

NEW ZEALAND PM GIVES A MASTERCLASS IN PROPAGANDA

By Dr Muriel Newman, 11 June 2021

“It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

– President Abraham Lincoln

When Jacinda Ardern took office in 2017, she promised her government would be the most open and transparent New Zealand had seen.

In her first formal [speech](#) to Parliament she pledged: “This government will foster a more open and democratic society. It will strengthen transparency around official information.”

Since that time, the Government’s “iron grip” on the control of information has tightened and it is harder now than ever to get information.

This is the view of one of New Zealand’s most experienced political journalists, *Stuff*’s Andrea Vance, who last weekend [explained](#), “In my 20-year plus time as a journalist, this Government is one of the most thin-skinned and secretive I have experienced. Many of my colleagues say the same... It’s now very difficult for journalists to get to the heart and the truth of a story. We are up against an army of well-paid spin doctors. At every level, the Government manipulates the flow of information... Even squeezing basic facts out of an agency is a frustrating, torturous and often futile exercise.”

She explains that since “the current Government took office, the number of communications specialists have ballooned. Each minister has at least two press secretaries. Ardern has four.”

The team assisting the Prime Minister to shape her public image is headed by her chief press secretary, Andrew Campbell, with former *Stuff* business editor Ellen Read as his deputy. Essentially, they handle incoming questions for the prime minister, help with speech writing, set up interviews and press conferences, and accompany the PM through media engagements.

In addition, the prime minister’s office not only controls what other members of the Cabinet are saying, but they go to great lengths to “make sure their audience is *captured*, starting the week and cementing the agenda with a *conference call with political editors*”.

It is not just politicians that have press secretaries – so too do government departments, and under our PR-savvy Prime Minister, the number is skyrocketing.

In the year Labour took office, the Ministry for the Environment had 10 PR staff - they now have 18. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade more than doubled their staff – up to 25. MBIE blew out from 48 staff to 64, with the New Zealand Transport Agency, which had 26 communications staff five years ago, now employing a staggering 72!

With this PR army promoting an image of government benevolence and attempting to block

unwanted scrutiny, even basic requests for information are now being denied.

Andrea Vance describes how attempts by two senior journalists to interview Foreign Minister Nanaia Mahuta, at a time of intense interest in the China-Australia-New-Zealand relationship, were refused - not because of geo-political sensitivities, nor a diary clash, but because “the paranoid and hyper-sensitive minister objected to taking questions from *two* journalists at once.”

That same Minister, with her local government hat on, had released radical proposals for ‘three waters’ reforms that would essentially centralise the management of drinking water, wastewater, and storm water operations from local councils to mega-agencies, with 50 percent control allocated to private sector tribal corporations. Yet, she “refused to answer detailed questions about the proposed changes”, agreeing to only one interview – with a ‘friendly’ state broadcaster. The whole debacle represented “a serious blow to accountability”.

It turns out that journalists who ask hard questions and challenge the Government’s spin are increasingly being side lined – refused interviews, excluded from press conferences, and ignored at media stand-ups.

Government departments are also being obstructive, refusing to answer *Official Information Requests* unless ordered to do so by the Ombudsman. As a result, queries that should have been responded to within 20 working days are taking months to answer with much of the information, when it is eventually released, heavily redacted.

These are not the actions of the open and transparent government promised by Jacinda Ardern, but of an increasingly totalitarian regime.

In her article Andrea Vance asks why the difficulties faced by journalists should matter to the public: “Why should you care?”

She then explains, “Because the public’s impression of this government is the very opposite. They see a prime minister that has captivated the world with her ‘authentic’ communication style, intimate social media postings, daily Covid briefings and proactive releases of Cabinet papers. It is an artfully-crafted *mirage*, because the reality is very different. This is a Government that is only generous with the information that it chooses to share.”

Jacinda Ardern is, of course, a public relations graduate, with a Bachelor of Communication Studies in Public Relations and Political Science from Waikato University.

As a result, when faced with a pandemic and an election in 2020, Prime Minister Ardern’s confidence in the power of PR led her to employ an army of communications experts to help her win the Covid-PR war *and* the election.

As George Orwell said, if you control the language, you can control the mind, and that is certainly how it all played out. Using carefully crafted lines like “the team of 5 million”,

Jacinda Ardern was able to persuade the nation that she was saving lives - and deserved to be re-elected.

Official information [revealed](#) that by the end of May 2020, the cost of the PM's public relations campaign – which had built a formidable propaganda machine involving 28 advertising, marketing and communications contractors - was a staggering \$16 million dollars: “The majority was to two firms who are listed as communications directors by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Clemenger BBDO was paid \$3m for its role, which involved the clear and concise messaging such as ‘stay home, save lives’. But the biggest earner OMD, a multinational advertising firm... was paid \$12m for its role in the response.”

