

Don Rood

How Water is Reshaping the Political Landscape

Abstract

New Zealanders place great value on the quality of their freshwater rivers, streams and lakes for recreation, conservation and food gathering. But over the last 25 years they have become increasingly concerned at the deterioration in water quality, the loss of swimming holes and fishing spots, and the impact of pollution on native and valued introduced species and their habitat. The issue has deeply divided the community and become more and more acrimonious. Recreational and conservation groups blame industrial agriculture for much of the decline, and accuse central and local government of turning a blind eye to the problem and failing to protect the environment.

Scientists have added their voices to the debate, but big agriculture and its lobby groups have responded aggressively, denying the problem exists, attacking their accusers and warning government against tackling the problem with tighter controls. Public frustration at the political paralysis and inaction has seen water quality become New Zealanders' biggest single concern. The issue is now firmly established on the political agenda and one any political party wanting to govern the country ignores at its peril.

Keywords politics, dirty dairy, election issue, contamination, drinking water, tourism, the Environment Election

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The enormous power of water to reshape the land is etched all over New Zealand. The relentless flow of rivers has carved gorges through solid rock, eroded mountains to form vast, fertile alluvial plains, and filled lakes with billions of cubic metres of some of the clearest and cleanest water in the world. Now, water is also reshaping the political landscape.

In the past, the seemingly endless supply of fresh water was taken for granted. Lowland streams, rivers and lakes were exploited and abused for economic gain or simply because it was cheaper to dump urban waste into waterways than to install expensive treatment systems. At times, the only concerns about water publicly voiced by political and agricultural business leaders was that rain fell in the wrong places or that it was a waste to let water flow out to sea. The solution they pursued was to spend greater sums of money on capturing and storing water and building irrigation schemes to divert and harness even more of our freshwater reserves.

But in the last 20 years, that mindset has been challenged. New Zealanders have been increasingly voicing their concern about what is happening to their rivers, lakes and streams. They have marched on Parliament, signed petitions and protested that waterways have been getting dirtier: drained and contaminated by intensive agriculture and thoughtless urban development. And they have voiced their anger that New Zealand's lax approach to anything to do with water has not only polluted their local swimming hole, but also allowed foreign companies to bottle and ship large volumes overseas without paying a cent in royalties for the privilege.

The debate has introduced a new word to the political lexicon – swimmable – and a new phrase – dirty dairying. They were descriptions the ruling National Party from 2008 to 2017 did not pay enough attention to and that, according to National insiders, cost it the 2017 election. David Farrar was a trusted advisor to former National prime ministers and the man who Prime Minister John Key praised in his victory speech on election night 2014 as 'the best pollster in New Zealand'. Farrar recently told *Fish & Game* magazine that he is in no doubt National paid a heavy price for its failure in 2017 to identify water as a significant

issue: 'When in power, National misread what was happening and made mistakes. There were several factors involved: water purity, clean streams, bottling, and irrigation. And they all combined to be a nasty issue for the Key and English government,' Farrar says (Rood, 2019).

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Farrar attributes the fact that water quality became a crucial election issue in 2017 to the effective campaigning by environmental groups such as Fish and Game New Zealand, Forest & Bird and Greenpeace: 'Clean water is very powerful because it directly affects a person's life and people have an immediate reaction to the issue,' Farrar says. 'No one wants to be arguing against drinkable or swimmable water. National has learned its lesson, realising it mishandled the clean water issue while in power.' Those views are backed up by long-time National Party observer and political commentator Matthew Hooton. He told *Fish & Game* that National turning a blind eye to the importance of water cost it dearly. The 2017 election result was close – too close to call on election night – but in Hooton's view it was water that won it for Labour:

National knows the clean water issue cost it the last election. When you talk to them, they will admit they got it wrong and they lost votes. Water quality is now a mainstream issue. Everyone cares about water quality. National

didn't understand that, nor the depth and breadth of public feeling, and it cost them.

Hooton now considers the environment and water quality as defining issues for this country's political parties, not fleeting or fashionable topics:

It is like good monetary policy; to win, a political party better have an environment policy and it better be a good one. It is unacceptable the state the rivers and lakes have got to. It is a serious political issue which has to be resolved. (ibid.)

