
Reviews

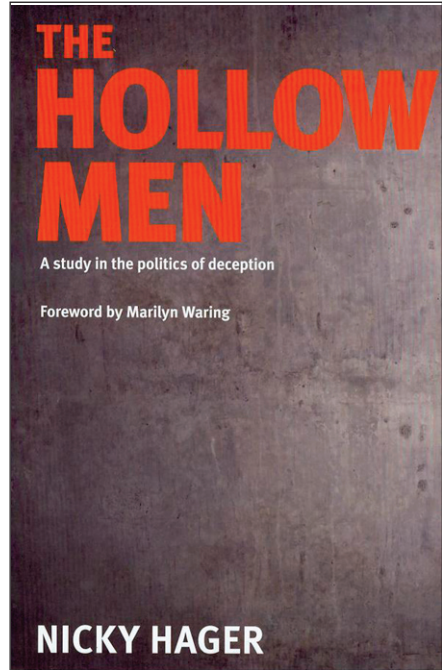
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Exposing the covert Right in a news world without political memory

The Hollow Men: A study in the politics of deception, by Nicky Hager. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2006. 352 pp ISBN: 187733362X.

THE ARRIVAL of this book last November was a landmark event for political journalism in New Zealand. There had been rumours about an exposé of National Party links with the Exclusive Brethren sect and wealthy corporate donors.

Weeks before the 2005 election a negative third party pamphleting campaign against Helen Clark's government and the Green



Party became headline news. The Exclusive Brethren belatedly announced their authorship of the pamphlets as National leader Don Brash denied all involvement.

Journalistic scepticism about Brash's denial was compounded by previous revelations of his extramarital affair with Diane Foreman from the Business Roundtable, an umbrella group of New Zealand's largest corporates. Foreman's talent for

covert fund raising had enabled Don Brash's accession to the National Party leadership in October 2003.

After National's 2005 election defeat, newsrooms became aware of party dissatisfaction with Brash's performance. During 2006 rumours abounded of a giant leak from National's Parliamentary headquarters; apparently Brash's private email correspondence had been downloaded. Eventually, journalists and politicians learned of a tell-all book which was likely to have explosive repercussions.

On Friday, 17 November 2006, Don Brash obtained a court injunction against the book's publication. On Tuesday, November 21, investigative journalist Nicky Hager called a press conference announcing the existence of his book and its general contents. Intense media speculation focussed upon National's association with the Exclusive Brethren, the private email leaks and Brash's political future.

On Thursday, November 23, Don Brash called a press conference and announced his resignation as leader of the National Party. Next day the injunction was lifted and the book went on sale. The National Party had already selected a new leadership team to replace Don Brash and his deputy Gerry Brownlee. John Key and Bill English immediately took charge and spoke of a new beginning

for the party.

News outlets nationwide reported upon unfolding events. Major newspapers *The New Zealand Herald*, the *Herald on Sunday*, the *Dominion Post* and the *Sunday Star-Times* carried pages of coverage.

Then, suddenly, the headlines stopped. Key and English acted as if nothing had happened and news coverage moved on. Meanwhile, National-aligned advisers, journalists, commentators and bloggers set out to damage the author's reputation. To them, Nicky Hager was a conspiracy theorist who had 'stolen' private emails to promote his own agenda.

One aggrieved Brash adviser publicly compared Hager to David Irving, the Holocaust denier. There were brief, favourable responses to the book from professor Raymond Miller, a political scientist from the University of Auckland, and Jim Tucker, executive director of New Zealand's Journalism Training Organisation. However, four months after publication this book has still to receive a substantive, historically informed review.

Hager's general thesis can be outlined as follows: With the replacement of Bill English by Don Brash, National became an anti-democratic political party which set out to deceive the voting public. Wealthy

corporate elites associated with the Business Round Table, the far right ACT party, the Centre for Independent Studies and various public relations firms supported Brash's seizure of power and anonymously donated substantial sums to National's campaign war chest. They wanted a new government with the power to institute market driven policies in the areas of labour relations, state owned enterprises, education, transport, accident compensation and local body government.

Meanwhile Christian right networks headed by the Maxim Institute forged an alliance of convenience with Brash's advisers. Support for religious schools and opposition to the *Civil Unions Bill* would deliver the congregational vote. More furtively, the Exclusive Brethren sect offered volunteer activists and anonymous pamphlet advertising for the 2005 campaign. Subsequently, the pamphlets declared that a new government would stabilise the family, imprison more criminals, reduce taxes and rebuild an attack-strike air force.

To obscure these agendas, National privately contracted focus group research designed to elicit deep-seated anxieties about New Zealand's cultural tensions and economic future. The collated responses were used to position

National as a mainstream party responsibly attentive to the aspirations of ordinary New Zealanders.

The Clark government could then be denigrated and ridiculed as a bumbling, out of touch accomplice of the politically correct. Throughout the campaign these impressions were reinforced by billboard and television advertisements in tandem with a demographically calculated tax cut package.

