

# Sunlight did what sunlight does: Nicky Hager on Dirty Politics, three years on

## Politics

**Dirty Politics** landed like a bombshell in the NZ election campaign of 2014. It may not have affected that outcome, but that was never the ambition. It has, however, made a big impact on our politics, argues Nicky Hager

Three long years ago, during the last election campaign, the book *Dirty Politics* revealed a political dirty tricks campaign being run out of John Key's Beehive office. It was an ugly operation, jarringly contradicting the friendly, BBQ-guy image cultivated by Key. If you don't know the details, it is still well worth reading the whole grubby story.

Quite a lot of people wondered at the time whether the book might change the outcome of the election. It didn't and some concluded that the book had had no effect. But my aims were different. The book has had an effect far beyond what I could reasonably have hoped for.

Here is my assessment of what has changed as a result and what hasn't.

### Exposing and considerably closing down the dirty tricks campaign

Before the book, the dirty politics brigade was having a huge influence over New Zealand politics. Personal attacks were cooked up in the prime minister's office and elsewhere, drafted into nasty, drip-fed blog posts and sent out into the world through two National Party-aligned blogs: Whale Oil and Kiwiblog. An embarrassing number of journalists reprinted these attacks and came to use the bloggers, Cameron Slater and David Farrar, as regular sources for tip offs and news. The journalists were aware that the bloggers had close links to John Key and his government, and this further enhanced their status and influence.

The attack machine had success after success. In the 2011 election, a series of manufactured scandals left Labour and its leader Phil Goff looking incompetent and untrustworthy. In 2013 Auckland mayor Len Brown's political career was demolished by the release of extremely personal details of a foolish romantic affair. The 2014 election was then dominated by a series of smears and apparent scandals targeting each of National's political opponents. All of this would turn out to be traceable back to the bloggers and National Party figures. In New Zealand's small political system, the covert dirty tricks were overwhelming normal politics.

The most important effect of the book is that this dirty tricks campaign was exposed and largely stopped. The dirty tricks coordinator in John Key's office, Jason Ede, was hastily removed from his job and has never been seen again. There is hardly a single journalist left who would take stories off the dirty politics bloggers. Cameron Slater and the Whale Oil blog still exist, but they have shrunk back to the margins of politics. Sunlight did what sunlight does. Just three years later, the 2017 election seems relatively free of orchestrated attacks and undeclared machinations. (The politicians are still quite capable of creating their own problems and random events, but that is what makes politics endlessly interesting.)

### Revealing the attack machine to its other countless victims

Numerous people have been attacked over the years by the Whale Oil or Kiwiblog sites: politicians, journalists, academics, a public servant handing out political leaflets in his lunch hour, almost anyone doing something effective on the left side of politics. Some attacks were to help the National Party; some were commercial operations attacking private people on behalf of undeclared paying clients. The important thing that has changed is that now these people know what was going on. It is a shocking experience to find yourself virulently attacked online, with some scurrilous criticism appearing at the top of the search results when someone looks up your name. Now, at least, these people know that it is the dirty politics brigade, that there are many people in the same position and that the attacks say much more about the attackers than they do about themselves.

By understanding the game, people have been able to fight back. On page 95 of the book *Dirty Politics*, for instance, there is mention of an attack job done for money by Cameron Slater and his PR industry collaborator Carrick Graham against a school principal who was in a matrimonial dispute. Amid the riches of filth, the story only got two paragraphs. But it didn't end there. The person who paid Slater and Graham for the attacks was a lawyer and she has since been taken to a legal tribunal for improper behaviour. Just this month the tribunal decision was published, revealing the whole operation. It makes [interesting reading](#).