It turns out that everything from “go hard, go early” to the “be kind to each other” messaging was carefully planned, tested, and executed by experts.

At the time, *Newstalk ZB's* Mike Hosking was [scathing](#) that so much money was being spent on ‘spin’: “Extraordinary, isn't it? It shows just how much we got played by a government that was as desperate to score points as it was to actually address a health crisis. Is communication important? Of course. But do you need to pay \$16 million for it? No. This wasn't simple instruction that any government can come up with, this was clearly a highly planned, seriously worked over piece of strategy designed for maximum political impact.

“And the irony is, from the advertising agencies point of view, it worked. We got sucked in, followed orders and came out hailing the Prime Minister with a 59 percent share in a poll. Value for money then? Or a master piece of fantastically expensive spin? Again, we were played like a fiddle.”

Stuff's Political Editor Luke Malpass [agreed](#): “The Ardern Government has been delivering a masterclass in propaganda since Covid began. It has presented the plan that it formulated as the only feasible option, set up rules and language to prosecute that agenda and rhetorically crushed all opposition. That was buttressed over the months by the fact that the Government's plan was sound, effectively carried out and delivered comparatively very good results. Labour won a crushing election victory off the back of it.”

Indeed, the \$16 million of taxpayers' money bought Labour a masterly election campaign – by keeping the country's focus on the virus, and constantly repeating the mantra that it was our team of 5 million that defeated it, they communicated a powerful party line: by sticking together we won the Covid battle and by staying with Labour we will win the battle to rebuild our nation.

Labour's regular election year focus group polling would have told them that to win over ‘soft’ National voters they needed to shift into the political centre ground and temper their socialist ambitions. As a result, Labour based their election manifesto on their 2017 agenda, and used conservative slogans such as a ‘strong and stable’ government and a ‘steady pair of hands’.

Their PR machine was evident on the campaign trail as political commentator Richard Harman [explained](#) at the time: “On the road with Ardern, they had a much more experienced and substantial team. They had two press secretaries with the Prime Minister; National had one. Labour had a professional video crew for social media; National had a staffer with an iPhone. Labour had its former party president and Minister, Ruth Dyson, as its advance person carefully setting up events that Ardern was going to and checking them out to avoid pitfalls. There was little evidence of any advance work [by National].”

After the election, Jacinda Ardern [acknowledged](#) that her support had come from across the political spectrum, “To those amongst you who may not have supported Labour before... I say thank you. We will not take your support for granted. And I can promise you, *we will be a party that governs for every New Zealander.*”

In a media [conference](#) the next day, she specifically reassured New Zealanders about the agenda she intended to roll out, saying, “None of it will be new, because we laid the foundations for these next three years in the previous three years.”

But the truth is that much of what Jacinda Ardern has done since the election *is* new to the public. Not only was her *He Puapua* report - which provides a blueprint for Maori sovereignty over New Zealand by 2040 - *not* disclosed to the voters during the campaign, but its public release was deliberately delayed until *after* the election.

It is in this politically-charged environment, that this week’s NZCPR Guest Commentator, journalist Graham Adams outlines the difficulties in holding a Prime Minister to account, who is PR-driven and, it seems, is prepared to ‘bend the truth beyond breaking point’:

“Jacinda Ardern has offered herself as a hostage to fortune by repeatedly denying that the doctrine of ‘*white privilege*’ is being taught in schools, or that the teaching curriculum mentions it anywhere, or that it is part of her ‘government’s agenda’.

“She has conceded that *white privilege*... might have been taught by a teacher somewhere at some time in some school but insists it isn’t official policy.

“In denying that discussing *white privilege* is an approved part of teaching in schools, evidence shows she may have been bending the truth beyond breaking point. The official education document *Te Hurihanganui* mentions ‘*white privilege*’ in its opening paragraphs. The government has funded the programme to the tune of \$42 million. Launched in October 2020, it has now been established in numerous schools in Nelson, Te Puke, Porirua and Southland, with more to come.”

Graham points out “For someone who prides herself on mastering the details of her government’s policies, it’s impossible to believe Ardern is simply ill informed or forgetful about *Te Hurihanganui*’s existence or what it recommends.”

He wonders whether the motivation for the PM’s repeated denials – that leave her open to charges of lying - could be that Labour’s polling is showing a high degree of public disquiet

over anti-racism programmes in schools and the imposition of the *He Puapua* plan for tribal rule.

Perhaps this means the Ardern Government's "artfully-crafted mirage" that Andrea Vance so eloquently describes, is finally starting to fracture.

Certainly, the fact that the Government is rolling out the radical *He Puapua* in secret, instead of openly, indicates that even Labour supporters are becoming concerned. If they really understood the truth – the serious threat to democracy that the PM's separatist agenda represents and the deeply divided society it would create - their opposition and sense of betrayal would intensify.

On this issue, we the majority have the mandate – Jacinda Ardern does not.