

In September 2005, National Party leader Don Brash came within a hair's breadth of becoming New Zealand's prime minister and the National Party of controlling the government. News reports and commentators said National had run a good campaign, achieving the outstanding result of nearly doubling the party's electoral support. Some said Don Brash might have gone a bit far with policies that appeared anti-Maori, but overall his campaign had been remarkably successful.

Behind the scenes, however, some people in the National Party were profoundly unhappy with how some of this 'success' had been achieved. They believed that some of this 'good' campaigning had been so unprincipled and even unlawful that the country was lucky they had lost the election.

It is not uncommon for there to be conflicting views and even fierce differences within a political party, but in this case these people were willing to back up their allegations with proof. Over two years they fronted up with evidence – internal reports, emails, travel itineraries and meeting minutes – documenting the inside story of Don Brash's rise to leadership and many details of how National went about trying to gain power.

Collected together, these inside papers give an unprecedented look at the workings of a political party, the tactics it used to try to win power and the identities and influence of the financial backers whose money nearly won the election. It is apparent why the people were prepared to leak internal party business. The story that emerges is an extraordinary case study of unprincipled and anti-democratic politics: repeated cases of deceiving the public, hidden agendas, dodgy election finance issues and, underlying it all, a deeply cynical approach to winning the votes of those whom Brash described as the [omitted owing to injunction].

It is not that the activities and themes described in this book have never happened before: such cynicism is found to varying degrees in most eras and parties. But this study of the National Party covers a period of extremely cynical political behaviour. And what is unique is the opportunity it offers to observe politics up close and in the politicians' own words. *The Hollow Men* covers the term of one National Party leader, from his rise to power until what appears (at the time of writing) to be his approaching demise. But though the story is about the politicians and political staff at a particular point in New Zealand history – from 2003 to 2006 – the themes and insights into techniques and strategies are relevant to all modern politics, in New Zealand and beyond.

Some important issues arise concerning the use of leaked materials. The first is checking the motives of those who provide it. After spending many hours with these people, in series of meetings, I am confident that their primary motivation for releasing the information to me was a wish for more principled and democratic behaviour in the National Party. The sources were approached separately and were acting independently. They considered providing documentary evidence only when we had built up trust and talked through the reasons for writing the book.

Second, there is the question of the legitimacy of using leaked material. Among the documents I received was incidental personal information. Some of this would perhaps have been picked out first by some news organisations, but I believe that the people concerned have an overriding right to privacy in these matters and it has not been included. I believe that leaking information to the public can be justified only when there is a strong public interest. Readers will be amazed at the level of detail and some will wonder whether such secret party business should be made public. The intrusion is permissible because of the scale of dishonesty and unprincipled behaviour it reveals. There is no other way that the public and electoral authorities could ever get to learn

about these things.

Moreover, the activities brought to light involve public figures, all of whom enjoy high salaries paid by the public and who wanted the ultimate privilege of being entrusted with control of the entire government. Many of these people will run for office again. In government, they would control the nation's public assets and services, have wide powers to make laws and send people to war and generally shape the country we live in. Informing the public about their beliefs, attitudes and actions is not only desirable but necessary.

The origin of this book can be pinpointed exactly to Tuesday, 27 January 2004. When the news was broadcast of Don Brash's controversial but poll-lifting 'Nationhood' speech at the Orewa Rotary Club, I was curious about the political calculations that seemed to lie behind its claims about 'race-based privilege'. My first impressions of Brash as National Party leader had been of a principled right-wing politician. But here he was, a millionaire belonging to the social group that enjoys most privilege, in his first major speech as leader, subtly attacking many of the poorest people in New Zealand. What was going on? My interest grew. I wanted to understand National – what they believed in, who had influence on the party and their methods of trying to gain power. But at the beginning I simply decided that, if I could somehow find the necessary sources, I would make it a priority to research Don Brash and the National Party.

It was some months before I heard about and met the first potential National Party sources. Since then, by separate routes, I have had extensive contact with others. Over time they provided the many documents quoted in this book.