Although National dropped the ball in 2017 by failing to heed the public mood on water, and those close to the party now admit so, the signs of growing voter unease had been there for a long time. As far back as 2001, the statutory organisation charged by Parliament to manage game bird hunting and trout fishing and habitat, Fish and Game New Zealand, commissioned NIWA, the National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research, to look at farming's impact on the environment. The initiative was prompted by growing concern from the organisation's tens of thousands of fishing licence holders about the deteriorating state of many rivers and streams and the impact the resulting poor water quality was having on native and sports fish numbers.

The NIWA review confirmed Fish and Game's worst fears. It concluded: 'Lowland rivers in agriculturally developed areas are in poor condition due to high nutrients, turbidity and faecal contamination.' And it sheeted home the blame for the situation to agriculture: 'this report firmly established the link between agricultural land use and poor water quality, stream habitat and impacted biotic communities' (Parkyn et al., 2002).

Fish and Game responded with a public awareness campaign which not only thrust the issue into the public and political spotlight but also spawned the phrase 'dirty dairying'. The campaign seemed to quickly resonate with the wider public. Lincoln University's *Public Perceptions of New Zealand's Environment 2002* survey revealed a big leap among New Zealanders

identifying farming as one of the main causes of damage to fresh waterways. In 2000 the same survey had shown farming in fourth place, with 24.4% of those polled blaming it for damage to fresh water, behind sewage on 46.6%, and hazardous chemicals and industrial activity. By 2002 farming had leapt to bearing 38% of the blame, in second place behind sewage, which was little changed on 46.9% (Hughey, Kerr and Cullen, 2016).

Stung by the negative publicity generated by Fish and Game's campaign and increasing public criticism of agriculture's pollution of waterways, particularly by intensive dairying, the dairy industry giant Fonterra reacted with an initiative it hoped would ease public concerns. Known as the Clean Streams Accord, the initiative set ten-year targets for dairy farmers to fence streams, protect wetlands and better manage effluent and nutrient discharges. The streams to be protected were defined as permanently flowing and more than ankle deep and a metre wide. A more colloquial definition was 'wider than a stride and deeper than a Red Band gumboot'.

The accord was signed in May 2003 by Fonterra, the ministries for agriculture and the environment, and Local Government New Zealand on behalf of regional councils. In 2013 it was succeeded by the *Sustainable Dairying: water accord* (DairyNZ, 2015). However, as Phil Holland pointed out in an article he wrote for the 2014 *Lincoln Planning Review*, the dairy industry made a big mistake by snubbing the environmental groups which had raised the concerns in the first place. Holland argued that by not inviting Fish and Game and other advocates for the environment like Forest & Bird to be part of the agreement, these organisations were left free to step up their clean water campaign and criticise the new accord (Holland, 2014).

Two of the environmental groups' main criticisms were that the accord was only voluntary and that it did not protect the thousands of smaller streams narrower than a metre which naturally flow into bigger waterways. The significance of omitting smaller streams has been pointed out by AgResearch scientist Richard McDowell in a 2017 article in the *Journal*

of Environmental Quality (McDowell, Cox and Snelder, 2017). These smaller, exempt streams actually account for 77% of a catchment's contamination load, according to McDowell.

Even though the accord was voluntary, farmers and their lobby groups such as Federated Farmers and DairyNZ were unhappy that it asked them to fence

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streams and better control dairy effluent. This appeared to be fuelled by their increasing concern about how local and central government were reacting to the public's growing focus on environmental issues, such as climate change and freshwater pollution, and the potential impact that attention would have on the viability of traditional farming. Acrimonious climate change policy debate had already prompted the National and ACT parties to align themselves with Federated Farmers to fight the Helen Clark Labour government's proposals to tackle global warming by targeting emitters of greenhouse gases. These proposals included a levy on farm stock methane emissions to fund research into reducing farm emissions,

an idea which farmers and Labour's political opponents quickly dubbed a 'fart tax'.

The then president of Federated Farmers was Charlie Pedersen, an outspoken Manawatū farmer who was vocal in his scepticism about the need to tackle climate change at all, let alone to protect fresh water affected by greenhouse gas-causing nitrogen emissions. And he was scathing about the public's growing demands that more needed to be done to protect the environment. In a 2006 speech to Federated Farmers' annual conference, Pedersen targeted the emerging environmental concern, warning delegates that environmentalism was being elevated to 'a religious status' and that environmentalists were waging 'war against the human race'. He went on to describe environmentalism as the 'politics of envy' and said environmentalists were trying to 'reduce the brightest and hardest working' to 'the level of the ordinary, the uninspired' (Pedersen, 2006).