Throughout 2004 and 2005, Brash's strategists (Murray McCully, Gerry Brownlee, Steven Joyce, Richard Long, Matthew Hooton, Peter Keenan and Bryan Sinclair) employed market research companies, advertising specialists, public relations firms, media managers and television trainers to sell the National brand. Don Brash was portrayed as a reluctant politician, attuned to the concerns of apolitical New Zealanders. Together, corporate donors, private sector communication specialists and Brash's close advisors formed a collusive network of power. The Christians were dealt with carefully and pragmatically on a quid pro quo basis. National offered policy commitments on selected moral issues in return for campaign support. Consequently, the National Party membership was disenfranchised and voters were treated as manipulable

‘punters’ rather than participants in the democratic process.

Now, most of these developments predate the Brash-led National Party. In a *New Zealand Times* article back in October 1986, Fran O’Sullivan identified a ‘new right’ business network with close links to senior members of the fourth Labour government. The named businessmen included Don Brierly, Ron Trotter, Alan Gibbs, and John Fernyhough. The New Right influence upon party politics, public policy and the New Zealand economy was mapped out by Bruce Jesson in *Behind the Mirror Glass* (1987), *Fragments of Labour* (1989) and *Only their Purpose is Mad* (1999).

In 1989, Joe Atkinson wrote an academic article detailing the collusions between private pollsters communication specialists and major party elites. The trends identified by these and other writers are confirmed by Hager’s analysis. Here it is instructive to compare Labour’s 1987 re-election campaign with the National campaign of 2005. Both required new right corporate backing and the construction of a deceptive communications strategy. In this regard Hager’s recent concerns reflect those expressed in Murray McLoughlin’s TVNZ documentary *For the Public Good* (29 April 1990). Inter-

viewed New Right luminaries opined that market driven policies such as privatisation would benefit the country rather than themselves. Finance Minister Roger Douglas and other senior ministers also believed this, but ordinary party members clearly did not. Labour, therefore, faced a difficult question; how could they ensure re-election without alienating opponents of the New Right?

The documentary revealed that large corporates bankrolled the campaign on the understanding that Roger Douglas would remain finance minister. The policy pay-off would be privatised State Owned Enterprises (SOEs), flattened rates of income tax and the commercialisation of social policy provision. During Labour’s campaign unprecedented sums were spent on marginal seat telephone polling. Subsequently, a multimedia advertising campaign featured a vivid television sequence promoting the new economy and denigrating the economic past. Shiny corporate offices were seen to replace the abandoned decrepitude of dusty attics, long play records and model tiger moths. Meanwhile, Prime Minister David Lange flew around the country promising a second term of inspired government economic growth and social policy reform. Labour was duly re-elected before tearing itself apart.

The documentary ended with the corporates migrating to National, in support of the ideologically driven Ruth Richardson as finance spokesperson.

Since then much has changed and from a new right perspective few of these changes have been for the better. In November 1990, National was elected but Prime Minister Jim Bolger's subsequent demotion of Ruth Richardson was seen as a failure of nerve. The privatisation agenda stalled and a new proportionally based electoral system (MMP) was voted in by referendum. After the first MMP election of 1996, Prime Minister Jim Bolger was obliged to work with New Zealand First, a conservative, less market-driven coalition partner. New Right elements within the National caucus deposed Jim Bolger in favour of Jenny Shipley.

However, Shipley was defeated in November 1999 by Labour (led by Helen Clark), the Alliance (a left party with a strong activist base) and the Greens. For the New Right this was the worst electoral result in decades. Worse still, National selected as leader Bill English, a relative moderate, and was heavily defeated in the 2002 election. Many businesses were not averse to a Labour-led government which favoured low tariffs and Reserve Bank monetarism. This was

a 'third way' regime which proved to be only notionally committed to the principles of social democracy.

Nevertheless, New Right activists felt vengeful toward the government and betrayed by National. Then, in mid-2003 they saw an opportunity to resume control of the party, with Don Brash as their man.

Hager skilfully documents the beliefs and objectives of Brash's supporters. Correspondence from Brian Nicolle, Matthew Hooton, Michael Bassett and Roger Douglas reveals a shared sense of national mission and tactical urgency—English must go, New Zealand's future was at stake.

In Hager's account, Brash is both an asset and a liability. He attracts corporate money and appears unsoiled by the rough and tumble of party politics. On the other hand he cannot think on his feet and suffers from selective memory syndrome. Despite these liabilities Brash very nearly became Prime Minister.

In this regard, Hager details compellingly how the Australian-based market researchers Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor translated the insecurities of uncommitted voters into loaded messages; politically correct Labour—mainstream National. Consequently, a skilful, racially loaded billboard campaign and anti-tax television advertisements enticed

undecided voters. This was an unstoppable combination until the Exclusive Brethren connection was publicised.

