

## **John Key and the Political Logic of Desire**

Olivier Jutel on the agent of neoliberal dreams

John Key, the Prime Minister of New Zealand and former Merrill Lynch forex trader, is a remarkable politician. His importance extends beyond the antipodes as chairman of the International Democratic Union, an association of leading conservative parties. Key presents a viable model for a Third Way conservatism, an identity politics reboot of “compassionate conservatism”, that does not betray his class interests. At a recent meeting with business leaders detailed by the *New Zealand Herald* Key expounded his vision to transform the country into the “Switzerland of the Asia-Pacific”. Where Europe is beset by terrorism and refugees, America the spectre of populism left and right, and China ecological catastrophe; New Zealand is blissfully unafflicted. Key offers New Zealand as the last new world with echoes of Emma Lazarus; “Give me your tired plutocrats, your foreign capital yearning to breathe free and *I will give you flexible labor markets, trust-fund anonymity, few investment restrictions and 0% Capital Gains Tax*”.

The details of this private meeting might appear politically awkward for Key in light of the Panama Papers leaks which followed two weeks later. While he has had to commiserate with David Cameron, Key will most likely escape political damage despite being a member of this global financial elite. Key’s remarkable run in office and historic popularity are not in spite of his class but because of it. He is credited for guiding New Zealand through the GFC as an insider and neoliberal technocrat. However it is not a bloodless efficiency that has made New Zealand politically stable but Key’s function as an agent of desire, or as he puts it “aspiration”. Key has served as a model of the good life while transcending stagnant historical-political battle lines and offering a new nationalism of corporate spectacle and self-confidence. There have been no shortage of opportunities to puncture this image with breathtaking scandals revealing the “true nature” of Key’s post-politics. In the face of hypocrisy, cynical manipulation and character failings, the public have defied rational civic expectations either in their disinterest or in rallying around Key. His popularity should force the Left to question rational humanist conceptions of the public as the role of enjoyment and desire become central to sustaining Key’s base.

## **Teflon John**

Consider the travails of Nicky Hager, New Zealand's Sy Hersh, who has gained unprecedented insider access to the material inner-workings of the National party. His two great works on National, *Dirty Politics* and *The Hollow Men*, do not simply detail the mechanics, but the cynicism and obscenity which fuels the machine. The presidential John Key has secured the three successive terms through fastidious polling and a centrist cosmopolitan tack aimed at broadening the right's electoral appeal. Behind this 'feel-good' factor was a smear machine imbricating the PM's office and reprehensible far-right media actors. The PM and the most toxic agents in our discourse (Cameron Slater and others) had made fools of us all, using state secrets to destroy political opponents. The story of *Dirty Politics* was a journalistic slam-dunk, widely covered in mainstream media as a matter of principle. Hager had managed to produce another stellar work of civically minded journalism with his endearing trademark, if tragic, optimism.

Academics and the left assumed that while middle New Zealand might be averse to ideological battles they would recoil at this gap between image and substance. The opposite was true as the electorate vaulted Key back into office with only Dunedin North and Wellington Central resisting the blue tide of National. The public's response to scrutinizing Key was something along the lines of; 'Leave Brittany alone!'. In the aftermath of the 2014 election Hager would find his work imperiled by a punitive government and police force looking to prevent anything like this from happening again.

Left accounts of Key's historic levels of popularity invariably include a Chomskyan theory of a pliant corporate media. From the ouster of the great populist John Campbell at TV3 and the ubiquity of Tory lickspittle broadcasters such as Paul Henry and Mike Hosking, corporate media has come to resemble an endless advertorial for the Key government. There is no doubt that this government has mastered the art of poll driven politics and making an end run around the news media through celebrity spectacle, morning zoo radio and fishing shows. With the neoliberal debasement of civic virtue and a crisis of public broadcasting the hollow man reigns. As a symptom of post-movement politics, the left has been reduced to praying that political scandals will bring deliverance. There certainly has been no shortage of potential candidates. From *Dirty Politics*, to the cronyism for personal vanity that was the *Sky City* convention centre deal, the repeated bullying and sexual

harassment of a waitress, denying that “mass data collection” is mass surveillance, the prison privatization debacle and bribery in the comically grotesque Saudi sheep deal, to name but a few. In each instance the PM has emerged unscathed leaving the tenacious Radio NZ journalist Guyon Espiner bewildered and the left embittered.

