

## CHAPTER 5

# SIMON LUSK'S PLAN

Simon Lusk had been watching US Republican politics for years and looking for ideas that were applicable to New Zealand. Gradually he put together a plan to move the country's politics to the right. He laid this out in conversations with his close political allies and in a three-page strategy paper that was never intended to be made public.

The plan was practical and methodical. The idea was to target candidate selection processes in safe National seats, installing a rump of hard right candidates who would influence politics for many years to come. Suitable candidates could also be found and trained for local government elections. At the same time, a pool of younger people would be identified, cultivated and guided into right-wing politics. Each of these groups would be managed and supported by professional strategy advisers, notably Lusk himself. Such figures were familiar in US politics but not in New Zealand.

Lusk was also well aware, from his American observations, that the single greatest advantage of right-wing parties and candidates was their ability to greatly outspend their opponents with support from wealthy and corporate donors. Fundraising was central to the plan. Next, the right could dominate the media by the dominance of right-wing blogs: 'the right currently controls the blogosphere,' he wrote, 'and political journalists repeat much of what appears on blogs.' The blogs were part of the second track of politics available for 'black ops' and negative campaigning. Finally, his plan involved 'weakening the power of those who believe in big government', meaning deliberate strategies and tactics to marginalise anyone, even within the National Party itself, who did not hold hard right views. All the strands required long-term effort, he argued, 'investing for at least 20 years' to ensure these changes to the political environment are permanent.<sup>1</sup>

Lusk was very much a successor of the advisers seen around National leader Don Brash in *The Hollow Men*, who saw their role as moving the party and New Zealand politics to the right. Like them, Lusk understood that he lived in a country where the hard right ACT Party could attract only about 1 per cent of voters and where the majority consistently supported more moderate policies, including publicly provided health, education and social support. His plan needed to be implemented by stealth.

The difference between Lusk and many big ideas people is that he actually got things done. His first attempt as a professional strategy adviser had been the 2008 election, when he assisted the election campaigns of six conservative National Party candidates, four of whom won.<sup>2</sup> These included Sam Lotu-Iiga and Louise Upston: Lusk was campaign manager for Upston and ‘shrewd counsel’ to Lotu-Iiga.<sup>3</sup> Both of them proved to be socially and economically on the right of the party, with Lotu-Iiga working closely with ACT MPs and both voting against the 2013 Marriage Equality Bill.<sup>4</sup>

In the following years, Lusk continued to work as a mentor for some MPs, for instance Lotu-Iiga, who personally paid him a retainer for the service.<sup>5</sup> Some Cabinet ministers had misgivings about Lusk’s growing influence; they believed him to have links to 13 National MPs. This was discussed at the 27 June 2011 Cabinet meeting and a message was sent to all MPs discouraging them from paying for Lusk’s services. MPs, including Lotu-Iiga, stopped paying the retainer but remained in contact with Lusk. Meanwhile another minister, Judith Collins, reportedly heard the Cabinet discussion and resolved to make contact with Lusk. She saw him as having influence over 13 caucus votes in a post-John Key leadership bid.<sup>6</sup>

Although sometimes, like Slater, a controversial figure, Lusk was nonetheless thoroughly within the National Party, part of the hard right wing then associated with Collins. Shortly after the 2008 election, when Lusk and Slater had become friends, the latter arranged for Lusk to meet his father, John. Lusk reported back that it ‘went bloody well with your father, I am planning to talk to him further about professionalising politics in Auckland (which won’t cost much at all) to really smash the left.’<sup>7</sup>

By 2011 Lusk was being paid by a new set of candidates to help them win selection for National in that year’s election. Early on a Saturday evening in January Lusk and Slater were chatting via Facebook about Lusk’s latest success, the selection of Jami-Lee Ross for a by-election in the safe National seat of Botany.

