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It's time to end the secrecy over political donations

05:00, Feb 29 2020



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Jacinda Ardern distances Shane Jones' role in fishing policy decisions

The PM reiterated to media that Stuart Nash is Minister of Fisheries, after it was reported Talley's donated \$26,950 to the NZ First Foundation.



EDITORIAL: Future historians of New Zealand politics may look back on 2020 as the year in which voters finally lost patience with the arcane secrecy that surrounds donations to parties and candidates.



CHRIS SKELTON/STUFF

Christchurch Mayor Lianne Dalziel's election expenses are being investigated.

It is a year in which the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is being kept busy. [The SFO is investigating](#) the NZ First Foundation, which has been alleged to act as a slush fund for the NZ First party. The SFO also brought charges against four men, including former National MP turned independent Jami-Lee Ross, over two \$100,000 donations to National that were allegedly broken up into smaller amounts so as to slip under disclosure thresholds.

The law requires that donations over \$15,000 to political parties require a name and address. [Coincidentally or otherwise](#), two donations from companies linked to New Zealand's richest man, Graeme Hart, to the NZ First Foundation came in at \$14,995 each. RNZ reported that the foundation has "a pattern" of receiving donations that fall just under the disclosure threshold – there were 12 in only two years.

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In the same period, Seafood giant Talley's and its managing director Sir Peter Talley donated \$26,950 in four amounts that also fell below the threshold.

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Former Green Party co-leader turned Greenpeace executive director Russel Norman warns against seeing the direct buying of influence. Instead, Norman said, it's human nature that "political parties and MPs are more likely to give a decent hearing to people who are giving them very large sums of money".

Even if the process is not corrupt, the secrecy and the manipulation of the rules risks eroding public trust in our democracy.

Dalziel's case is already known. Her initial return after the 2019 local body elections failed to list six people who donated more than the candidate threshold of \$1500. After public pressure and media scrutiny, Dalziel eventually revealed six names, all of which are reported to have connections to her husband, lawyer Rob Davidson.

The six donations ranged from \$1750 to \$17,850. The original return had put them all under Davidson's name.

Is there a better way to fund elections? Dalziel's mayoral challenger, John Minto, who brought the complaint about Dalziel's donations to the electoral officer, has suggested an overhaul of donation rules within wider electoral law reform. Minto argues that all donors giving over \$50 should be identified, individuals should be named rather than companies and donors should be identified at least one week before the election.

There is a good precedent for the third of those suggestions. Four days before the 2019 mayoral election, Wellington's candidates revealed backers who donated more than \$1500. The public learned that then incumbent Justin Lester had raised only \$11,000, with the E Tū union giving him his largest single donation at \$5000, while current mayor Andy Foster had raised \$56,000, with more than half coming from a group of donors that included companies associated with Sir Peter Jackson and Dame Fran Walsh.

Informed voters could make their choices accordingly.

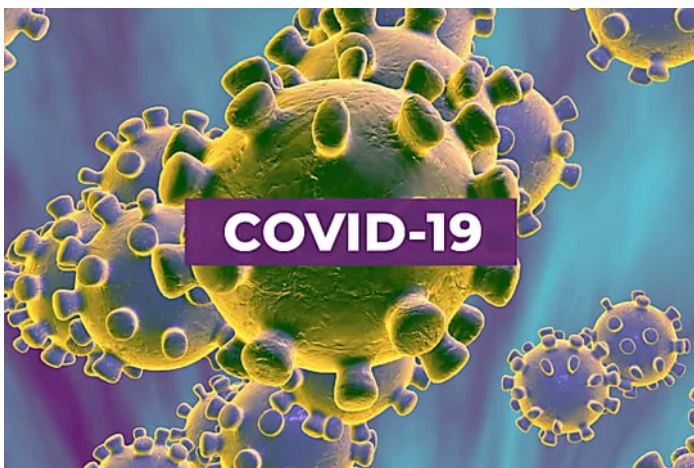
But in Christchurch, neither Dalziel nor candidate Darryll Park was prepared to do the same. Minto volunteered that he had just one donation over \$1500, from the Campaign Against Foreign Control of Aotearoa.

Banning donations and publicly funding candidates and parties instead is not the answer. Rather, New Zealand voters must now start to demand greater transparency.

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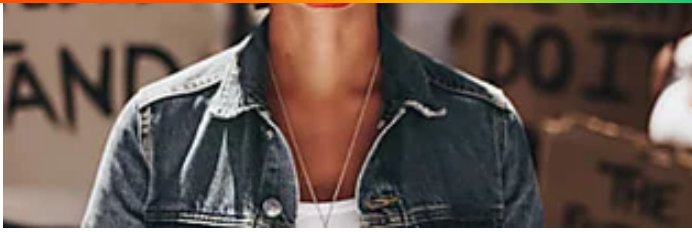
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