There is a lot we have failed to understand about Key, ourselves and the nation in these last 8 years. Our social media ghetto allows us to believe that we have some privileged insights over the duped. We commit ourselves to either reversing the brainwashing or cursing the sheeple for their stupidity (See Martyn Bradbury’s ‘Sleepy Hobbits get the Government they Deserve’). The high point of this condescension was surely the Internet Party’s ‘Moment of Truth’ where a confused left looked towards a self-interested tech capitalist and cyber-libertarian supermen to deliver political manna from heaven, destroying the edifice of Key with a big reveal. While obviously no recipe for mass politics this analysis elides a crucial fact – the public have seen Key with the mask off and they are perfectly happy.

### **Neoliberal Super-Ego of Enjoyment**

Key is undoubtedly the product of marketing and a nouveau riche politics ascendant at this historical conjuncture. But the truth of Key is not in some hidden content but precisely in this meticulously crafted image as the relaxed anti-politician who has parlayed financial success into political office. He is a model of the good life holidaying in Hawaii and supporting his children’s eclectic passions, from art school to house music. He is bromantic with All Black hero Richie McCaw *and* Barack Obama, while also a mentor to our big brother nations heads of state, David Cameron and Malcolm Turnbull. He is all of these things and he shares them with us as the ultimate act of neoliberal public service and sacrifice as surely he could be making tens maybe hundreds of millions of dollars in the private sector. Key’s story of *from statehouse to head-of-state* is the New Zealand American Dream supplanting our social democratic quarter acre pavlova paradise. Key is a figure of dreams, telling us how to desire and giving us gratification through him and the promise of an aspirational New Zealand, where the ability to dream is the reward in itself.

Here the left must abandon a liberal rationalist notion of the electorate and consider John Key as a figure of libidinal investment. With Key the public are both inter-passive, ie they enjoy through his enjoyment, and experience him as what Jacques Lacan called the ‘big Other’. Through Key we have a proper order of desire

and enjoyment around affluence, our sense of place in the world, self-confidence, corporate spectacle and the end of politics. For Aucklanders riding a decades-long property bubble, a conspicuously consuming Cosmopolitan middle class and the so-called aspirational classes, 'making it' is synonymous with Key. He is akin to Slavoj's Žižek's notion of the permissive Master in late capitalism who issues the 'super-ego injunction to enjoy'. Conversely right-wing activism characterised Helen Clark and Labour as the nanny-state super-ego of endless prohibitions, Key emerges as the agent of 'yes you can!'. In this way he is the soul of neoliberal capitalism in New Zealand, allowing aspirants and a privileged few to enjoy guilt free while feeling progressive, cosmopolitan and #blessed.

Of course behind every post-politics lies antagonism. Key's technocratic competency belies an explosion of child poverty, a housing crisis and rising inequality. Those portions of the radical left and the Labour party machine that still resist Key's optimism are beneath contempt as 'rent-a-crowd thugs' or in league with 'rapists, child molesters and murderers'. These outbursts are not simply unvarnished moments revealing Key's true nature, they are the truth of his aspirational politics. In being libidinally invested in Key's politics of enjoyment one has to both enjoy through him and strive for this enjoyment in our own lives. The superego injunction also perfectly describes the atomized alienation of white-collar workers who aspire to upward social mobility. We must enjoy our work, engage in lifelong learning and enjoy a full life in order to mark ourselves as desirable and entrepreneurial. When not alienated our enjoyment is always thwarted by a Lacanian drive in which the object we desire cannot be attained or is not quite as it should be. Some agent has conspired to impede our progress; whether the 'backwards' and 'negative' elements of our society like the Left or the drug addicted beneficiary. They are the blockage in realizing our frictionless society, as such they are not a political opponent but an 'other' worthy of contempt.

