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Matthew Hooton and Dirty Politics: anatomy of the vast right-wing conspiracy

Matthew Hooton was there at the start of the conservative attack blogs, Now, in a revealing interview, he tells how it all spiralled out of control.

ADAM DUDDING
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The bloggers.

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ON AUGUST 13 2014, Nicky Hager lobbed his *Dirty Politics* grenade into New Zealand's political conversation. Once the smoke had cleared, and everyone had checked themselves (and the book's index) for shrapnel wounds and knives in the back, the nation's politicians, journalists and bloggers started to coalesce into two broad groups.

The bunch to the left were shocked and disgusted and angry. The bunch to the right said things like: "nothing to see here", or "everybody knew all this already" or "Hager's making it up".

And there was one person who you'd have expected to have joined that lot on the right, but who instead stood in the middle of the room, roaring. This was Matthew Hooton – the public relations man, the tribal National voter married to the daughter of the party's former president, the former spin-doctor to National Cabinet minister Lockwood Smith, the political commentator who gets wheeled in by radio shows and magazines and newspapers when they want a vigorous cheerleader for the economic hard-right (look – there's his latest column on this page!).

He's also the guy who spent a weekend curled into a foetal ball after Hager's 2006 book *The Hollow Men* revealed his cynical boastfulness during his stint as a freelance adviser to National's then-leader Don Brash.

Yet while so many on the political right have tried to brush off Hager's revelations about links between the Government and attack blogger Cameron Slater, Hooton has instead spoken in the book's defence.

He has described Key's dismissive response as "the most ill-judged performance of his six years as Prime Minister". He said Collins isn't fit for senior office. He said the Government "deserves to lose" the election.

Then in two remarkable radio appearances – on RadioLive last Sunday and National Radio on Monday - Hooton said that he had evidence of his own of something rotten in Key's office. In 2012, claimed Hooton, when his PR company was bidding for a contract with the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (Cera), the PM's office tried to block the contract. He said a private client had also been warned off him by the PM's office.

This tribal National voter had gone right off the reservation.

So is Hooton a turncoat? Has he had some sort of ego explosion in placing himself at the heart of the country's biggest story? Has he gone, perhaps, a bit mad?

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Not at all, says Hooton. Last week, in the small boardroom of his central Auckland offices, he explained his position.

Yes, he's a National voter, "but I won't speak against my core views in support of the party". Sure, he's economically to the right of the Government, but this isn't strategic warfare designed to push the party right. Yep, Hager is a left-wing activist who uses stolen emails, "but I'm unaware of anyone proving his documentary evidence is false".

Yes, he is airing a personal beef with the PM's office in public. But he says he's done so because they're pertinent. And he's angry.

He's angry that during a press conference on Monday, Key flatly rejected claims about Matthew's going through at the moment."

interference in Hooton's Cera contract, then slipped in this little insinuation: "I don't really want to go into what Matthew's going through at the moment."

Hooton believes Key was referring to the fact that two weeks ago Hooton quit drinking. He calls himself an alcoholic, and big boozy lunches have long been part of his life, but as he's got older (he's 42), he's found it was "causing me to behave in ways which were harmful to my business reputation and my family". Apart from anything else, modern IT has made it just too easy to fire off rash emails and texts while under the influence.

A few days after the Hager book came out, he went to his GP, signed up with Community Alcohol and Drugs Services (CADS) and found a psychologist who specialises in these things. He's had a couple of stints off booze in the past, but this is the first time he's quit for good. So far, he's loving it.

If Key was trying to marginalise him by suggesting he was "going through" something, his timing is bad, says Hooton. Sober, he's calmer, less combative. He puts it this way:

"One of the mistakes that I think John Key made politically, when he accused me of being a liar and made reference to personal problems about me, is that normally I respond with sledgehammer to an attack.

"In fact, one of my staff sent me a text saying, 'Just because the prime minister is being a c*** is no reason for you to call him a c***'. So I texted the staff member back and said 'in this particular case you don't need to worry.'"

The sober, calm Matthew Hooton instead wrote a "carefully worded press statement" in which he said he stood by his statements, was "disappointed" the PM had disparaged him, but still supported the National Party. He then sought advice from lawyers and friends before releasing it. "And that's the end of the matter as far as I'm concerned."

Of course, given what he's just called the prime minister while talking on the record to a journalist, it's not really the end of the matter, but we'll let that pass for now.

A CYNIC might say there's another reason Hooton has been so noisy of late. It might help distract from the fact that Hooton himself is one of the book's targets.

Hooton says the one thing he was ashamed about "when you read it in the cold light of day" was the bit where the blogger Cactus Kate (real name Cathy Odgers) asks for Hager's home address, so she can pass it on to wealthy Chinese clients angered by a study Hager co-authored about tax havens: "Chop chop for Nicky," wrote Odgers. Hooton gave her Hager's street name (but not number).

"I don't really expect anyone to believe this," says Hooton, "but if I had the slightest belief Cathy Odgers was going to get some Hong Kong ninjas over to kill Nicky Hager, I would like to think I would at least have called the police. But I didn't think that."

Even if Hooton is only a minor target in *Dirty Politics*, though, his associations with the main players still go way back. He first met tobacco lobbyist Carrick Graham when they were both 8 years old and attending Kings Prep School. They've since worked together and as rivals, in PR.

He got to know Kiwiblog's David Farrar in the 1990s when they were both spin-doctors for National ministers.

