

**EXTRACT FROM *DIRTY POLITICS* BY NICKY HAGER.
PUBLISHED IN 2014 BY CRAIG POTTON PUBLISHING.**

CHAPTER 4

THE CRUSHER AND THE ATTACK DOG

The attack bloggers' point of contact in the National government, year after year, remained John Key's office. But Cameron Slater had another close friend and ally in the government, Cabinet minister Judith Collins. They had much in common. One cultivated the iron woman persona of Crusher Collins, future prime minister, the other the reckless bully-boy persona of Whale Oil, crusading outsider. They were drawn together by right-wing politics and a shared attraction to aggressive and often petty attack politics.

Slater was a devoted supporter of Collins, using his blog to promote her and to attack her critics. Collins, in return, fed a continuous supply of material to Slater: public press releases, political gossip, tip-offs and serious leaks. She boasted for him in 2013 that 'you might not like it but Whaleoil is better informed and better read than any other news outlet or social media'.¹ They talked often by phone, and in the evenings and weekends they chatted via Facebook. In work hours Collins e-mailed him directly from her sixth-floor Beehive office.

Often their exchanges were about small events of the day. The following are typical of Collins's messages: 'You should whack these guys hard, they are truly pathetic';² 'Cam, FYI. Another own goal for plughead', her name for Labour MP Clayton Cosgrove;³ could he edit her Wikipedia page and replace an unflattering photo;⁴ and, forwarding a document, 'I think I seriously annoyed certain people over it. Too bad!'⁵ There are hundreds of e-mails between them, including many from her private e-mail address.

The same gossipy tone is found in their Facebook discussions. 'Did you see the line up the [Labour Party] had for [the TV3 programme] the Nation?' she wrote during the 2011 election campaign. 'Like Mangrove, Beaumont and septic tank are going to bring them any votes.' ('Mangrove' was a nickname for Labour

MP Stuart Nash and ‘Septic Tank’ was Labour MP Carmel Sepuloni.)⁶ Labour MP Jacinda Adern was ‘My Little Pony’.⁷ At other times they discussed more serious issues, as when Slater wrote that she and he needed to find a right-wing candidate to take on Auckland mayor Len Brown: ‘put your thinking cap on.’⁸

In one conversation, Collins complained at length about the people arrested in the 2007 Urewera police raids. Slater replied that he had ‘had an interesting chat with [a police source] on Thursday night about this.’ ‘Yes?’ Collins said. ‘There might be a stray video arrive in my PO box this week,’ Slater said. ‘Oh, gosh,’ she replied sarcastically, ‘what a shock. The sort of thing that people who are no longer before the courts would [not] want seen.’ Slater agreed: ‘Terrible ... not the kind of thing they would want seen since they are portraying themselves as nice people.’⁹ There is no sign that he received the video, but this was the minister of police, later minister of justice, apparently talking without concern about someone leaking police evidence. (Slater obviously had no concerns about the police evidence either, and in this period when Collins was also minister of corrections, he appears to have used a prison officer in the department to move a prisoner between prisons on his instructions.)¹⁰

Collins’s cynicism about her parliamentary colleagues is clear in her conversations. ‘Did you notice that Deborah Coddington was talking up [National MP] Nikki Kaye today in HOS [*Herald on Sunday*]?’ she wrote. ‘Wonder what she is expecting in return.’¹¹ Or writing about her ACT Party coalition partner: ‘Boscawen will be right ... He’s too Aspergers to lie.’¹² And when one of her least favourite Cabinet colleagues, Simon Power, announced he was leaving at the 2011 election, she commented, ‘all those 2005 intake [of National MPs] who suck up to him would have thought, “What, you bastard, why did I waste my time being nice to you?”’¹³

But what Collins and Slater shared most were their dislikes and enmities. Their hostility towards many people in the National Party was at least as strong as their dislike for their political opponents. As quoted in Chapter 1, Collins wrote about Auckland National Party internal politics, ‘Personally I would be out for total destruction ... But then again I’ve learnt to give is better than to receive.’¹⁴ They called it the double rule. If someone attacked them, they gave back twice as much. Here is Slater writing about a senior National Party official who had annoyed him:

Cameron Slater: he is a very silly man, because I could stop the people who are going against him. But now, he is just going to get double.