This then is how we can reconcile a public that is unfazed by the PM conversing with right-wing media gargoyles like Cameron Slater and Rachel Glucina in a manner worthy of Nixon. The obscene outbursts against this other who stands in the way of our enjoyment, perhaps a Pike River activist and bereaved mother<sup>1</sup> or a sexually harassed waitress with a 'massive political agenda'<sup>2</sup>, is not an accident; it is what Lacan calls jouissance. Jouissance is the dark side of enjoyment when we are stuck in a fetishistic politics that disavows contradiction and clings to a social ideal

like Key's post-politics. This is the base political energy that can explain a phenomenon such as Donald Trump as an obscene agent that allows one to enjoy the denigration of women, minorities and China, while retaining a notion of American exceptionalism. Key is obviously a different creature, there is no pretension to American alpha maleness but an adolescent deviance that has made him one of John Oliver's favorite politicians. Perhaps Oliver's best moment was when he recounted the Prime Minister's opening to the waitress Amanda Bailey that she had 'a very tantalizing pony-tale'. Oliver's response; 'if you are a full grown adult male there is a very short list of things you can describe as tantalizing without creeping out everyone. There is steak...and that is absolutely it'. Key's obscene public outbursts from ponytale pulling, confessions of peeing in the showier, rape jokes and volunteering information about his vasectomy to parliamentary reporters, are not incongruous with his neoliberal technocratic competency but is what allows us to enjoy it.

### **Whither the Left**

The question for the left is how did John Key end history for a second time in New Zealand? Where right wing populists and social democratic insurgents have emerged in other OECD nations, Britain, Greece, France, Spain and the US, New Zealand's political situation is decidedly stable. One struggles to think of who could possibly serve as a Corbyn, Sanders or Varoufakis figure in the New Zealand context. It is certainly true that New Zealand has been spared some of the worst of the GFC by virtue of China and the fact that as 'one of them' Key assuages the skittish investor class that could so easily add our nation to the axis of PIGS. Where the radical-left protest chant/pun 'John Key is a Banker!' is meant as an indictment of class, Key has wielded his experience as a currency trader as an asset and mark of technocratic competency. It is in this fundamental depoliticization and zenith of neoliberalism, a banker as head of state, that Key is seemingly able to transcend the left and right making him such a potent agent of desire and new nationalism.

In understanding the origins of Key's post-politics and how he has confounded the left it is necessary to return to our Thatcher/Reagan/Keating (right Aussie neoliberal?) moment. The dramatic transformation of the country under the David Lange and Roger Douglas' Labour government was a heady mix of identity struggles and brutal neoliberal reforms. Filmmaker Alister Berry compared the

events to Pinochet's Chile sans bloodshed with identity struggles used as a Trojan Horse for neoliberalism. This class reductionism may be necessary in a historical analysis but it elides the fact that the 80s really were a time of antagonism and social transformation. The new social movements against apartheid, nuclear weapons, gender and sexual discrimination and the recognition of indigenous rights and culture by the state were clearly not pseudo struggles but New Zealand's equivalent to 1968. Social tumult followed with generational confrontation, victories for biculturalism, draconian welfare reform, deindustrialisation, labour struggles and the capitulation of the Council of Trade Unions.

For nearly 25 years this moment defined our politics. The Labour party of Helen Clark hoped to out-run a legacy of class-treachery through a new Third-Way social democracy softening the blows dealt by Douglas and National's Hayekian finance minister Ruth Richardson. The right, incarnated in Don Brash, pined for ANZUS, wished to revoke perceived Maori privilege and finish neoliberal shock therapy. In a manner exemplary of the Third Way, Labour's victories were that of inclusion into the marketplace through education, tax credits for working families and the ambition to 'close the gap', in contrast to traditional social democratic demands to end poverty or restore full employment. While in Clark's words the neo-liberal baby was not thrown out with the Douglas/Richardson bathwater, Labour were perceived as real reds by virtue of their weightedness in history and rhetorical appeals to the left. Where Labour continued to make gains for identity struggles and minority inclusion (civil unions, legalised prostitution and child welfare) this was experienced by the right as socialist feminists conspiring to ruin our lives and prevent us from disciplining our children.