Pedersen was not alone among farmers in seeking to downplay the need for politicians to listen to environmentalists. In the same year, DairyNZ chairman Frank Brenmuhl likened environmental constraints on farming to 'state theft', drawing comparisons to the Mugabe regime's farm confiscation programme in Zimbabwe (Brenmuhl, 2006). It was against this increasingly bitter backdrop that water quality, climate change and the environment started to seep into the political mainstream.

The Labour-led government, stung by the backlash over the seabed and foreshore controversy and worried by the potential for Māori claims for water should it try to crack down hard on freshwater allocation and management, made slow progress on issues like water quality. The business backlash to its emissions trading scheme made the going even tougher for its flagship climate change policy and the implications for the economic control of water.

While the looming global financial crisis diverted voters' attention in the lead-up to the 2008 election, little more than a year after winning the new National-led government thrust water back into the headlines. In March 2010, the government suddenly sacked all democratically elected

councillors from Canterbury's regional council, ECan, and replaced them with a new chair and commissioners (Gorman, 2010). The reason given was water. Environment Minister Nick Smith and the local government minister, ACT's Rodney Hide, cited what they claimed was ECan's failure to address 'urgent problems with water management in Canterbury' for the decision (Smith and Hide, 2010). As late as 2015, Smith was still resisting a return to democracy for ECan, saying it carried 'too many risks' (Pearson, 2015).

At the time of his decision to sack the ECan councillors, Smith said efficient water management was crucial to New Zealand's competitive advantage and clean, green brand. That reference to clean, green New Zealand would soon come back to haunt National, this time on a world stage. In 2011 the prime minister, John Key, was interviewed on BBC World's programme *Hard Talk* by Stephen Sackur. Sackur challenged Key over New Zealand's '100% Pure' tourism marketing campaign, saying New Zealand was clearly not 100% green, that it was struggling with water pollution and that government had been complacent about the issue for years. Key dismissed the concerns of scientists Sackur cited to back up his claim, saying they were like lawyers and he could 'give you another one that will give a counterview'. '[I]f you don't believe it is clean and green you need to show me a country which is cleaner and greener,' Key retorted (Murray, 2011).

As it happened, academics from Princeton, Harvard, Singapore and Adelaide universities had been compiling just such a list. In a report published in 2010, New Zealand was placed 18th among the 20th worst countries by proportional composite environmental rank (Bradshaw, Giam and Sodhi, 2010).

It wasn't only conservative politicians who were getting the message that the environmental harm being caused by intensive farming was a growing threat. In a 2013 speech to a Trans-Tasman Business Circle lunch, Fonterra chief executive Theo Spierings warned farmers that they were a decade behind their European counterparts in environmental sustainability. He said this was disappointing and it was time farmers got their act together because they could not continue to grow the way they

had in the past or they would hit the wall in terms of environment and sustainability (Hickey, 2013).

There was a sound basis to Spierings' concerns. Environmental protection had failed to keep up with the explosion in dairy cow numbers as eager investors read the market signals and tried to capitalise on soaring dairy prices. The rapid expansion in dairy herds saw new farms carved out of less profitable sheep and beef farms in less traditional dairying areas like Canterbury and Southland. In the 21 years from 1994 to 2015, the number of dairy

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cows soared 69% to 6.5 million (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). More than half of these animals were concentrated in just three regions: Waikato was home to the biggest dairy herd of 1.75 million animals, followed by Canterbury with 1.25 million and Southland with 0.75 million. The biggest increases over this time were in Southland, which recorded a 539% growth in dairy herd numbers, followed by Nelson's 499% growth and Canterbury's of 490%.

The impact these millions of extra animals was having on the environment, and fresh waterways in particular, was becoming obvious. Over this period, the parliamentary commissioner for the environment released several reports on the problem, pointing to the explosion in

dairy cow numbers as the root cause of dirty rivers, warning of the continuing damage being caused and calling on the government to do more to tackle the issue.

National had tried to bring competing interests together by establishing the Land and Water Forum in 2009. The forum was set up using a Scandinavian model designed to provide consensus, but that proved difficult to achieve. After several reports and hundreds of recommendations, most environmental groups quit, complaining that remaining was pointless because the government was not acting on the forum's advice and recommendations (Press, 2015).