Judith Collins: you know the rule. always reward with Double.

Cameron Slater: i learned the rule from you! Double it is.

Judith Collins: If you can't be loved, then best to be feared.¹⁵

The pair worked together using the Whale Oil blog to mock or attack their opponents. A frequent target was Labour MP Trevor Mallard. Here is a relatively harmless example from during the 2011 Rugby World Cup.

Judith Collins: Cam, last night at the Parliamentary function for the All Blacks and Springboks. Mallard made a complete duck of himself. Has anyone told you yet?

Cameron Slater: no what happened?

Judith Collins: Well, he was representing Phil as leader of the opposition and when he spoke, he talked about how nice it was that there was a united welcome for the Springbok as 30 years' ago, just down the road, 'my good mates were batoning my other good mates'. Cue - sharp intake of breath all around. The Springbok captain in his reply pointed out very nicely that he was a little boy at the time (3 years' old) but he very graciously dealt with the clodhopper. One of the All Blacks said to me later that he had asked Mallard what the f..k he thought he was doing. People were appalled.

Cameron Slater: That is just silly stuff. How many there? Can I blog it

Judith Collins: You can use it if you like but just don't say it was me ...¹⁶

The next morning Slater published a post on the Whale Oil blog entitled 'How Embarrassing', by Cameron Slater:

Things were trucking along nicely until Mallard got up to speak. He talked about how nice it was that there was a united welcome for the Springbok as 30 years ago, just down the road, 'my good mates were batoning my other good mates'.

Cue – sharp intake of breath all around.

The Springbok captain in his reply pointed out very nicely that he was a little boy at the time (3 years old) but he very graciously dealt with the crippled campaign manager.

*One of the All Blacks said to my tipster later on that evening that he had asked Mallard what the f**k he thought he was doing.¹⁷*

Slater had changed her quaintly old-fashioned word ‘clodhopper’, obviously not his style, but otherwise it was almost entirely written by Collins.

Slater had headed the post ‘via the tip line’. When she sent her account of the event the day before, Slater had joked ‘tipline is very busy’. Collins didn’t understand and replied, ‘Really? Labour or Nats.’ He replied, ‘No the tipline is busy talking about mallard at the rugby function.’ Collins said ‘Oh dear ... I can be a bit slow ...’ Slater said, ‘Hehe, best thing I ever did was start referring to the tipline.’¹⁸ The ‘tipline’ often meant Collins. She caught on and some e-mails she sent him from then on began ‘for the tipline’.¹⁹

Another example of information sent from Collins was the occasion when Mallard had carelessly pressed ‘reply to all’ while answering an e-mail sent to all MPs by a member of the public. His reply, sent at noon, therefore also went to all MPs, including Collins. She forwarded the e-mail straight to Slater with the subject line ‘Note to self trev, don’t reply to all’.²⁰ By 12.53 p.m. Slater had posted the e-mails on his blog, headed ‘Note to self trev, don’t hit reply to all’.²¹

Slightly less harmless was an occasion in September 2013 when the executive assistant to the newly elected leader of the Labour Party, David Cunliffe, e-mailed an invitation to a group of senior Labour MPs to meet with Cunliffe and accidentally included the address of a National Cabinet minister, Amy Adams. It was clearly a mistake by a staff member, the kind of thing that most people would not exploit. The Slater documents show what happened next.

The executive assistant had sent out the invitation at 12.55 p.m. The papers show that Adams’s senior private secretary printed out the e-mail and only 10 minutes later, at 1.05 p.m., someone scanned it on the photocopier on the Beehive building’s fourth floor, home to Adams’s office, e-mailing it directly to ‘AJA’ (presumably Amy Juliet Adams).

