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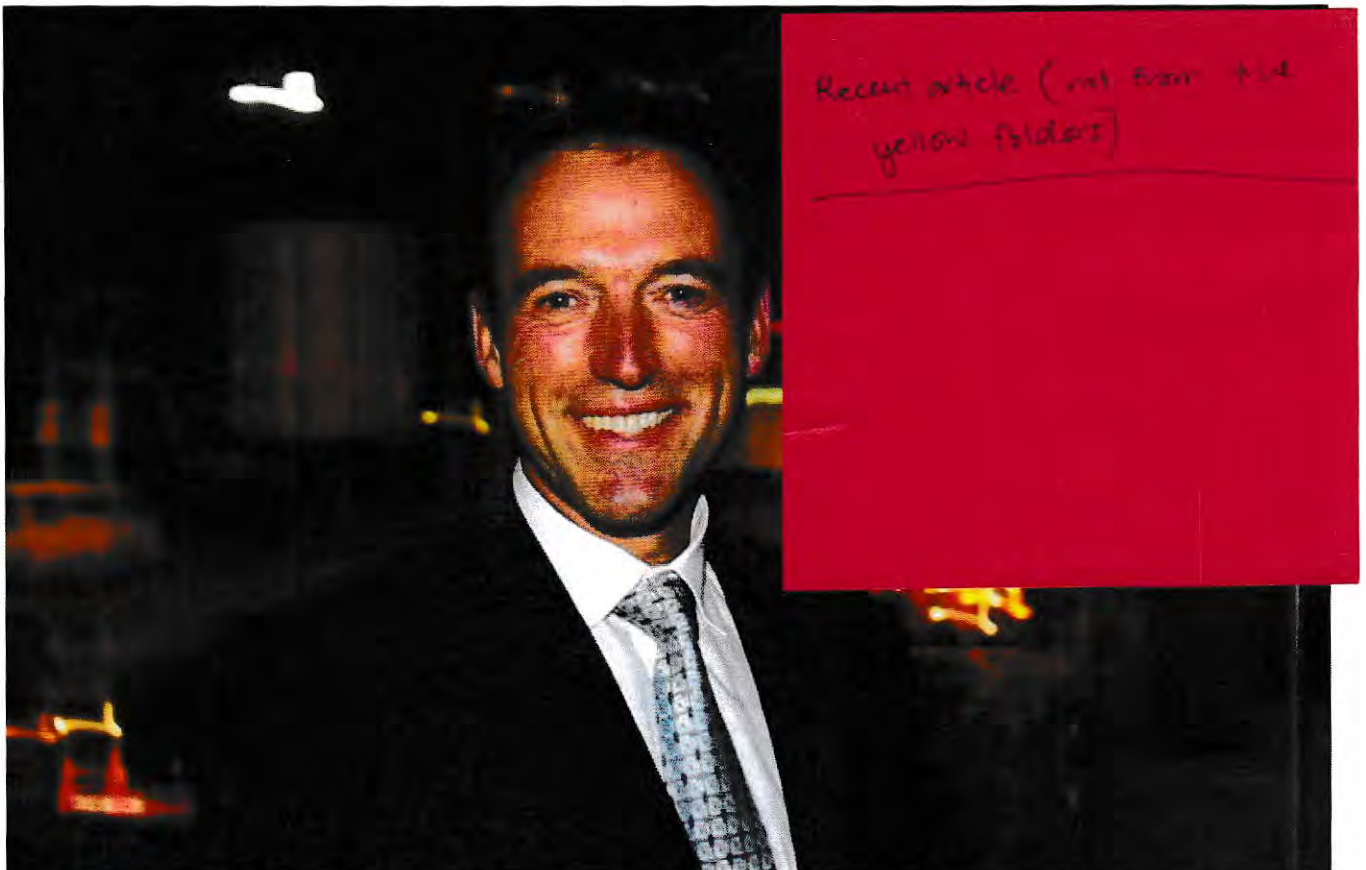
Wealthy and powerful NZ First Foundation donors revealed

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The mysterious foundation bankrolling the New Zealand First Party has been receiving donations from entities connected with some of the country's wealthiest business people in amounts just under the threshold at which the donors' names would normally be made public.



Philanthropist and businessman Graeme Hart is New Zealand's wealthiest man Photo: Fairfax Media

Last year companies owned by New Zealand's richest man donated nearly \$30,000 to the Foundation in two amounts that each fell \$5.01 short of the \$15,000.01 level at which political donations are publicly disclosed.

Church Bay Farm, which is 100 percent owned by Graeme Hart, donated \$14,995 to the New Zealand First Foundation on 29 March, 2019, according to documents seen by RNZ.

On the same day Walter & Wild, which owns the Hubbards, Hansells and Gregg's food brands, also donated \$14,995 to the Foundation. Walter and Wild is two-thirds owned by Graeme Hart with the remaining third owned by his son Harry Hart.

Graeme Hart, a businessman and philanthropist, who recently funded a \$10 million initiative to provide low cost dental care in South Auckland, has a wealth estimated at \$10 billion by *Forbes* magazine.

Documents from 2017 to 2019 seen by RNZ show the New Zealand First Foundation has a pattern of receiving donations of \$15,000 or just under.

Over that time, donations of that size alone brought in more than \$300,000 to the New Zealand First Foundation, yet none of the donors were revealed - even though in some cases, multiple such donations were made by related entities or individuals during a year.

Records show the Foundation spent hundreds of thousands of dollars paying bills for New Zealand First, including campaign expenses such as renting and setting up a campaign HQ in Wellington and running the party's website.

According to records viewed by RNZ, the Foundation received 12 payments of \$15,000 in the two years between April 2017 and May 2019 - one cent under the declaration threshold.