By 2014 the mounting pressure for change was starting to have an effect and explicit water quality policies appeared in political party manifestos. National surprised many with its 2014 election pledge to spend \$100 million to protect waterways. The initiative would see what it described as 'selected areas of farmland next to important waterways' bought and retired over ten years. In its third term, the Key government tried to ease the growing public discontent and demonstrate that it was taking the issue seriously, releasing a consultation document, *Next Steps For Fresh Water*, in February 2016 (Ministry for the Environment, 2016). It correctly identified that our rivers, lakes and streams were being polluted by agriculture, industry and urban activity, dirtied by erosion caused by farming, forestry and infrastructure and drained and dammed by irrigation and electricity generation. But its proposed remedies were dismissed by critics as weak and inadequate. Fish and Game chief executive Bryce Johnson described it as an attack on the environment, a win for agriculture and out of step with public sentiment.

The threat the country's deteriorating water quality posed to public health was also becoming apparent. In Canterbury, the region's medical officer of health, Alistair Humphrey, issued warnings that the contamination of drinking water by nitrates from intensive farming posed a serious health risk (Humphrey, 2011). The most vulnerable were babies under the age of three months, who, he warned, were at risk of 'blue baby' syndrome caused by the high nitrate levels in the water used to mix

their milk formula robbing them of oxygen.

Toxic algae blooms in rivers and lakes were also gaining increasing publicity as the algae killed dogs and forced authorities to close popular swimming spots. But it was the deadly contamination of drinking water in the affluent Hawke's Bay town of Havelock North which may have proved the tipping point for the public. In August 2016, more than a third – 5,500 – of the town's 14,000 residents fell ill with campylobacteriosis after their drinking water supply was contaminated by farm animals. *E. coli* had travelled from pastures into an underground water bore. Three people died, with another 45 admitted to hospital. The official report into the contamination said the incident raised serious questions about the safety and security of New Zealand's drinking water (Government Inquiry into Havelock North Drinking Water, 2017a, 2017b).

Local government's role in protecting the environment and water quality also came under fire, with public law specialist and former prime minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer saying that regional and district councils' performance was seriously deficient. In *Local Government Magazine*, Palmer launched a blistering attack on the lower North Island's Horizons Regional Council after it lost a case in the Environment Court over its failure to properly protect water. Palmer said the 'illegality of the council's decision-making is quite stunning' and had bordered on misfeasance. He warned that the interests of future generations were now at stake (Palmer, 2017).

It was precisely the new generation of environmentalists making their voices heard when a new environmental pressure group, Choose Clean Water, was launched in late 2015 (www.choosecleanwater.org.nz). Choose Clean Water targeted younger people, grabbing media and public attention with a nationwide tour to raise awareness, marches on Parliament and petitions calling for action to fix the problem. The Tourism Export Council backed the new group, highlighting the fact that tourism had overtaken dairying as New Zealand's biggest single income earner.

By the start of election year 2017, public patience had run out with central

government's handling of water quality. Frustration compounded when the government released its latest plan to tackle the issue (Ministry for the Environment, 2017). Its proposal to designate waterways as 'wadeable' rather than 'swimmable' and to make that the new target drew widespread scorn. Tourism Export Council chief executive Lesley Immink bluntly told

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Environment Minister Nick Smith: 'A national water policy statement that only aspires to *wadeable* is a marketing disaster for New Zealand.' Water scientists admitted they found the plan complicated, and Nick Smith courted derision when he suggested culling birds was a possible solution to improving water quality (Burry, 2016).

The toxic brew of public anger, scientific bewilderment, government duck-shoving, dirty dairying and declining water quality was now attracting the attention of international media. Critical articles appeared in well-respected publications like the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Economist* and the *South China Morning*

Post, as well as documentaries on international television networks like Al Jazeera. The *Economist's* blunt headline cut deep: 'Dairy farming is polluting New Zealand's water' (Economist, 2016). It was against this backdrop that the 2017 election was fought and water emerged as a central battleground.

The *Stuff* website dubbed it 'The Environment Election', journalist Ged Cann noting that the 'environment is having its moment in the 2017 election. It seems more voters are concerned about it than ever before' (Cann, 2017). Jamie Morton in the *New Zealand Herald* noted that water quality was dominating the environment debate as a result of what it described as Kiwis' anger over our freshwater estate reaching boiling point (Morton, 2017). Labour released detailed environment and water quality policies, and while they generated a fierce backlash among farmers and conservative politicians, the policies thrust the issues further into the political spotlight and appeared to resonate with voters. Water quality also featured in the manifesto of the Opportunities Party, which snared 2.4% of the final vote – a good showing for a minor party fighting an election for the first time.

