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POLITICS

NZ’s richest man explains donation to NZ First

Evidence from the rich lister Hart family outlines to the High Court the circumstances around multiple donations to the New Zealand First Foundation

Packaging billionaire Graeme Hart, his son and son-in-law all donated to the New Zealand First Party under the publicly declarable financial limit in 2019 when

the party was part of the Labour government considering a Capital Gains Tax.

The country's richest man and his family members, usually intensely private, ended up being quizzed by the Serious Fraud Office in its investigation into

the New Zealand First Foundation, and their evidence has been presented to the Auckland High Court trial of two men, whose names are suppressed, for obtaining

by deception.

The SFO alleges up to $750,000 raised through the foundation was intended for the political party but its proceeds were spent by the two men without the

authority or knowledge of key elected party officials. The total donations were not declared to the Electoral Commission as would be the case for political

parties. The defendants deny the charges, saying no offence was committed and money donated for NZ First was spent on NZ First causes and bills.

Hart, his son Harrison and son-in-law Duncan Hawkesby are among 43 donors from that period whose interviews with the SFO are being read to the court as

the Crown lays out its case. Many donors have said they donated thinking it was to the political party, or for party leader Winston Peters, knew nothing

of the separation between party and foundation and did not know what account they had been directed to bank donations into. Some have said they did not

care what account it went to so long as their money supported NZ First.

Duncan Hawkesby.  Photo: RNZ

Duncan Hawkesby, husband of Hart's daughter Gretchen and the director of Hawk Marine Ltd, said he met members of NZ First in March of 2019 on a couple

of occasions through a PR consultant Thomas Pryor of Sherson Willis. Hawkesby became aware that financial support from him and his family was being raised.

Pryor emailed Hawkesby on March 20 to say he'd met NZ First's then-MP Clayton Mitchell "re CGT" and "overall was a really positive conversation and their

thinking is very much aligned". Pryor then set a meeting between Hawkesby and Mitchell and suggested it would be good if Graeme Hart could "drop by".

Hawkesby's evidence said Hart did greet Mitchell but left after a couple of minutes and the MP set about outlining funding requirements including costs

incurred at a previous election.

Mitchell then set up a coffee meeting between the party's then-MP Fletcher Tabuteau and Hawkesby and it was there Hawkesby was provided the bank account

number for the NZ First Foundation. "Members of the family said they would also like to donate," the Hawkesby evidence records, and noted that "me and

my extended family highly value our privacy".

He texted his brother-in-law, Harrison Hart, who runs a business named Walter & Wild: "Hey Hazz, can you please deposit $14,995 into the account below

from a Walter & Wild account?" That money went through to the NZ First Foundation on March 28.

Hawkesby then contacted a Graeme Hart adviser to establish which business would donate on his father-in-law's behalf, was told it would be Church Bay Farm Ltd

and later provided Hart senior's personal assistant with the NZ First Foundation account details.

Church Bay Farm Ltd donated $14,995 on March 29 and Hawkesby's firm Hawk Marine gave $14,995, on April 2.

Hart, aged 67, whose wealth is estimated by the NBR List at $12 billion, said in evidence he "decided I wished to provide financial support to New Zealand

First by way of a donation. This came about after discussions with my extended family including Harrison Hart and Duncan". Hart senior gave an adviser

verbal authorisation to make a payment. "I had no knowledge of the structure. I understood an account number had been provided."

Harrison Hart's evidence confirmed he received the text from his brother-in-law Hawkesby. "After a discussion with him about NZ First's policies, I had

indicated that I wanted to make a donation to them. I explained to him that due to logistical reasons I wanted Walter & Wild to make the donation."

Hart junior said he had no knowledge of NZ First's structure, nor did he make it his responsibility to know. "I just thought the donation was to NZ First.

I don't understand the difference."

He opted for the $14,995.00 figure, because "where privacy is available I prefer that". Nobody had advised him about anonymity and donations. "I pay attention

to local politics and news and have probably known that amount for years, just as general knowledge."

Harrison Hart said he had not assisted in other fundraising for NZ First.

After the donations, the former MP Mitchell reached out to the Hart family through Thomas Pryor, suggesting a catch-up between Graeme Hart and Winston

Peters. "I am waiting to hear back for a suitable time for Winston and Graeme to catch a lunch together."

Mitchell also tried to follow up with Hawkesby, through Pryor, on some kind of funding arrangement for an NZ First database, but Hawkesby "chose not to

respond".

The trial, before Justice Pheroze Jagose, is set down for another three weeks.

\* A government announcement on April 17, 2019 put an end to the proposal for a capital gains tax. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said: "All parties in the

government entered into this debate with different perspectives and, after significant discussion, we have ultimately been unable to find a consensus.

As a result, we will not be introducing a capital gains tax."

Property developers who did not want a capital gains tax had earlier been reported as having given money to New Zealand First.