Slater wrote that he had received the ‘utu post’.<sup>8</sup> This was a speciality of

Lusk's where he wrote, under Slater's name, what he publicly called a 'lessons post' about the selection process – when it was over. He told Slater to 'change anything you like, and beef it up a bit. There has to be consequences to people's actions.'<sup>9</sup> The utu post, which appeared on the Whale Oil blog the next day, said Jami-Lee Ross was the 'winner on the night and likely to have a long career as an MP'.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, Slater's friend Aaron Bhatnagar needed to get new advisers and 'break his habit of playing dirty'. Slater had added some words to make the criticism easier for Bhatnagar: 'Aaron is a mate and so hopefully he will take this commentary as it is intended, cold hard facts from the Whale, acting as a mate.' But Slater could be surprisingly disloyal to his friends. In this same Facebook discussion he wrote about Bhatnagar: 'What a loser, he couldn't even win WITH daddy's money, you think Zac Goldsmith would have ever stood in a seat he couldn't win. Rich people don't lose selections unless they are fucking hopeless or fucking stupid. He lost to a maori and that is even funnier.'<sup>11</sup>

The utu post also suggested that another selection candidate, former broadcaster, Maggie Barry needed to 'get some proper advisers'. But the strongest criticism was reserved for Bhatnagar's political adviser, Hamish Price, 'a nasty, offensive and divisive self important fool of a man that should be avoided at all costs by any candidate'. After dumping on his adviser competition, Lusk wrote: 'If Maggie does decide to pursue a career with National she should do what this blog recommends to all candidates. Get proper professional advice from discreet and competent people with a track record of winning. There are a number of people who work behind the scenes and shun publicity, and candidates can call the tip line for their details.'<sup>12</sup>

This sounds like Lusk advertising for paying work. But more important to him was building his 'loose alliance of committed fiscal conservatives', the group of right-wing MPs who, under his guidance, would help to move the National Party permanently to the right. This was the post about which Judith Collins wrote to Slater, 'Loved the utu post.' Slater said cheerfully, 'Shit this utu post is going to cause some rumbles. Chaos and mayhem.'<sup>13</sup>

After discussing the utu post, Lusk said to Slater, 'I reckon i can get a few candidates paying you to sort out their facebook pages, could be a nice little earner through the entire cycle.' He continued, 'I can sort out Mark no worries, he doesn't mind spending.'<sup>14</sup> Mark was Mark Mitchell, another of Lusk's paying clients, who was competing for selection in the safe National Party seat of Rodney, where long-time MP Lockwood Smith had decided not to stand again. Mitchell was a good example of the hard right MP grouping

Lusk was trying to build. 'I'd really like to have him win to prove it can be done, and that you and i are crucial in peoples career.'<sup>15</sup>

Over the following weeks Lusk and Slater wrote over 20 Whale Oil posts about the Rodney electorate selection process, attacking first a local candidate and front runner named Brent Robinson, then the other front runner, Scott Simpson, and also various party officials who were standing in the way of Lusk's client. Here are Lusk and Slater at the beginning of the Rodney selection campaign.

*Simon Lusk: i want to see mark selected, but if brent plays fair i am going to play fair. ... obviously with the option of playing the man if we decide it is necessary*

*Cameron Slater: well [what about] a post about sometimes when an MP has been there forever it is time to look outside the party hierarchy because the MP has stifled the best*

*Simon Lusk: yes, and that we need a genuine star, someone that has made it on a global scale ... and while brent is a willing toiler for the party, we must stop selecting second raters*

*Cameron Slater: you've got it*

*Simon Lusk: We'll have a proper post when we pull the trigger, nice but create doubts in the minds of the delegates ... frame the race as a very successful man who is turning down millions a year to do the best he can for NZ...*

*Cameron Slater: successful but tough*

*Simon Lusk: yes, is excellent under pressure*

*Cameron Slater: not a panty-waist ... we can sex it up with the war stories then the media will pick it up.<sup>16</sup>*

Mark Mitchell, the man they were promoting, had been a New Zealand police officer and dog handler until 2002, when he moved to the Middle East after the 2003 Iraq invasion. He was one of a rush of former police and

military personnel who took lucrative private security jobs helping to protect the ill-fated occupation forces in Iraq.

*Simon Lusk: his dog stories are awesome, czar nailed a lot of bad bastards, including ripping a monsoon shield off a car to sort out three gang members that were taking on mark*

*Cameron Slater: hope it chewed on them hard*

*Simon Lusk: i believe it did, mark said when they start screaming you know the fight will go out of them*

*Cameron Slater: lol*

*Simon Lusk: broke a guys elbow*

*Cameron Slater: so tough in business, tough in terrorists, tough on crime*

*Simon Lusk: that is fucken impressive, bite hard enough to break an elbow*

*Cameron Slater: just plain tough*

*Simon Lusk: compassionate though*

*Cameron Slater: doing for the underdog, nabbing bad bastards since  
xxxx*

*Simon Lusk: how good are your media contacts to get coverage of some of his stuff protecting his staffers after the iraqi terrorists killed lots of people*