Nicky Hager at the Dirty Politics book launch, Unity Books, Wellington

### Revealing corporate smears for cash operations

The book revealed that one of Slater and Graham's most lucrative freelance attack campaigns targeted public health professionals – on behalf, apparently, of unlovely corporate clients such as the tobacco industry. The public health professionals were trying to save people's lives from tobacco, alcohol and obesity harms. The attacks seem to have been an effort to protect profits from these meddlers. Even after these activities were exposed in the book, Graham and Slater appeared to continue the attacks. Eventually some of the health professionals took action. In June last year they launched defamation action against Slater and Graham. The years of acting with impunity have hopefully come to an end.

### Diminishing the influence of the dirty tricks operatives

On this point, the results are more mixed. Slater and the Whale Oil blog, the heart of the dirty politics system, are certainly diminished. It now seems hard to believe that not long ago they were so influential. But some others have continued to be a problem. Slater's political attack collaborator, Simon Lusk, was seen in last year's local government elections when he assisted with attack tactics for some mayoral candidates. His campaigns faced a backlash in some towns when people realised that a dirty politics practitioner was involved in the election campaign.

Slater's fellow attack blogger, David Farrar, is still used as a commentator by some news media, including being introduced just as a "blogger". He is still also chief pollster for the National Party, helping study public opinion and guide political management week by week. It is hard to imagine a more partisan commentator and at the very least his job should be declared to listeners.

The final prominent dirty politics figure was Lusk and Slater's apprentice, Jordan Williams. He is seen in the book *Dirty Politics* as their enthusiastic helper, ready to help dig dirt on the latest target. For a while he appeared to have come out of the controversy mostly unscathed. He (assisted by Farrar) has attracted large amounts of news media publicity for the Taxpayer's Union, which seems to me to largely serve as a vehicle for rightwing attack politics. (I think media organisations are being foolish giving prominence to this group, with its undeclared funding sources, as if it were a democratic community group.)

Williams even won a defamation case against former Conservative Party leader Colin Craig, after Craig accused Williams of being involved in dirty politics against him. Record defamation damages were awarded to Williams. But then in April this year the presiding judge, Justice Katz, took the unusual step of setting aside the verdict, saying it would be a miscarriage of justice. She said Craig's actions "must be viewed in the broader context that his own character and reputation were under sustained attack from Mr Williams". The judge's carefully argued judgement is a pleasure to read (there are extracts [here](#)). Jordan Williams may have initially won the court case, but his character is becoming more widely known.



Colin Craig's pamphlet prompted Jordan Williams' lawsuit.

### Showing a side of John Key that did not fit his public image

Ever since Key became a National Party politician, I have watched with amazement that he could project an artificial persona with such ease. His early press releases and speeches repeatedly referred to his "state house" upbringing, as he manufactured a rags-to-riches reputation. He set aside his ruthless corporate past and cultivated a guy-next-door friendly goof image – when really he was as ruthless and self-serving as ever. I couldn't understand why many commentators did not seem to notice.

And so, for me, an important part of the *Dirty Politics* revelations was that they showed the public another side of Key, one that was usually only seen in private. There he was buddies with Cameron Slater, symbol of the ugly and extreme corner of New Zealand politics. Key was the chief beneficiary of years of unscrupulous political attacks, riding high in the polls as his opponents were tripped up and smeared. The heart of the dirty tricks campaign was his ninth floor Beehive offices, where his staff plotted their attack politics and collaborated with Slater. This is a defining feature of Key as a politician.

Nonetheless, three years ago, when the book *Dirty Politics* came out, Key determinedly dodged or denied everything. Week after week he refused to answer questions put to him by journalists. Surprisingly, this approach in part worked. This is one of the things that wasn't changed by the book: Key has continued to be defined more by his success in the polls than by what he achieved and the tactics he was willing to use to help stay ahead in the polls. It is going to take a while before this period of our history is properly understood. This should come with time.

But overall, as the list above shows, plenty has changed already. The trouble with using dirty tactics is the risk of being found out and the tactics blowing up in your face. Bit by bit, the triumphant manipulators of the 2011 and 2014 elections have been getting their comeuppance; and other people have hopefully been deciding that there are better ways to do politics than following them down that dismal road.

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