



Dirty Politics: How Attack Politics is Poisoning New Zealand's Political Environment

Nicky Hager

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Early in 2014 Nicky Hager was leaked a large number of email and online conversations from Cameron Slater's Whale Oil blog. Many of these were between Slater and his personal allies on the hard right, revealing an ugly and destructive style of politics. But there were also many communications with the prime minister's office and other Cabinet ministers in the National Government. They show us a side of Prime Minister John Key and his government of which most New Zealanders are completely unaware.

Key has constructed an easy-going and relaxed public image, declaring to the public that 'there's no room for negative campaigning in New Zealand'. The reality is very different. His government has worked hand in hand with Slater and his collaborators in a sustained campaign of personal attacks against their political enemies, a deliberate but hidden strategy to avoid being held responsible for negative campaigning.

Dirty Politics continues the story that began in Hager's best-selling book *The Hollow Men*, investigating the way that underhand and deceptive politics poisons the political environment for everyone. If you care about integrity and ethics in politics, then this book will be disturbing but essential reading.

Dirty Politics: How Attack Politics is Poisoning New Zealand's Political Environment Details

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Dylan Horrocks says

Was clearly written quickly and occasionally feels a bit rushed, but all that is quite understandable. Full of fascinating detail and taken as a whole pulls back the curtain to reveal some of the seedier back alleys of NZ politics. More than anything, I hope plenty of National Party supporters read it - especially those people I know personally, who would be appalled by what is going on. Even the tone of the emails and discussions revealed would be enough to outrage many, not to mention the realisation that some of our own local MPs got into parliament partly through the underhanded efforts of people like Simon Lusk and Cameron Slater. The chapter that shifted my reaction from curiosity to deep fury was the section on corporate lobbyists' involvement with and funding of the right wing attack blogs - which amounts to significant amounts of money, ghost writing of posts and even extensive commenting under assumed names. Realising how much time, money and effort is going into covert manipulation of online discussion by corporate interests and very nasty right wing professional political "consultants" left me utterly appalled. The specific revelations of deception and unethical behaviour by members of the current government are, of course, damning and well documented, and important. But the book is well worth reading aside from all that, as an insight into some of the toxic elements at work in our political landscape. The same people, ideologies and tactics appear again and again in NZ politics over the last 10-20 years, and if we don't want them to weaken our democracy and turn NZ into a copy of America's corrupt and broken system, we need to recognise and understand what they are and how they work. This book is essential reading.

Pete Olds says

People are increasingly talking the disadvantages of capitalism, and Dirty Politics highlights it with the immoral antics of a number of individuals related to the National Party (and sadly, to what were once some stalwarts of past National Governments).

It's a depressing reading...but acts as a reminder to all New Zealanders that there are three stories in everything around us:

- the true story
- what we are told
- what we believe

It does explain some of the weirdness of the political blogs and brings to the surface some of the skull-duggery that goes on, not only within the world of politics, but also affecting some innocent every day New Zealanders who just happen to have the wrong jobs, or say the wrong thing in public.

And it brings to the surface the issues with the stretched commercial media who increasingly take PR releases as "news".

I should say that this book, and Mr Hagers earlier efforts, are timed to discrediting the National Party, typically immediately prior to an election. I assume that other parties indulge in similar "Inspector Clouseau-like" antics.

The material is highly recommended. The reason it is rated 4 rather than 5 is some questions around the source of the authors material, and the use of a book to publish this material, rather than mainstream media itself - and so to some extent the book never really gets that focus on the material that it should.

But - whatever or whoever you are, if you vote in the New Zealand elections, you need to read this stuff, think about it, and think about the other material you aren't being told.

Essential reading for every New Zealander - and recommended for others

David says

Other reviews berate this book for sounding hastily written, but I picked up nothing of the sort, only thorough and meticulous writing and an approach that was remarkably free of partisanship given its subject matter. The facts of how New Zealand's politics have been manipulated underhandedly by its leading lights to personally denigrate their opponents were delivered convincingly and with flair. New Zealand is fortunate to have an investigator as fearless and able as Hagar (even if the results of the recent election show that not enough New Zealanders got his message).