*Cameron Slater: easy ... once i start pumping his story they will pick it up anyway ...<sup>17</sup>*

Lusk said, 'I think it would also be worth talking to jason ede about mark, not yet but soon, saying that he is a good news story that will appeal to the

masses.’ Slater replied, ‘Ok will work on that.’ Lusk wanted Ede to know that he and Slater were the ones who were going to get Mitchell into Parliament. ‘We need to think about this,’ he said, ‘how to tell the story about the nailing, that it isn’t random, it is smart people making smart decisions to fuck up opponents. Ede needs to know that it is your set up.’<sup>18</sup> The first Whale Oil post about the Rodney electorate selection appeared a few days later, written in Lusk’s style. ‘This blog does not take sides in selection races,’ it said. ‘The delegates can be trusted to make the right choice, and should be left alone to make the right choice.’

After this post Slater went down to Hawke’s Bay to hunt with Lusk and then, on 7 February, they both went to Puhoi, north of Auckland, to plan out the selection campaign with Mitchell. From then on their campaign intensified. They had apparently decided it was necessary to play the man. The first target was Brent Robinson. A Whale Oil post declared that ‘thanks to the tipline’ it appeared that Robinson had been signing up people in his church to become National Party members. ‘Branch stacking may or may not be constitutionally valid,’ they wrote, ‘but it is highly unethical.’ National should be looking carefully at what has gone on to see if Robinson was ‘fit to go through pre selection’.<sup>19</sup>

The next day the attack shifted to the electorate chair, Cehill Pienaar. The tipline had, they claimed, run hot with unspecified criticism of Pienaar. ‘The calls and the people now talking have become overwhelming.’ The post then made a threat about what Mitchell might do with his money. ‘What concerns me is that with at least one of the candidates known to be a scrapper that this could all end up being discussed in a court and poor [National Party lawyer] Peter Kiely will have to expend an enormous amount of energy hosing down the issues.’<sup>20</sup>

For the next few days Lusk and Slater ran two themes, attacking Robinson for his Christian connections – ‘the last thing the party needs is more allegations of interference in the party from religious brethren’<sup>21</sup> – and attacking Pienaar about his past in South Africa: ‘there are a few people in the South African press who have long memories of this man, and there have been offers of providing full details of his extremely colourful past, especially in the 1980s.’<sup>22</sup> A post called ‘Rodney skulduggery recap’ said of Robinson that ‘some tiplines un-kindly describe the protagonists as members of “The Cult”’. Meanwhile Pienaar was ‘outed as an extreme right wing former South African politician’.<sup>23</sup>

Several posts followed about Pienaar’s pro-apartheid beliefs in the 1980s.

'It galls me as a kiwi,' the post said, 'that people like him are hiding here in New Zealand and attempting to pervert our democratic processes here. By helping, orchestrating and enabling the branch stacking of Brent Robinson he has brought his despicable politics to the fore in New Zealand.'<sup>24</sup> Lusk joked to Slater via Facebook that 'cehill just keeps on giving doesn't he'. The *Dominion Post* had run the Whale Oil allegations against Robinson and Pienaar that morning.<sup>25</sup> Slater said, 'I had jonathan marshall asking me why I drip fed all the cehill stuff and don't just do a big post ... idiot repeaters [journalists] ... they obviously don't know about [Whale Oil] Rule of Politics #43, Death by a Thousand cuts is always better than a swift beheading.'<sup>26</sup>

National Party insiders were well aware of the Whale Oil campaign but did not know yet who Slater was backing. 'They have no idea that I'm on mark's side,' he wrote to Lusk, 'just that you are.' Lusk replied that the party president had warned Mitchell off working with him. 'Doesn't worry me too much,' he said. 'My reach in auckland is improving a lot, sam [Lotu-Iiga] and JLR [Jami-Lee Ross] will help things. It is a long game and I am going to outlast the others.' They moved to discussing who they could get to lobby for Mitchell within the party. 'I just need to think it through with a gun in my hand and a couple of dogs to control,' Lusk said, 'too complex for sitting at a desk.'<sup>27</sup> This was part of the routine of Lusk's days; the day before he had written, 'I am going to go and drill holes in cute little bunny rabbits.'<sup>28</sup>

The following day, 22 February 2011, the blog had 'A thought for Rodney electorate': 'Proverbs 22:8 Those who plant injustice will harvest disaster, and their reign of terror will come to an end.' It said, 'National Party delegates are sensible people, as they go into the meet the candidates meetings and the final selection I know that they will do the right thing.'<sup>29</sup> Lusk and Slater now moved to the next stage of their campaign.