It is worth remembering the red-baiting hysteria which accompanied Clark's leadership and the perceived totalitarian implications of eco-bulbs and shower-heads. Perhaps the most humiliating moment for the Labour Party after the election was new leader Phil Goff parroting this gendered narrative of the 'nanny-state' while vowing to learn from their mistakes. Goff seemed to be confessing to all of the wild libidinal fantasies about the Labour Party as a socialist coven. The apogee of this discourse was the 'Helengrad' meme, circulated widely by mainstream commentators including the *Herald's* business columnist Fran O'Sullivan who referred to Helen Clark as a 'political dominatrix'. If ever there was a demonstration of the libidinal logic of politics it was in the misogynistic attacks on Clark as an agent

of political/sexual frustration, emasculating men as a result of some inner pathology. Here the right can justify Cameron Slater levels of obscene jouissance as Clark is seen as a perverted super-ego standing in the way of their enjoyment.

While Key undoubtedly rode much of this populist anger to victory over Clark in 2008, his legacy has been staked on erasing politics on transcending this history. Most left commentators have regarded Key's failure to remember his position on the Springbok Tour as a gaffe, or worse, pandering to embittered reactionaries. The importance of this moment rather is the message that its 'OK to forget' or ignore politics as we have a technocrat at the wheel who just wants us to enjoy. New Zealand politics is peculiar for many reasons not the least of which is the fact that the word 'neoliberalism' actually passes the lips of our politicians. The spectre of right-wing neoliberals and the return to the dark days has been used by the likes of Clark, Michael Cullen, Winston Peters and perhaps most self-reflexively by David Cunliffe. John Key has skillfully blunted this attack, not by any substantive political transformation, but by a poll-driven appropriation of the empty politics of the Third Way. To this end Key's former leader Don Brash and Roger Douglas were publically sacrificed as 'radicals' and 'too extreme' for cabinet positions. This didn't prevent National from going into coalition with far-right ACT Party and advancing charter schools, prison privatisation and state asset sales, but the gesture of ideological disavowal served to assuage good conscience cosmopolitans.

This is the sin Matthew Hooton cannot forgive Key for, appropriating the Thomas Friedman maxim of today's Third Way capitalism that 'nobody has to be vile'. The Third Way is a perfect vehicle for neoliberal depoliticisation and it took a right-winger to acknowledge this fact, just as only Nixon could have gone to China. Key effectively turned the tables on Labour signing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, forming a coalition with the Maori Party and embracing indigenous self-determination and empowerment, cynically through the neoliberal vehicle of Whanau Ora. It was Labour that was in Key's words 'backwards' and 'negative' just as they are now seen as the face of xenophobia in the debate around foreign investment in Auckland property. Key has also chalked up some impressive identity politics victories such as same-sex marriage, while largely retaining popular Clark government policies such as Working For Families and Interest Free student loans.

From this depoliticisation and flight from history Key allows us to dream and reimagine our politics as the 'aspirational' nation. It is remarkable how much this notion of aspiration, whether petite bourgeoisie striving or an ineffable sense of national satisfaction embodied in Rugby World Cup titles, has and continues to define the era of Key<sup>4</sup>. Key was not off base when he compared himself to Obama with Key's empty signifier 'aspiration' analogous to Obama's 'Hope' and restoration of confidence after Bush. The efficacy of this empty signifier does not merely allow us to transcend the 80s but is a palliative to our nationalism of post-colonial unease. We thankfully do not have the kind of confident nationalism that comes from unrestrained colonial genocide or being much more than supplicant imperialists. The silver fern was the obvious choice for this project of uncomplicated nationalism as a sporting symbol, devoid of any reference of Tangata Whenua, that elicits the haka, the one place our embrace of Maori is not fraught with guilt or resentment<sup>5</sup>. Key may have lost the battle for a new flag but this setback is akin to Hugo Chavez losing his bid to scrap term limits. Historical anxieties have been replaced by enjoyment our national void with the corporate spectacle of the Rugby World Cup, Hobbit movies and '100% Pure'.

### **Transcending Key**

After eight years the left remains solidly on the backfoot, unable to articulate a competing aspirational politics or tarnish Key's reputation. Key has shown incredible flexibility in either abandoning unpopular policies or raiding the Labour brains-trust for ideas. Just as he is a figure of enjoyment for the centre-right he is a symbol of torment and hatred for the Left. All of the frustrations and inconsistencies in the Left's own camp; Labour's disunity, betrayal of working class and Maori, the Green's enlightened bourgeois politics or the radical Left's alliance with a tech capitalist narcissist, all are overcome in a focus on Key. While certainly a result of 'presidentialization', Key has become an irrational hate figure panned by Internet Mana as a sycophantic bootlicker of the Americans and routinely portrayed as an SS officer in anarchist street art.

