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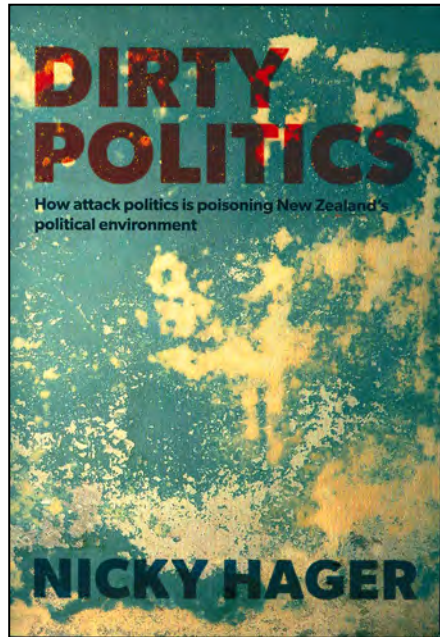
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Taking scalps and vicious 'attack' politics

Dirty Politics: How attack politics is poisoning New Zealand's political environment, by Nicky Hager. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2014, 166pp. ISBN978-1-927213-36-0

NICKY HAGER'S revelations of dirty tactics by the National Party will come as no surprise to those numbed by the vicious politics of the US, the UK or Australia, but they have raised hackles in New Zealand and no doubt prompted many people to wipe their hard drives as thoroughly as they can.

Dirty Politics investigates the role played by the right wing commentator Cameron Slater who uses his WhaleOil blog to attack National Party opponents. It also details the depth of collusion between the National Party government and Slater. The revelations were met with gasps of what one suspects were feigned incredulity by the media and it is certainly noticeable that certain media workers have tried to



distance themselves from the scandal in the ensuing months.

For members of the public who retained some faith in the New Zealand political system, Hager's book exposed a system in which a right wing government largely bereft of any ideas apart from staying on power, has dragged local politics down to unprecedented levels, with raids on Labour computer systems and leaks targeted at the press.

According to Hager, Cameron sought advice and information from prostitutes about the sex lives of politicians and crowed in obscenity-laden e-mails about how it was 'never wise to piss off the whale'. Hager noted:

If Slater and his colleagues had been moral conservative campaigners their interest in other people's personal lives might have had some small justification. But, as with the attack on [Auckland mayor] Len Brown, the aim was purely to hurt their political opponents (p. 115).

So far Hager's only scalp has been Justice Minister Judith Collins, whose resignation Prime Minister John Key demanded. However, Hager himself has been the victim of attacks by those whose behaviour he has questioned.

Hager felt the weight of governmental displeasure when, soon after the election, police raided Hager's home and took away papers, equipment, computers and electronic equipment belonging to the freelance journalists' family.

Hager said in a statement that he had been told he was not a suspect, but a witness.

The US-based Freedom of the Press Foundation has launched an international appeal to raise funds to cover Hager's legal costs. The foundation has reported that Hager was working on a project using documents leaked by Edward Snowden and raised speculation that New Zealand's government has been nervous about the possible revelations. Australian and English governments have both acted aggressively in the wake of Snowden's revelations and used or

drafted draconian legislation to punish journalists who write about state spying operations.

Hager told *The New Zealand Herald* after the raid that he would not co-operate with the police and believed the raids were dangerous for journalism in New Zealand.

Those who hoped that *Dirty Politics* would have some affect on the outcome of the election have been disappointed. There may have been reasons for the fact that ultimately the book had little short term impact, none of them anything less than depressing. Were those sections of the New Zealand media which used Slater's material complicit in the outcome? Perhaps people have become so jaded by the second rate nature of national politics in New Zealand that they simply no longer cared, or else they may have believed that Cameron's behaviour was actually acceptable.

Hager sees the kind of tactics used by the National Party and its supporters as a threat to democracy. Quoting Simon Lusk, he writes that negative campaigning 'lowers turnout, favours right more than left as the right continue to turn out, and drives away the independents'. Then he continues:

In short, many people simply stop participating in politics. If politicians cannot be trusted, if politics looks like a petty or ugly game and if no one seems to be talking about the things

that matter, then what's the point of bothering to participate? (p. 132)

Perhaps we can only hope that thoughtful readers will take the time to digest the implications of Hager's books and decide that they don't want to vote for politicians who use such tactics.

Exposing celebrity reportage

Conflict Coverage Promotion: High Quality or High Concept? By Chris Veits. Hamburg: Anchor Academic Publishing, 2014, 95pp. ISBN 978-3-95489-200-6

DUE to his background in entertainment television Chris Veits would seem uniquely qualified to conduct a semiotic analysis of the conflict coverage promotional spots on CNN International and Al Jazeera English. However, admirers of Al Jazeera English might be surprised to learn how both networks routinely employed high concept material in the segments lauding their reporting of the multinational intervention in Libya and the broader Arab Awakening. Although at times semiotic approaches can seem like the scrutiny of minutiae, the unusual choice of promotional clips provides an opportunity to demonstrate how image centric these channels' claims about their professional integrity and morality really are.

While this slim volume refrains from exploring Qatar's involvement and ambitions in Libya, Egypt and Syria, its strengths lie in its skilful exposure of the self-aggrandising poses struck by celebrity reporters in conflict areas and how their employers attempt to exploit them to retain viewers. The author isn't fooled by the accoutrements which journalists insist in equipping themselves with while no one else in the frame senses any imminent danger. This predilection for helmets and body armour—as well as the use of dramatic explosions filmed under uncertain circumstances—creates the impression of being close to the action, and fulfils the audiences' expectations of being taken there by the network. Yet if the crew were really as close as these outlets would have us believe, then the footage acquired would come at an even higher cost than their industry-leading production standards exact. This reminds us what quality journalism should and shouldn't be; and as he looks to move into non-fiction TV, it's comforting to realise that Veits feels CNN and Al Jazeera could do better.—*Steve Ellmers is a Unitec lecturer.*