The next day they ran a post headed 'Scott Simpson now favourite in Rodney'. It was timed in the early evening before the first meet-the-candidates meeting for the selection hopefuls. The attacks on Pienaar would continue – Slater: 'check out my latest post, if that doesn't fuck pienaar nothing will' – but the main target was now the other front runner, Scott Simpson.<sup>30</sup> The post purported to be praising Simpson. He was a former Northern regional chair, he deserved his 'long awaited chance of running for office' and he had shown 'a huge degree of dedication to the party'. They then put the knife in.

*Scott does have a few negatives that have also come through the tipline.  
Most appear to be from people in the McCully/Boag camp who think*

*this blogger is too dumb to work out the game they are playing. In the interests of fairness the weaknesses are [With my comments in brackets]:*

- *Scott is too old. [WO [Whale Oil]: True, he is older than Maggie Barry so he will never make it into cabinet especially with the cycle the way it is – he would likely be 64 before National is next in government.]*
- *Scott is not particularly likable. [WO: Sure Scott is not as user friendly as someone like John Key, Paula Bennett or John Carter, but he is a lot more likable than Tim Groser or Chris Finlayson. And he wont rabbit on in latin.]*
- *Scott has a blood feud with the President who is shackled up with Scotts ex-wife. [WO: So what! Both men are big enough to deal with this and for those morons in the party who think the President will break a habit of a lifetime and actually do anything let alone try to kneecap Scott, it is not going to happen. Ever. Not even Scott can enrage Peter enough so he will get off his arse and do anything.]*

*This blog is not endorsing Scott, as it stays neutral, but it is saying do not vote for Brent Robinson, who's unethical behaviour means he is not fit for political office let alone the local bowling club committee in Orewa.<sup>31</sup>*

At 6.30 the following morning Slater wrote to Lusk, 'Is that all you want up for Rodney.' Lusk had supplied him with the next attack post on Simpson. Lusk answered, 'Let me look at it again. I think so. We are trying to take out Scott and that will do that.' Slater replied, 'Up now.'<sup>32</sup> The post, about the meet-the-candidates meeting, said, 'Scott confirmed his front runner status with a solid performance', then continued: 'the only strange thing was that ... [he] went all negative, which is the cardinal sin in selection.' It questioned whether Scott Simpson could 'lose the unloseable selection' and cited 'concerned' people who alleged that he had rigged the regional delegate list.<sup>33</sup> They, of course, were the main ones going negative. Lusk explained to Slater they needed to be careful. 'The difficulty is that we want scotts people to lean on brent [Robinson] to get him out first,' he wrote later that day. 'Then we can smash scott.'<sup>34</sup>

Mitchell, their selection candidate, was paying big money for this dirty campaigning, and was well aware of what he was buying. Slater wrote to Lusk, 'I hope Mark is up with the play on these posts.' Lusk said, 'Yes am

talking to him a lot. He is telling me that it is having a massive effect.' Slater replied, 'Hehe.'<sup>35</sup> Winning a selection in such a safe electorate almost guaranteed the candidate a place in Parliament indefinitely and attack politics was a major part of how it was being achieved. In just a few weeks there had been so much conflict and controversy that Lusk and Slater had their first victory. The party officials, rattled by the criticism, moved the selection date back by two weeks.

At this point, the end of February, a National Party board member became concerned about the direction the selection was taking and raised questions about Mark Mitchell's past. Lusk and Slater talked over the problem via Facebook and decided the best strategy was to hit back immediately. Lusk said, 'Why don't you write something, email it through to me. I will sort it out with mark and it can go online.' Slater replied, 'I'll write it up about how they are saying [the information on his past] is supposed to be bad but not actually showing people the info, so in the interests of getting things out in the open here it is ... seems pretty above board to me etc etc.' Lusk agreed. Half an hour later Slater wrote, 'Ok I'm off home ... will think of Rodney post on the drive, unless you come up with something suitably nasty meanwhile.'<sup>36</sup>

By 10 o'clock that night they had something suitably nasty. Without irony they published another attack on Simpson, entitled 'Muckraking in Rodney'. 'Not content with having his mates jack up the regional delegates in his favour,' they wrote, 'Scott Simpson and his pals are now really stooping low by touting that one of the candidates has a dodgy background that should be looked into.' They batted aside the questions about Mitchell's past and said, 'Frankly these tactics smack of desperation and show clearly that Scott Simpson thinks that Mark Mitchell is a serious threat to him.' They repeated the hints of legal action. 'Misrepresenting the truth can often lead to legal actions and I doubt the board member concerned has my robust attitude towards legal action.' They urged the party leadership to intervene in the selection process.<sup>37</sup>

