest in whether there was substance to her concerns, she said. After being charged she was placed under restrictive bail conditions and subjected to suppression orders for nearly 18 months, costing her a job and legal bills. “My life has been so damaged by this ... it’s an ongoing nightmare,” Ms Z declared.

On November 26 Radio NZ reported that, following an audit of police internet usage, 20 staff were placed under investigation for alleged “misuse and inappropriate content.” Of these, three had been cleared and six had been stood down, with three facing criminal investigation.

The scandal is the most recent in a litany of investigations and inquiries spanning decades. Similar systemic issues were identified by the Bazley Commission 18 years ago. That inquiry, into allegations that officers had undermined or mishandled investigations into complaints of sexual assault against other officers, delivered 60 recommendations to the police, IPCA and government—all now exposed as entirely ineffectual.

The ruling establishment has rushed to restore the plummeting reputation of the police. No criminal charges are being pursued against officers involved. Public Service Commissioner Brian Roche insisted there is “no evidence of corruption or cover up,” praising Coster for “unreservedly apologising and accepting accountability.” Chambers assured parliament that he had now set specific goals to restore “trust and confidence up to 80 percent” in the police.

In a TVNZ interview on December 7, Coster defended himself, saying he had acted in “good faith” but made “honest mistakes.” Coster also maintained he had “informally” briefed Labour’s then Police Minister Chris Hipkins in 2022 and Mitchell early in 2024 about the allegations. Both have denied any such conversations took place.

Any conception of reforming “police culture,” given the central oppressive role the police play in capitalist society, is doomed. Amid a brutal austerity drive and escalating social tensions, police are the means of suppressing opposition particularly in the working class. The National Party-led government and the opposition Labour Party, competed on right-wing “law and order” policies.

The drum-beat includes a vicious political campaign witch-

hunting Palestine protesters and, as in other countries including Britain and Australia, preparing escalating police-state measures against oppositional activities including workers’ struggles and strikes.

In May, the IPCA found that police had unlawfully pepper-sprayed and arrested prominent activist John Minto at a pro-Palestinian protest in Christchurch in February. The 70-year-old spokesman for Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa was targeted and charged with obstructing and resisting police.

The police are an essential component in the escalating state-wide offensive on the social position of the working class. The prison population has reached an all-time high, despite official figures showing a fall in the number of crimes. New Zealand’s incarceration rate is high compared to other OECD countries, with 199 prisoners per 100,000 people. Māori, among the most oppressed layers of the working class, are significantly overrepresented, making up 52 percent of inmates despite being only around 15 percent of the population.

New Zealand police are also involved in high rates of killings. Officers do not routinely carry firearms but can access them from police vehicles and stations. According to a 2022 Radio NZ report, police had killed 40 people since 1990, putting NZ ahead of England and Wales in fatal shootings per capita. The country of 5 million people had nearly eight police shootings per 10 million, compared to 0.3 in England and Wales, and 2.4 in Australia. Those killed are disproportionately Māori.

Meanwhile, corporate leaders investigated by police routinely avoid prosecution. Fifteen years after the Pike River coal mine disaster, which killed 29 workers, no one has been held accountable for violations of health and safety laws that turned the mine into a death trap. In 2017, police also decided not to charge individuals responsible for violating multiple building regulations in the construction of the CTV building, which collapsed in the 2011 Christchurch earthquake killing 115 people.



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