I gave some of this information to other journalists before the 2005 election. The sources agreed that, since this present book was then far from completion, I could pass their information on so that the public might know more about Don Brash before they voted. The documents included emails and faxes showing that Brash, who was being presented to the electorate as a mild centrist politician, had been helped into the party leadership by a surprising network of people from the ACT Party and the New Zealand Business Roundtable – that is, the far right of New Zealand politics. These 'leaked National Party emails' were in the news in late August and early September 2005.

Following those news stories, there were some separate leaks of National Party material, to media organisations and to an MP, in which I was not involved. To avoid unnecessary speculation, I should say that none of my sources provided information to achieve any kind of personal political advantage.

The leaked papers came from the highest levels of the National Party hierarchy, centred on the leader Don Brash. He was an almost obsessive email writer, often spending hours each day writing and replying to correspondence. Many of these emails were leaked, as were numerous other types of documents produced by his staff. And the closer those staff were to Brash, the more documentation there was about them and their communications.

The underlying theme of the book is the conduct of politicians and others in politics – how their strategies, expediencies and the games they play to advance themselves can harm the whole political system. Short-term political necessities get in the way of the long-term good of the country. The chapters that follow show how easy it is to spin and manipulate and how our defences as a society (news media, electoral laws and so on) are inadequate to protect the public. This in turn creates the situation where many people 'don't like politics' and leave it to the politicians – and if anything is clear from this story it is that politics should not be left to the politicians. The story is, in essence, about

democracy – that ideal everyone in politics applauds and few respect.

This book is about the New Zealand National Party, but if you could look inside Labour and other parties, many of the same themes would apply. It also raises fundamental questions about private influence and power in New Zealand. Revealed in these pages are the identities and motives of the main National Party donors – none of whom are ever declared publicly. Their money is one of the means by which these radical right reformers of the 1980s and 1990s – the key figures behind the privatisation, deregulation and cuts of social services – retain influence within the National Party and, through it, over New Zealand politics.

Those 'reforms' allowed foreign companies to buy up most major New Zealand businesses, lowered income and job security for many people by reducing employment protections, left the public health system in crisis, introduced youth pay rates and university fees and, in these and many other ways, scuttled hopes for an egalitarian society. The rift between richer and poorer New Zealanders has been widening ever since.

The book's title comes from the T.S. Eliot poem of that name. It was published in 1925, not long after the First World War, when he was feeling disillusioned with contemporary society and politicians. Early in the 21st century many in New Zealand and elsewhere feel the same.

Philosophy and ideology have helped to create a type of politics that disappoints and repels many ordinary people. But this book is not about the inevitability of expedient and unprincipled politics. Understanding what is wrong means things do not have to remain that way.

While reading the following chapters, be aware of how rare it is to see the way politicians behave when they confidently believe that they are acting in secret. The public is usually fed an unnutritious diet of scripted media statements, clever advertisements and practised denials. This is a chance, thanks to the National Party sources, to see and judge for yourself some of what really goes on.

Nicky Hager

#### Acknowledgments

This book has been a group effort, contributed to by an outstanding variety of people. First there were those in and near the National Party. Six people in particular provided most of the information and trusted me with telling the story. I hope the book lives up to what I told them I was trying to achieve.

Many others made it a much better book than it would otherwise have been, including those who commented on the drafts and who responded generously to my requests for information. In particular I am blessed with an exceptional publishing team: Steven Price for legal advice, Anna Rogers as editor, Anna Rogers as editor, Peter Dorn and the staff at Astra Print, and Craig Potton, Tina Delceg, Gwen Redshaw, Arnott Potter and Phillipa Duffy at Craig Potton Publishing. I am especially grateful to Robbie Burton, Managing Director and Publisher at Craig Potton Publishing, for his support over many years.

Thanks, finally, to the friends who helped to support me financially and in other ways during two years' work on the book, to my three remarkable sisters – Debbie Hager, Mandy Hager and Belinda Hager – and to Julia Wells for her daily encouragement and good humour.