And so it went on. More attack posts followed until the National Party decided to cancel the selection process and reopen it again later that month. Simpson pulled out and moved to the Coromandel electorate, where he won the selection and became an MP without having to face more weeks of orchestrated attacks.<sup>38</sup> Lusk and Slater moved the negative campaigning back to Robinson, whom they hounded with claims of being 'shabby', 'shameless', 'unethical' and 'unscrupulous'.<sup>39</sup>

Slater also used a small sum of money provided by Lusk to manipulate Victoria University's iPredict rankings of the Rodney candidates and then wrote posts using the iPredict results to reinforce their campaign. Here are Lusk and Slater discussing iPredict: 'Great post on ipredict,' Lusk said. 'You like, i manipulate[d] scott to being the front runner before i posted, only took \$5,' Slater replied. 'How much of that \$200 have you got left?' Lusk asked. 'All of it,' Slater replied. 'I have been slowly buying up no MMP when it falls below 20, but now I will use it to manipulate Rodney stocks.' Lusk said, 'Let me know when you run out.'<sup>40</sup> Thus Slater could write, for instance, 'Brent Robinson has some strong backing on iPredict though this has tailed off in the last day or two.'<sup>41</sup> It is surprising that Victoria University associates itself with the iPredict 'market-based forecasting system' and equally surprising that many politicians and others take its results seriously. It is readily used as a political tool, in this case for just \$200.

On 27 March a flattering profile of Mitchell appeared in the *Sunday Star-Times*. 'Former cop Mark Mitchell's exploits in the Middle East sound like the plot of a Hollywood blockbuster – but has he got what it takes to make it as a politician?' it began. 'He's had violent confrontations with gangs and criminals during 14 years in the New Zealand police force. He's spent eight years as a top international hostage negotiator, at one point fighting for his life in a five-day siege in Iraq, a story which is set to feature in a movie made by Brad Pitt.'<sup>42</sup>

The newspaper had been given a rosy version of Mitchell's career. Mitchell presumably was caught up in the siege – he had gone to make money in the midst of a bloody civil war – but his job was not as a hostage negotiator and the words 'top', 'international' and 'eight years' only compounded the exaggeration of his role. He was a private security contractor, that dubious by-product of the Iraq occupation.<sup>43</sup> The movie did not eventuate. Slater sent a crowing message to Lusk saying, about the other Rodney selection candidates, 'Fuck they must be bitter about the [*Sunday Star-Times*] article.'<sup>44</sup>

At the same time as the public sell, Lusk proposed that they send a quiet word to the National Party hierarchy not to try to raise negative stories about Mitchell. This appears to be a reference to possible legal action. He wrote to Slater, 'You could tell your father that people need to be careful as Mark has very deep pockets and is not interested in the results, just hammering opponents.' Slater replied, 'I will.'<sup>45</sup>

On the day of the selection meeting, 26 April 2011, they posted a final 'Rodney skulduggery update', rerunning all the attack lines against Brent

Robinson. They quoted Proverbs 28:10, 'Those who lead good people along an evil path will fall into their own trap, but the honest will inherit good things.'<sup>46</sup> Mitchell won.

On the morning after the selection meeting Slater and Lusk wrote the utu post, describing the winners and losers, and reminding other would-be candidates about the 'very small group of talented, experienced professionals' who could enhance their chances. As they spun the results in the utu post, Slater and Lusk still did not admit their role. 'Delegates in Rodney have told me what a fantastic guy [Mitchell] is,' the post said, as if they had not been working for him for months. 'It is hard to remember the last time a National candidate met delegates by helping them bale hay and then had a few beers afterwards, but this kind of touch builds loyalty, loyalty that helped Mark win on the first ballot.'<sup>47</sup> A wealthy, hard-line private security industry man had turned up from overseas and walked into a safe seat; some soft lighting was required.