In the mid-2000s, though, the opportunities for politically like-minded people to find each other exploded, with the growing popularity of blogs – online outlets where anyone could rant about whatever they liked.

There were blogs about food and film and pets and sexuality, but for political bloggers, the internet became a quasi-journalistic wild west, where defamation laws could be pushed to the limit, where political insiders could release facts or opinion without being hamstrung by traditional media rules about balance, accuracy and context. There were bloggers on the far left, the far right, and everywhere in-between, and for many blogs the only people reading them were other bloggers.

But in 2008, the last year of Helen Clark's Labour government, a handful of the more popular bloggers on the right found common cause in wanting to see Winston Peters out of the election race. They were also all keen to see Clark's electoral finance bill defeated, and, of course, for National to come to power.

They called themselves the Vast Right-Wing Conspiracy (VRWC), in a mocking nod to Hillary Clinton's use of the phrase during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Occasionally they'd meet in the real world for a drink or a meal, but mainly they talked in emails, on Facebook, in each other's comment section. It was a loose coalition with numerous lesser blogs on the periphery, but the core was well defined, says Hooton.

There was Farrar and Slater, whose Kiwiblog and Whale Oil blogs had the biggest readership. (Slater, son of a former National Party president, was politically well-connected, but he was initially best known for his tendency to break court suppression orders, and his viciously abusive, near-psychotic prose style).

Hooton, meanwhile, was blogging on the now-defunct site NZ Pundit. There was also Odgers, who he describes as a "fantastically crazy Hong Kong lawyer who loves champagne . . . and lives a life of hedonism" who wrote acerbically as "Cactus Kate". Tina Nixon, a Wellington public servant, was "Busted Blonde", and Charles Finny, then head of the Wellington Chamber of Commerce wrote as "Queen Bee" on a blog he called "The Hive".

They sometimes acted in concert, but Hooton sees nothing wrong with that. "We tag-teamed, like political activists do – "I've heard this; I'm going to write that; you guys might want to follow it up".

"It was normal political activism, with the usual extremely foul language, and ironic and sometimes deeply inappropriate comment, in the way people talk when they're in private with friends, or at the pub."

A blogger who was on the periphery of the VRWC says some mainstream journalists happily exploited the unregulated new medium. They would feed information to a blogger because once it had been blogged they could then say it was in the "public domain" and report it themselves.

After the 2008 election, the VRWC slowly disestablished. Winston was out of office. So was Clark. The Electoral Finance Act was repealed. For political ranters, being in power wasn't as much fun as being in opposition.

The Hive shut down. Busted Blonde's posts became more sporadic and less political (and in 2010 Nixon had a falling out with Slater which saw him write numerous bullying posts about her).

On the right, Slater and Farrar's blogs remained dominant, but as Hager's book has revealed so explosively, Slater's behaviour in particular took a dark turn, with allegations of inappropriate links between him and Judith Collins, between him and the PM's office, and of payments apparently made by Carrick Graham to Odgers and Slater to launch attacks through their blogs.

Former Queen Bee Charles Finny says much of Hager's book "was no surprise – everyone knew Whale Oil was mates with Judith Collins", but he was taken aback by the claims around the SIS briefing "and the commercial work Slater was apparently doing for Carrick Graham." In the days of the VRWC, the idea that money would change hands for attacks "didn't enter my head".

Hooton had his suspicions payments were made, "but these were private sector blogs . . . people can do what they like."

Hager's book has undoubtedly disrupted the world of political blogs. The public and the mainstream media seem likely to treat their output with a great deal more caution in future.

It's possible, says Hooton, "that the people of New Zealand may decide they wish to regulate these blogs in some way as papers, or television or radio."

But then again, perhaps not. On Friday, David Farrar told the Sunday Star-Times he knew for a fact "that there were still communications this week between Press Gallery journalists and Whale Oil" about potential political stories.

Whatever the future of the blogs, and whatever mistakes they may have made, Hooton says you don't abandon friends. He's been in touch with his old blogging cronies more since the book's launch than ever.

He think Odgers, in particular, can do with a bit of support, given her relative isolation up there in Hong Kong. "One of the joys in my life is that I have a wide range of friends, some of whom are frankly certifiable. I'm not going to distance myself from these people on a social level."

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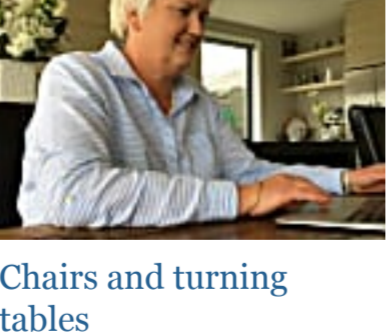
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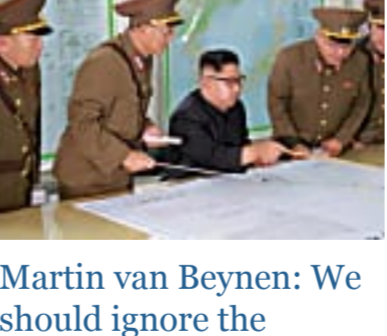
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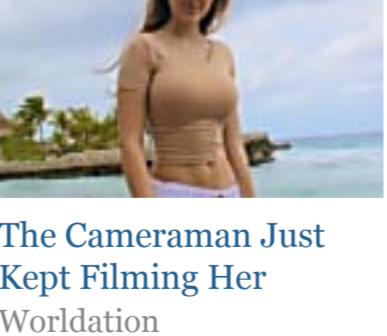
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