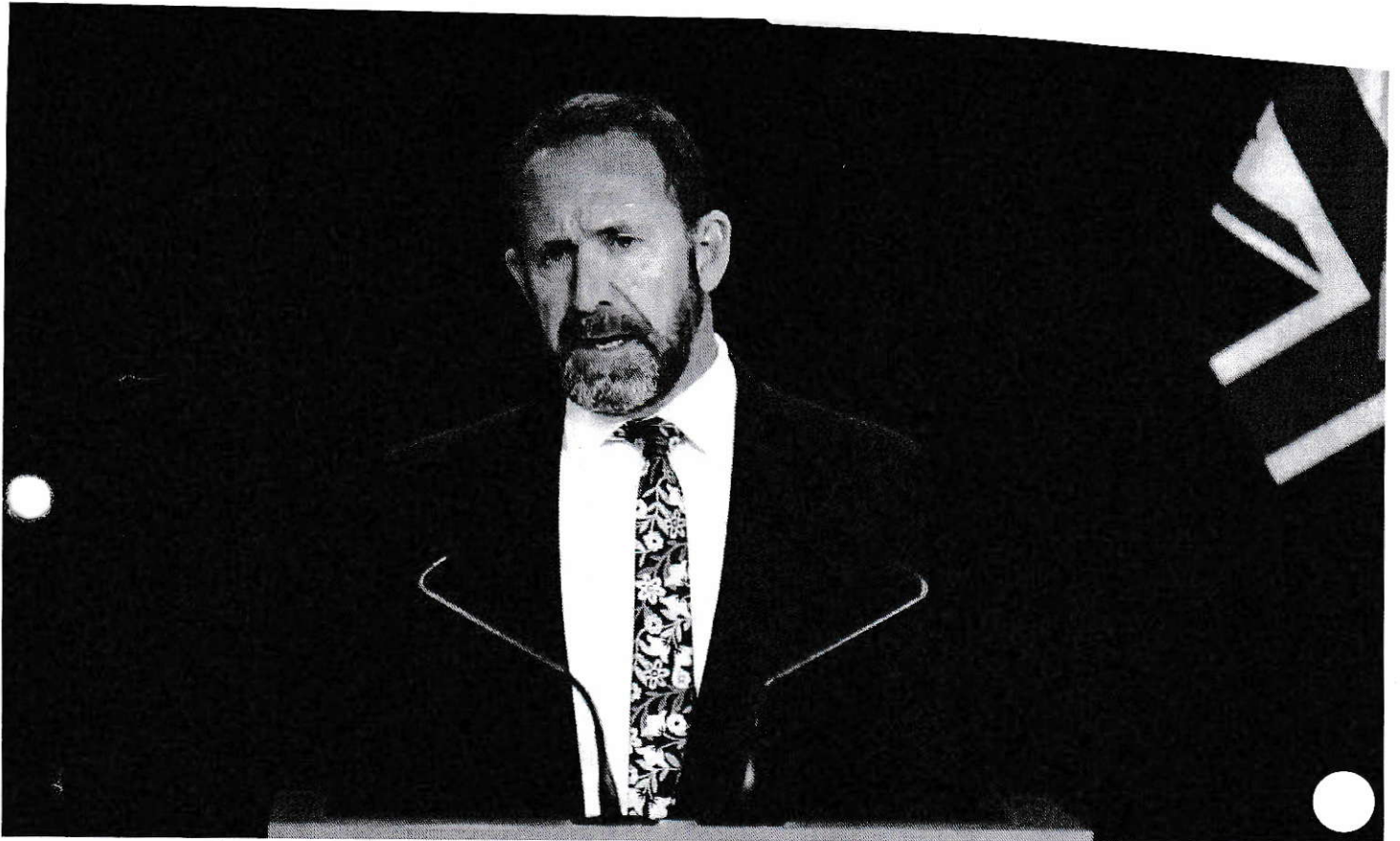


Roy, 2019



New Zealand bans foreign political donations amid interference concerns

Justice minister cites risk of foreign meddling in 2020 election and says further action could be taken

Eleanor Ainge Roy in Dunedin and agencies

Tue 3 Dec 2019 00.56 GMT

New Zealand will ban foreign donations to politicians and tighten disclosure rules for political advertising, the government has said, as concerns over foreign interference intensify ahead of an election next year.

The government said it would introduce legislation on Tuesday banning donations over NZ\$50 (\$32) to political parties and candidates by foreigners.

“The risk of foreign interference in elections is a growing international phenomenon and can take many forms, including donations. New Zealand is not immune from this risk,” justice minister Andrew Little said in an emailed statement.

The new laws also would require the names and addresses of those funding election advertisements in all mediums to be published to reduce the “avalanche of fake news social media ads” that had marred elections overseas, Little said.

New Zealand will hold its next general election in late 2020 and Little said further action could be taken to counter foreign influence based on recommendations from a parliamentary committee that was looking at the issue.

Law experts in New Zealand raised concerns that the ban does not go far enough.

“The main concern has recently been the types of donations that do not count as foreign donations,” said public law expert Graeme Edgeler.

“For example, a donation from a company registered in New Zealand is not a foreign donation, even if the company is wholly owned by a company or people outside New Zealand.”

“This bill does nothing to address this concern.”

Professor Anne-Marie Brady, an expert in Chinese influence in western democracies, described the bill as a “good start” on Twitter, but said “more needs to be done to make our democracy resilient against foreign interference.”

Dr Simon Chapple, from Victoria university’s school of government said the bill would not stop the influence of the Chinese Communist Party in New Zealand politics.

“The concern is that money connected to the People’s Republic of China’s strategic goals is being channelled in a non-transparent fashion into New Zealand politics via people who are residents or citizens of New Zealand, or by New Zealand domiciled companies. Nothing changes for these people. They can legitimately continue to donate.” Chapple said.

New Zealand’s allies in the “Five Eyes” intelligence-sharing community - Australia, Britain, Canada and the United States - have all expressed concern about foreign influence in politics in recent years.

While the New Zealand government did not single out a specific threat on Tuesday, British and US intelligence agencies accuse Russia of meddling in domestic politics and elections of several western countries including the 2016 US presidential election. Russia denies the allegations.

Australia has accused China of similar activities and has cracked down on foreign political donations and lobbying. China also denies the allegations.

In New Zealand, questions about political donations were raised in 2018 after a lawmaker accused the leader of the opposition National party of hiding a NZ\$100,000 donation from a Chinese businessman to avoid declaring it. The National party leader rejected the charge.

New Zealand’s intelligence chief said in April that the agency was concerned about activities by foreign state actors, including attempts to covertly influence politicians and monitor expatriate communities in the South Pacific nation.

A spokesperson for National party leader Simon Bridges said while his party supported the ban, “because it’s the right thing to do”, the government was using the legislation as a distraction from mounting problems.

“This legislation doesn’t need to be rushed, the government just wants to look like it’s doing something after two years of failing to deliver on its promises,” the spokesperson said.

“The government is sidestepping democracy for the sake of looking busy and trying to divert attention from its failures. Passing legislation under urgency without good reason sets a terrible precedent.”