Without Lusk and Slater's vigorous and covert negative campaigning, it is unlikely that Mitchell would have won the seat. The successful candidate would most likely have been either Robinson or Simpson, probably Simpson. The painfully insincere blog posts, the obviously biased attacks and the rest of the heavy-handed negative campaigning had done its job. It was not hay baling that got Mitchell in. Mitchell's main contribution in his first three years in Parliament would be a private member's bill called the Prohibition of Gang Insignia in Government Premises Bill: law and order posturing that did almost nothing to change the problems it talked about. He spoke up for strip searching of inmates in private prisons, praised an amendment of surveillance laws and moved an amendment to the 2013 marriage equality law to reassure marriage celebrants that they would not be obliged to marry gay and lesbian people if it was against their 'religious or philosophical beliefs' (before he voted against the gay marriage law).<sup>48</sup>

Lusk and Slater had also achieved their own personal goal, proving that they could win a safe seat selection against the odds and decide who made it into Parliament. They had used the same formula seen in earlier chapters: persistent negative politics and attacks delivered without revealing who was behind them. And, unlike most people, Lusk and Slater thrived on this stuff and had little time for those who didn't. Here, for instance, are the pair talking about their frustration with senior National Party officials part way through the Rodney selection campaign. Slater had said, 'I'm pretty pissed about their attitude', but Lusk replied, 'I am not. I am just motivated to cut

throats. Unfortunately the biggest buzz I get is when I wreck someone, only done it three times, but I was on a massive high.<sup>549</sup>

This kind of politics tends to reshape the political environment, making it harder to discuss and convey policy and ideas. The short-term political gains for a tiny minority cause long-term political problems for everyone. Attack politics is also effective because other people may not even realise that an orchestrated campaign is occurring. As Lusk said about one of his candidate selection clients that year, 'I have told him that I need to remain completely anonymous.'<sup>550</sup>

Lusk and Slater had been working on other candidate selection campaigns at the same time. Around this time Lusk wrote to Slater, 'I am going to tie up the palmerston north campaign by sunday, I'll let you know what your cut is.'<sup>551</sup> There had already been talk of payments from Mark Mitchell in Rodney as well. For instance, an invoice from Slater to Lusk later that year had charged \$3,450 for 'social media management' and a few months later there was a similar invoice for \$6,325.<sup>552</sup> It is not clear from the documents who the Palmerston North client was. But the Whale Oil commentary on the Palmerston North selection result warmly congratulated the winner, Leonie Hapeta, and said she would be a great candidate.<sup>553</sup> In the Hutt Valley's Rimutaka electorate Lusk and Slater backed Jonathan Fletcher, who also won the candidacy but without the fight seen in Rodney.<sup>554</sup> Lusk wrote on his website that he had won three out of three candidate selection contests that year.<sup>555</sup>

Slater came through this period annoyed at the resistance they had received from the party hierarchy, but again Lusk was focused on his bigger plan: 'I dont really care. I just know i will be around and you will be around and pinko [David Farrar] will be around when they are long gone.' Slater said that he cared 'in so much as they treat us with contempt until they need us', but Lusk replied: 'I have at least half a dozen people in their twenties who will be in caucus one day. It is a never ending cycle, and i am the one that is capturing all the talent, they will all be clients.'<sup>556</sup>

To Lusk, such young people were assets in the long-term political plan. A few days earlier, he had written to Slater about the impressive organiser of the Student Volunteer Army (SVA), Sam Johnson, who was co-ordinating voluntary clean-up efforts after the Christchurch earthquake. Lusk did not like a complimentary comment made by a Green Party MP about the SVA and wrote, 'Cam, can you bash this c\*\*t ... I'll write it.' He went on, 'Sam is a client. He will pay off long term.'<sup>557</sup> It is doubtful that Johnson saw himself as a client or as part of Lusk's plans and would like to be talked about in this way.

In mid-2013 someone in the National Party hierarchy leaked a set of strategy papers written by Lusk, including the plan quoted at the start of this chapter. The aim was to deter candidates and MPs from using Lusk's services. Judith Collins e-mailed Slater an article about the Lusk paper leaks and Slater forwarded it to Lusk. But Lusk did not sound concerned: 'Been good for business, cam, everyone now knows that they need us on side to win.'<sup>58</sup> As it turned out, by the time Mitchell was declared winner in the Rodney candidate selection, Slater and Lusk did not even talk about it in their long Facebook discussions. They had moved on and had new targets on their minds. Two weeks earlier Lusk had contacted Slater to ask, 'Has Rodney [Hide] got you on the pay roll or is he able to be taken out to save ACT.' Slater replied, 'Not on payroll.' Lusk wrote back, 'Will call to discuss later.' Their next black ops project was under way.