Bashnev says

Dirty Politics is about underhand tactics, to say the least, used by non-party (but highly partisan) operatives in New Zealand during the early 2010s. As such the book is mainly of interest to New Zealanders with diminishing enlightenment for political tragiocs of the anglosphere the further away from Wellington you are.

The author, Nicky Hagar, is a respected investigative journalist who has written a number books critical of government actions which he sees as undermining democracy beginning with *Secret Power* (which is now freely available from the author's website) and most recently *Dirty Politics*. Hagar takes the view that a functioning democracy should be open and transparent while being facilitated by a fourth estate which aims to inform the public and hold the government of the day to account and ultimately politicians battle it out with ideas.

All three of Hagar's democratic ideals are shown to be betrayed in the book. Initiated by the arrival of a USB containing email communications between a notorious NZ political blogger and a number of other political figures including a government minister, Hagar uncovers the smear campaigns run against political opponents of a variety of political persuasions often directly funded by the ruling party and assisted with timely tip offs from ministerial offices, fast tracked freedom of information requests and other misuses of government instruments. While personal attacks seem to be par for the course the hits are carried out at arms length so the ruling party need not own their own bile. All this is further enabled by a supine and lazy media which Hagar holds to the fire and even sets out a few dot points on how they could improve.

Ultimately I found the book valuable, interesting, rage inducing and the media naivety little bit embarrassing.

Owen says

A very interesting and depressing read. I agree with some other reviews that it feels rushed in parts. Nevertheless, a really insightful account of the manipulation of media for political gain and just how unscrupulous and murky the blogosphere can be.

Hayden says

A deeply unsettling and dispiriting expose of the pathological unscrupulousness indulged by New Zealand's right-wing government, in collaboration with the right-wing blogosphere. The leading party's recurrent breaches of protocol and common decency, by its main figures, are rendered all the more tragic by the impunity which its recent re-election signalled.

Alas, it would seem the "smiling assassin's" (the PM) phony appearance of civility and congeniality has triumphed over this journalistic effort to throw light into a previously unlit corner of grubbiness. But the liability ought to fall, at the end of the day, upon a media who, craven and obeisant at worst, incurious at best, refused to present as compelling this evidence-based case to a public unlikely to ever discover this long-obscured skulduggery through other means.

Adam Goodall says

You can feel the seven-month time window on everything. It doesn't read especially smooth and every so often Hager will draw a conclusion that isn't as rigorous as it could be (those conclusions tend to be "Farrar did x" because Farrar's communications weren't part of the hack). It's a compelling and stomach-churning read, though - a Confederacy of Sociopaths with Slater at the centre, preening and boasting like the cock of the walk. Hager doesn't need to do much, really, and his unintrusive style connects the big, screaming dots left by Slater and his pustulous mates while low-key saying 'maybe these blokes shouldn't hold as much power as they do'. It IS important work - an expose of a weak fourth estate and an ugly way of doing politics by way of the best/worst symbol of both - and while some of its parts may lack the punch others do (again, the Farrar chapter, which only hits its stride when it questions the media's accommodation of him under his cloak of 'independence'), we definitely needed to hear the sum of it.

(By we I mean the country, not the beltway tragics who've been trying to shout it out of existence with their cries of 'but we knew all this already!')

Laila Kanon says

*Rebel Readers Discussion

It was Jami-Lee Ross' controversy that got me interested to read Dirty Politics. A sample here:
<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/ar...>

Actually I do have reservation of Hager's motive for writing this book and after finally read it I do believe that it's in the public interest to get this material out in the open and for those who bother to read it to make

their own judgement. In this case, I share Hager's concern about the nature of attack politics and how its poisoning New Zealand political environment. It's hard to believe this kind of dirty politics are happening in New Zealand, so we actually no better than those rouge countries? All the more pity and the true victim of all this is democracy.

Richard Stephens says

While the book is not going to win any awards for the lay out and how its written the material covered is explosive and shows how close the relationship between bloggers such as Whale Oil and others with the National Party is.