In the same timeframe, the Foundation received a further seven amounts between \$14,000 and \$15,000 - some of them just a few dollars short of \$15,000.

Read more:

[Donations and declarations: The NZ First Foundation explained](https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/in-depth/408786/donations-and-declarations-the-nz-first-foundation-explained)
(<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/in-depth/408786/donations-and-declarations-the-nz-first-foundation-explained>)

If New Zealand First treats the Walter & Wild and Church Bay Farm payments as being party donations from the same donor it could still declare them in its return to be filed in April.

But Foundation records seen by RNZ show there were multiple cases since 2017 where entities linked to the same person have made a series of donations in close succession. Those amounts have added up to more than \$15,000 but have not been declared on the NZ First returns.

In some cases the amounts have exceeded \$30,000 - the threshold at which the party must declare a donation or series of donations to the Electoral Commission within 10 days of receiving them. New Zealand First has not declared any donations of that size in 2017, 2018 or 2019.

In 2017, entities linked to the Van Den Brink family, which owns Van Den Brink Poultry, made three separate donations totalling \$36,000. All three payments were made to the Foundation's bank account on 2 May, 2017.



Companies owned by the Van Den Brink family were among the biggest donors to the Foundation
Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

According to the *NBR Richlist* the Van Den Brink family has an estimated wealth of \$110 million from farming interests and donates to the Eat My Lunch charity, which provides thousands of lunches to children every week.

The NZ First 2017 electoral return shows no record of any donations from the Van Den Brink family, nor any of their associated entities. RNZ is not suggesting the Van Den Brinks broke any laws or that they were motivated by a desire to keep their donations secret.

The following year, 2018, the New Zealand First Foundation received \$40,000 from entities linked to Conrad Properties, which bills itself as New Zealand's largest apartment real estate developer.

The money was given to the Foundation in three separate payments, each falling below the \$15,000.01 threshold at which political parties have to declare them.

On 18 July, 2018 the Foundation received a \$10,000 donation from Equity Growth, whose directors are Ben Dearlove and Jamie Hutchens - both shareholders and partners in Conrad Properties.

Otago University Law Professor Andrew Geddis, an expert on electoral law, said under the Electoral Act, any party donation over \$15,000 must be reported to the Electoral Commission. "So by keeping donations under \$15,000, you avoid that donation having to be reported to the Electoral Commission. Therefore, you keep it secret from the public."

Neither Geddis nor RNZ are alleging that any of the donors named in this story broke any laws or that they were motivated by a desire to keep their donations secret.

Geddis viewed Foundation records and believes the Electoral Commission should look closely at how the New Zealand First party has handled donations made to the New Zealand First Foundation.



Otago University law professor Andrew Geddis says keeping donations to \$15,000 or less means donors can keep their identities secret Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

The Walter & Wild and Church Bay Farm Ltd donations would not normally show up on the New Zealand First return for 2019, due to be filed in April this year, because both are just short of the threshold.

But political parties are also supposed to declare a series of donations from the same donor over a calendar year that add up to more than \$15,000.

The next day, Mayoral Drive Tenancy Trustee, which is directed by Hutchens and Dearlove and part-owned by Conrad co-founder Rob Holden, donated \$15,000. Conrad Properties itself donated a further \$15,000 on 15 October, 2018 - making it \$40,000 from entities linked to the company in that year.

There are no records of any donations connected to Conrad Properties in the New Zealand First 2018 electoral return. Dearlove told Stuff (<https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/117577119/who-are-the-donors-behind-the-nz-first-foundation>) the company donated lots of money to charities and causes each year, and had never really thought about where the money to political parties ended up.

There is no suggestion of any wrongdoing by the company or its shareholders or that they were motivated by a desire to keep their donations secret.



Conrad Properties, who built the pictured development, and two other connected companies made donations to the Foundation Photo: RNZ / Claire Eastham-Farrelly

Geddis said if donations had not been handled correctly the onus fell mainly on the party secretary for New Zealand First, rather than the donors or the New Zealand First Foundation.

Neither the current NZ First Party secretary Liz Witehira nor previous party secretary Anne Martin responded to requests for comment.

Foundation trustee Doug Woolerton and Party leader Winston Peters both declined to comment.

The 2017 party return provided to the Electoral Commission declares 13 donations of between \$5000 and \$15,000. However, during the relevant period, the Foundation received 23 donations of that size.

In 2018, the party declared five donations of between \$5000 and \$15,000. records viewed by RNZ show the Foundation received at least six donations of that size.

"The party secretary is responsible for the return," Geddis said. "Unless the party secretary can prove that they did everything possible to ensure that the return is accurate then the party secretary is deemed to have committed an offence."

The way New Zealand First was operating was "very different" to how other political parties in New Zealand handled their finances, Geddis said.

"We're seeing large amounts of money that are flowing not to the New Zealand First party directly, but into an entity that is very closely connected to the New Zealand First party."

Records viewed by RNZ showed Foundation funds were used to pay NZ First party bills.

"None of the details of where that money's coming from, or even how much money is flowing in, is being disclosed to the New Zealand public, which means that when it comes to the New Zealand First Party, we really have no clue whatsoever as to how it gets its money [or] where it gets its money from."



Winston Peters Photo: RNZ / Patrice Allen

Geddis said that information was "very important for the public to know" in a democracy "where we're entrusting political parties and their representatives with a great deal of public power".

If the Foundation was run by people involved in the party's administration, the donations it received needed to be declared as party donations, Geddis said. Alternatively, if it was a separate entity, then the bills it had paid on the party's behalf should be declared as donations to the party from the Foundation, he said.

The Electoral Commission is investigating how New Zealand First has handled donations made to the New Zealand First Foundation after revelations by RNZ and Stuff last year.