Labour has made a start at implementing the strong environmental and water quality policies it campaigned on, with Environment Minister David Parker promising noticeable and measurable improvements in freshwater quality within five years. It has already outlined its freshwater strategy in a document titled *Essential Freshwater: healthy water, fairly allocated* (Ministry for the Environment and Ministry for Primary Industries, 2018) and will soon release a new National Policy Statement for Freshwater Management and national environmental standard for fresh water.

The freshwater strategy and its intergenerational goals dovetail with the government's announcement of this year's financial statement as the world's first well-being budget. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern explained the concept to world leaders at the World Economic Forum in the Swiss alpine resort of Davos at the beginning of 2019, saying it would take a broader approach to defining a nation's

health. Water quality and the environment, she stressed, are central to that thinking.

National also appears to be embracing the same approach. In his state of the nation speech in January, National leader Simon Bridges admitted that he and his party now realise how concerned New Zealanders are about water quality and the environment. ‘Economic growth and improving the environment can and must go hand in hand,’ he said. ‘New Zealanders have always trusted National with managing the economy. They know we’ll be careful with your money. But I want you to know you can trust us to care for the environment as well’ (Bridges, 2019). Underscoring just how important these issues now are to National, the first of the party’s policy discussion documents to be released this year was on the environment. National is also considering a new environmental party as a future coalition partner, with suggestions of a Blue-Green Party being formed (Bennett, 2019).

Have the politicians finally read the mood of the electorate accurately? The depth of voter concern about water quality is confirmed in a number of public surveys. Just before the 2017 election, Water New Zealand released the results of a survey showing that nearly three-quarters – 73% – of the public are concerned about poor water quality in our rivers and lakes (Water New Zealand, 2017). A poll conducted by Colmar Brunton for Fish and Game in December 2017 found 75% of those surveyed were extremely or very concerned about pollution of rivers and lakes. They rated the issue as one of their top two concerns, just behind the cost of living on 77%.

In April 2018 Colmar Brunton conducted another poll, this time for the Ministry for the Environment to gauge New Zealanders’ concerns about climate change and water quality. The poll found that 82% of those surveyed believed it was very or extremely important to improve water quality in lakes and rivers (Ministry for the Environment, 2018). In December 2018 Colmar Brunton repeated its poll for Fish and Game (Fish and Game New Zealand, n.d.). This time, pollution of rivers and lakes had risen to be New Zealanders’ number one concern, with 82% saying they are

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extremely or very concerned about the issue. The cost of living was in second place, with 80% extremely or very concerned. The health system was third on 78%, followed by child poverty, 72%, education and climate change both on 70% and housing 67%. These results demonstrate that water and climate change are now established as major issues for voters.

The next election in 2020 could well see a new direction for New Zealand policymakers and political parties. Mainstream parties will have to reassess whether the traditional policies they have relied on for decades to appeal to voters are still relevant or need rethinking and reprioritising. An emerging generation of young voters will likely be more swayed by environmental and climate change policies than hip-pocket staples like tax, state aid and superannuation. The two major parties, Labour and National, have already started that process. Labour stole a march on National in 2017 with its election water policy. Although the initial reaction, from the agriculture sector in particular, was negative, the commitment to restore lakes and rivers to a swimmable state resonated with voters to the extent that, as we have observed, it may well have cost National the election.

Although National is now trying to play catch-up, the ground will continue to change. The 2020 election will see a new cohort of voters entering the ballot booths: voters who weren’t born when the climate sceptics had the upper hand in international policy debates and who have grown up in an economy where tourism, not dairy, is the lead export earner; in a world where the news routinely features stories of rapidly shrinking glaciers, record-breaking summers and increasingly ferocious weather events. Through their formative years they have listened to the rising concern about the continuing deterioration of our rivers, lakes and streams and seen the failure of successive governments to properly address water quality and climate change, knowing it will be they who live with the consequences, not their parents. Their arrival on the electoral scene is sure to turbocharge the growing momentum for a fundamental change in political imperatives. The potential scars on the political landscape for those who choose not to listen may be as pronounced as those of water’s indelible mark on the land.

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