It also explains the background of attack politics and how it was successfully used in the States and how it came to NZ.

Rachel (Sfogs) says

I don't care what political party to support, if you are a New Zealander you need to read this book. Everyone knows that political tactics are not very trustworthy, but some are far more trustworthy than others. That goes for the political parties, and politicians themselves.
DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR ABOUT IN THE MEDIA! ESPECIALLY IF THEY INVOLVED BLOGGERS 'EMPLOYED' BY POLITICAL PARTIES OR BIG CORPORATIONS.
OPEN YOUR EYES PEOPLE.
THIS IS A DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY FOR GOODNESS SAKE!

P.S. If people are discrediting a book, there is a very good reason. Which means you should probably read it, and see what they don't want you to.

Very good book, an eye-opener. Not an easy read, though it's only 166 pages!

Andrene Low says

It reads like a James Bond novel in places. The scariest thing about this, is that events outlined in the emails of the main stars of the, actually took place. These back room shenanigans lead to people receiving death threats, others losing their jobs, marriage break-ups, etc. Anyone against the political party in power was a likely target.

People are saying the author is a crazy left wing conspiracy theorist but I'd have to disagree. His evaluation of the emails that are included in the book looks to be very sane, rational and not specifically leftist either. I should imagine if it had been the left responsible for the dirty politics, he'd have targeted them instead. Indeed he has targeted the left in previous books.

I'd recommend this book to anyone interested in seeing what their elected officials, and their dodgy mates, are really up to. I now read the headlines in the MSM in a very different way than I did prior to reading this brilliantly written and well researched book.

Philippa says

Nicky Hager is an excellent investigative journalist and this latest book is no exception. He does his homework, and as well as digging things up he also puts them in a wider context and offers analysis. He exposes things that some people would rather keep secret, but which he thinks are in the public interest. Certainly I think much of this stuff should be exposed as there are possible crimes, conflicts of interest and manipulation that should be investigated by the appropriate authorities. Of course some say that it's hypocritical because Hager based the book on hacked information, but he did not do the hacking and I think that once he was given it he had a duty to assess it and in this case reveal it, because if not, he would be standing aside while this bad behaviour continued.

Dirty Politics shocked me but didn't surprise me. I was sickened and saddened to read Cameron Slater's messages and posts; they are full of violent, abusive and denigrating language – full of hate. Does Slater have no love, compassion or respect for his fellow human beings? For himself?

I was dispirited to read the lengths some people will go to stomp on others to push their own agenda, or simply to earn money. The fact that a cabinet minister and a then parliamentary staff member are implicated in (and Judith Collins has admitted) passing on privileged information is disturbing but it is better to have this out in the open to hold those responsible to account, and to show others that this sort of behaviour is not tolerated in a fair and democratic society.

New Zealand has a reputation for being one of the least corrupt countries in the world. This book has us all talking about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour and that's a good thing.

Hager has been criticised for bringing the book out before the election, but why wait until afterwards?

Harvey Molloy says

Short, to the point, shocking. If you live in New Zealand or are interested in NZ Politics then you need to know the sordid details of how members of the Government used as a the Whale Oil blog as part of attack politics.

Carole says

Regardless of where you sit on the political spectrum, this is an important book that everyone should read because it highlights how massively important it is that people know how to think critically about what they are reading and hearing in the media. Nicky Hager makes the excellent point that blogs can fall outside mainstream media and are not regulated or constrained in the same way, making it even more important that the public question what they are reading on the likes of the Whale Oil blog. Scary stuff to think that public opinion can be so easily swayed and public figures forced to take action, because of the status given to hints, half-truths and innuendo.

Steph says

Poorly collated with a distinct lack of editing.

Could have been a great read but the above coupled with an appearance of a vendetta against some of the subjects overshadowed the content. As eye opening as it appears to have been to a lot of the NZ public, clearly the NZ public needs to be more cynical about what they read and believe, from mainstream media, the blogosphere and "investigative journalists" such as Hager.