Reduced to politics by memes and gifs the Left were irrationally exuberant about the recent dildoeing of cabinet minister Steven Joyce, attending Waitangi on behalf of John Key. Here our political impotence (metaphor intended) is reduced to an acting-out of jouissance which secures only smug irrelevance. Rather than causing



the government embarrassment this moment was embraced as a symbol of Key's politics of enjoyment with Joyce himself getting in on the fun of the 'Dildo Baggins' hashtag and eliciting John Oliver to do his best with the material. Oliver subsequently enlisted the pompously Tory Sir Peter Jackson to wave and declare a flag bearing the image of Joyce being hit by the dildo as our new national symbol. One can hardly imagine a more perfect image of the libidinal truth of John Key's aspirational post-politics. Here an internationally acclaimed kiwi director, who managed to rewrite labour laws for the promise of turning us into Middle Earth, engages in ritual of a self-deprecation and transgression. Key and Joyce have turned self-deprecation into a political art as a solicitation to the obscene Slateresque underbelly which provides an endless source of enjoyment in the left's torment and impotence.

This article has argued that the left should discard some of the humanist assumptions that have shaped our understanding of Key; that people just don't know about Key or that they are masterfully manipulated. This fact does not yield concrete political solutions but perhaps offers a few insights for the left. The libidinal logic of politics does not mean that the left should attempt Fabian psycho-public management a-la Cass Sunstein. And while George Lakoff's work is not uninteresting the proper framing of language is not enough for the task at hand. Our problems are not discursive but ideological and the focus on Key is a way of overlooking the disunity and contradictions of the Left. Key becomes and an omnipotent overdetermined enemy preventing us not only from ideological introspection but our ability to create a political culture of solidarity and enjoyment. A left politics must look past Key addressing him with indifference as simply the technocrat that he is. He is not a uniquely obscene figure but the reality of neoliberal post-politics which denies antagonism and produces the obscene jouissance necessary for followers to believe in the end of history. Key's end of history should be antagonistically opposed not in any overwrought sense of regaining sovereignty from America, or to re-win historical battles; but simply as a matter of justice. The task then becomes to define justice, solidarity, enjoyment and our dreams, something that has alluded the left but is necessary work.

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<sup>1</sup> The most shocking character revelation in Hager's book is the confirmed conversation between Key and Cameron Slater the day Slater was being roundly reviled in the New Zealand media for a blog post. The post detailed the death of a young man whose brother was killed along with 28 other in the Pike River mine disaster. The post was titled "Feral Dies, Does World a Favor". Slater and Key spoke of the deceased's mother who is a prominent Pike River justice activist. In a boastful private message Slater told his friend that Key told him that she was "the same fucking bitch" who confronts him at Pike River meetings. While we could give Key the benefit of the doubt that he did not utter those profanities, the conversation is no less obscene.

<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of the ponytail-gate scandal, *NZ Herald* journalist, Slater-asset and Key-loyalist, Rachel Glucina secured an interview by subterfuge with the victim of Key's antics. Directly after the interview Glucina dutifully texted Key to declare mission accomplished as the victim had 'a massive political agenda' suitable for the purposes of smearing. The *Herald* ran a front page exclusive the following day which cast her as part of Key-hating left.

<sup>4</sup> New Zealand's elite and the most conservative elements of National's support base, the farmers, have certainly cottoned-on to the utility of this rhetoric. Federated Farmers dramatically changed tact in 2011 with the aspirational blue-green Bruce Wills replacing virulent climate change denier Don Nicholson. While riding a massive dairy boom that has laid waste to New Zealand's rivers and wildly driven domestic consumer prices, Fonterra front-footed public backlash by announcing a free milk program at low-decile schools. This act of corporate 'citizenship' was a masterstroke of blurring the lines of antagonism in Key's aspirational New Zealand.

<sup>5</sup> ANZAC serves a similar function and its increasing presence in our politics is something that predates Key and National.