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| **Political Roundup: Is it time for an anti-corruption commission?**If ever there was an example of complacency about corruption and integrity in New Zealand politics it’s the fact that the Prime Minister’s Office knew back in 2021 that Cabinet Minister Stuart Nash was feeding privileged Cabinet information to business donors but did nothing about it. This is one of the extraordinary details to come out of the Nash scandal. Prime Minister Chris Hipkins was forced to admit yesterday in Parliament that in 2021, when Jacinda Ardern was Prime Minister, her office was made aware of the incriminating 2020 email from Nash to his political donors but nothing was done about it because neither the Prime Minister nor the Chief of Staff were informed. If Ardern had been told, surely Nash would’ve been sacked then. **Cover up or stuff up in the PM’s Office?** Back in 2021, the PM’s Office was alerted to the Nash emails when a member of the public made an Official Information Act request relating to Stuart Nash’s emails. Ardern’s office became involved, deciding that Nash’s emails to donors Troy Bowker and Greg Loveridge didn’t have to be released as part of the request as the emails were deemed “out of scope” of what was requested. Without knowing the details of what was requested, it’s hard to know whether this decision to keep the emails secret from the public was questionable or not. But it does seem extraordinary that in this process there was no thought to inform the Prime Minister about their existence. National Party leader Christopher Luxon is calling this a “cover up”. That’s certainly a possibility – staff might have decided it was best to keep the Prime Minister in the dark about evidence of Nash’s dealings with his donor friends. More likely, it was due to complacency and poor integrity procedures in the Beehive. If so, this isn’t necessarily cause for relief. It suggests the public can’t have confidence the Beehive is insisting on high ethical standards and prevention of possible corruption if staff were aware of this violation of ethics but were not aware of the need to take any action. It suggests that if other ministers were found to be passing on information to donors, this would also not be elevated to the Prime Minister. Of course, this all occurred when the Beehive was under “previous management”. Hipkins says he has sent a message to his staff that he expects to be informed of such cases in the future. **Probe into corruption and integrity needs to be widened** Prime Minister Hipkins has bowed to pressure yesterday on the need for an inquiry in the communications between Nash and his financial donors. After first saying that he considered Nash’s political donations saga to be at an end, Hipkins has asked the Cabinet Office to undertake a thorough investigation, which will take about two months. This investigation should also deal with why the Prime Minister’s Office missed the problem in 2021. The announcement of the inquiry is the right thing to do, although it’s limited because it only deals with Nash rather than all Government ministers and their relationship with donors. Given what’s happened with Stuart Nash it’s not clear that the public can have confidence that more generally ministers aren’t violating the rules. The Cabinet Office review should be widened, so that the public can have certainty it’s not a more widespread problem. Another inquiry that Hipkins is resisting, but which also urgent, is into the role of lobbyists in the political process. The central and unregulated place of lobbyists in politics has been identified as a key democratic deficit in New Zealand’s governing system. Lobbying in New Zealand is entirely unregulated – a veritable “wild west” setting in which vested interests are able to convert their wealth into political influence, raising serious questions about integrity and corruption in New Zealand politics. The integrity of the political process is in question at the moment, with revelations and scandals about political donations, lobbying, and vested interests. We are going to have to have some debates and discussion on how to clean up politics. While it’s good to have inquiries about individual scandals, it does seem like there’s an increasing case for the Government to establish an Anti-Corruption Commission much like they have in Australia. This is something that The Opportunities Party called for on Wednesday. Leader Raf Manji went on RNZ’s Morning Report today to outline the democratic deficits in New Zealand's political system, labelling it a “cosy club” which needs “an independent investigator like we have for the security intelligence services, like we have for the Police, who can investigate potential issues around corruption and unethical behaviour in our public institutions”. Alternatively, perhaps the Serious Fraud Office could be given more powers to investigate some of these issues around lobbying and donations. **How the Nash scandal came to light** Veteran political journalist Richard Harman has discovered how the media came to get the emails on Tuesday which led to Nash being sacked. He published a story this morning that details the chain of events in which it appears that one of Nash’s political donors who received his email passed this on the former Minister’s political opponents. Troy Bowker, who donated $10,000 to Nash in 2020, and who Nash leaked the sensitive Cabinet information to in 2021, seems to have fallen out with Minister in 2021. Bowker had a public scrap with another of Nash’s friends, Sir Ian Taylor, the founder of Animation Research. This was over Taylor posting on the social media platform LinkedIn criticising National leader Judith Collins’ call for a national debate on making Aotearoa the official name of the country. This resulted in Bowker questioning Taylor’s Māori heritage and stating this was “Another example of European NZers not being proud of their own ancestors and sucking up to the left Māori loving agenda.” Nash responded, according to Harman, by announcing he would no longer accept political donations from Bowker. Nash said Bowker’s comments were “appalling” and “it’s not the Troy I know”. Harman reports that “Nash has told friends that Bowker refused to back away and was furious with his comments and their friendship ended.” Subsequently, broadcaster Sean Plunket has, according to Harman, said that the business donors then provided the incriminating email to various people connected with opposition political parties. One of these was to “a business journalist, who is now a media advisor to a major political party” – presumably the National Party. But, “Plunket said that Bowker had also provided the email to Act (who he has also donated to), and it was that party who leaked it to Stuff journalist Luke Malpass.” It's therefore good to see the media is doing its job in shining light on these integrity shortfalls. But the impression the public will get is that such incidents are only occasionally being unearthed – and usually only when there are bust ups between some of the central figures involved. Overall, the Nash scandal has illustrated that the New Zealand political system lacks robust integrity systems to guard against corruption. This urgently needs to change.  |

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