Suddenly, mainstream National was openly associated with an extremist Christian sect. Brash was unable to cope and Labour's campaign riposte dripped with innuendo; 'Don't put it all at risk'. For National, such a disaster was always likely.

Unsurprisingly, complaints about the Brethren's pamphlets attracted media attention as did heartrending stories from former Brethren members. The pamphlets were vitriolic and highlighted themes avoided by National's campaign managers. The mainstream New Zealander's targeted by Crosby and Textor were not clamouring for national airstrike capability or a commitment to George Bush's foreign adventures. Yet these themes featured prominently in the Brethren campaign.

Brash's advisers knew that the Christian right connection could be dangerous. An incident just before the campaign illustrates this. When Brash attended an evangelical youth leadership conference organised by the Greenlane Christian Centre, he was digitally photographed with both arms upraised during the congregational prayer. As Hager drily observes, this was not a 'very mainstream pose'. Cited email correspondence be-

tween Bryan Sinclair and conference organiser Caleb Standen reveals the sensitivities involved. The digital images were soon deleted and Sinclair's concerns were allayed. Brash's advisers were not deterred by this experience; they were already committed to what was, in effect, a Faustian arrangement. The Brethren would sink the Greens (by taking their popular vote under the 5 percent threshold), the Maxim Institute would deliver the Christian vote and Brash would attain worldly power.

As we now know, Brash attained nothing and was bedevilled out of public office. His advisers scattered out of sight, with tainted reputations. According to Hager, certain National Party figures were always fearful about the Exclusive Brethren connection. This partly explains, I think, the deluge of National Party leaks. They came from experienced tacticians concerned about the lack of acumen within Brash's inner circle.

Ideologically, Christian neo-conservatism clashes with New Right libertarianism. As Hager demonstrates, National could never reconcile these contradictory perspectives. Brash himself was originally a liberal on moral issues. He voted for prostitution law reform, supported the *Civil Union Bill* and publicly defended Peter Ellis, a bisexual crèche

worker wrongly convicted of child molestation. But Brash's honesty on these matters was deemed to be a liability. Long before the campaign he was persuaded to become a moral conservative.

This book is not just an attack on the Brash-led National Party. As Raymond Miller remarked in his early *Sunday Star-Times* review, Hager's analysis 'could just as easily have been applied to other modern parties both here and overseas'. In this regard, *The Hollow Men* is a work of contemporary history which furthers critical understanding of the New Zealand political process.

It is now evident, for example, why major corporates opposed the introduction of MMP. Back in 1987, under Westminster rules, they knew that Labour's reelection would guarantee access to cabinet. In 2005, New Right strategists faced a more complex task. They had to win the popular vote, submerge the Greens, tie in the centre parties and deal with a newly formed Maori Party openly hostile to National. Hager's analysis also reminds us that suspect party funding practices require bipartisan scrutiny from MPs, journalists and public officials. As recent elections illustrate, large donor anonymity circumvents funding limits and renders political parties vulnerable to elite capture.

Unfortunately, routine current affairs journalism avoids such critical inspection of the political process. With notable exceptions, commercial broadcasting outlets in New Zealand stick to poll results, political announcements, personality clashes and scandal stories. Daily and weekly newspapers often favour columns from political insiders rather than independent journalists.

By contrast, *The Hollow Men* exemplifies the rigors of investigative journalism. On the JTO's *Noted* website, Jim Tucker (2006) notes in a brief review that Hager has 'cross-referenced the emails with media coverage of the time' and 'researched the background of the people mentioned'. In the latter context, Australian readers will appreciate the profiles of Lynton Crosby and Mark Textor.

In a chapter entitled, 'The Manipulators: Leveraging doubt and fear', their contributions to successful Federal Liberal campaigns in 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004 are documented (various other campaigns in Australia and the United Kingdom are also mentioned). In so doing, Hager shows how the Crosby/Textor style of polling focus group interviewing and message construction fitted with National's campaign objectives.

This kind of journalism is rarely attempted within New Zealand's

mainstream media organisations. Consequently, the public sphere is routinely shaped by market researchers, public relations practitioners and micro-managing spin doctors. The reception accorded to Hager's book illustrates this process. After initial controversy, Brash's departure allowed John Key, Bill English and their advisers to rejuvenate the National brand in a news world without political memory.

References

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Tenacious, sad account of NZ complicity on East Timor

Negligent Neighbour: New Zealand's Complicity in the Invasion and Occupation of Timor-Leste, by Maire Leadbeater. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2006, 280 pp. ISBN: 13: 9781877333590.

THIS is an essential book for any one interested in the way that New Zealand formulates and carries out its foreign policy. It is also a stark reminder that New Zealand, a founding member of the United Nations, a vocal supporter of decolonisation and a country much-praised for its peacekeeping efforts all over the world has not always been willing to take a moral stance when balancing trade, security and human rights.

Maire Leadbeater has produced the most detailed account so far of New Zealand's involvement in the