Question time in Parliament intervened for the next three hours, then just after 5 p.m. ‘AJA’ forwarded the Labour Party e-mail to Judith Collins in her ministerial office two floors above. Notice that Adams chose Collins as the recipient. Collins had had it for only two minutes when, at 5.09 p.m., she forwarded the scanned document to Slater.²² By 5.21 the e-mail was

posted on Slater's blog, 'David Cunliffe's team isn't off to a good start,' Slater wrote, 'here they are inviting Amy Adams to a private function for Labour MPs.'²³ It feels like an undignified use of a police minister's and environment minister's time.

These conversations and political collaborations provide the background to much more serious and questionable attacks conducted by Collins and Slater, again reliant on Collins's ministerial access to information. The first occurred in 2009, when Collins was the minister of police and corrections. In August of that year her government's reputation had taken a hammering when MPs' and ministers' expenses were released. The figures showed that Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Bill English, had been claiming a \$700 per week accommodation allowance for living in his family home. English eventually offered to pay back some, then all, of the allowance but not before he and the government had suffered considerable bad publicity and public scepticism. Just a week after he gave up the allowance, Collins and Slater came up with a plan for some political revenge.

It began on 7 October 2009, when Slater published a Whale Oil blog post entitled 'A curious set of circumstances'. Slater said the 'curious little story' began with Labour MPs sending official information requests and asking questions in Parliament about English's accommodation allowance. 'Making up requests is an art form in itself,' he wrote, 'and if you are able to know exactly where to go asking those questions then it becomes a whole lot easier.' He then named a man, Simon Pleasants, who worked for Ministerial Services managing ministerial housing and who, the Internet showed, had worked for Helen Clark's Labour government.

'Now I find this set of circumstances very curious to say the least,' Slater wrote. 'What we have here is a hard core Labour flunky, a tribal member working in an area where information has seemingly been flowing to opposition members where very specific questions have been asked that really couldn't have been asked unless someone was in the know.'²⁴

These were serious allegations against an employee based on nothing but guilt by association. But Slater did not stop there. Two weeks later, on the Whale Oil blog, he was calling Pleasants a 'Labour Party snitch' and the 'prime suspect' in feeding information to the Labour MPs.²⁵ A week after that, unsupported by any evidence, Slater had moved from suspicion to fact: 'all the information the [Labour MPs] Pete Hodgson and Trevor "Putin" Mallard used was kindly provided by their flunkie and snitch, Simon Pleasants.'²⁶

Where had all this come from? The allegation was leaked by Collins. On 6

October 2009, the day before his first post, Slater had received an e-mail from Judith Collins's private e-mail address. It was clear that they had already been discussing the subject and she was now putting the crucial details in writing. The e-mail contained just five words: 'Simon Pleasants, Manager, Ministerial Property.'²⁷ It seems very much as though a senior Cabinet minister was collaborating in publicly accusing a ministerial staff member of wrongdoing.

Slater's attack on Pleasants unleashed the usual outpouring of abusive blog comments. Allan: 'The prick should be sacked immediately.' Mikenz: 'we must sack the fuck!' Roger: 'Somebody fire the c**t – Can we get the prat harpooned? And shamed ... and tarred 'n feathered.' The right-wing blogger Keeping Stock (Tony Stuart) wrote: 'Superb work Cam! ... I wonder if Mr Pleasants will get a less-than-pleasant invitation to have a wee chat with his boss sometime this morning...'²⁸ Nick Bryant, press secretary to Minister of Economic Development and Energy and Resources Gerry Brownlee, joined in the comments disguised as Manu and Former Hack (he had previously worked for the *National Business Review*). 'Well done,' he wrote. 'You might well have one for the harpoon gallery here.' He had searched out further information on the Internet showing Pleasants's previous work for the Labour government, which he copied into the comments, and asked, 'Any progress on this today Whale? ... Any interest from the MSM [mainstream media]?'²⁹ In fact no media used the story. Slater and Collins had smeared the name of a government employee without evidence or the employee being able to reply.

One commenter was less sure: 'your evidence of wrongdoing is?' A West Auckland commenter named TonyC (Tony Cooke) replied: 'His wrongdoing is being a pinko communist fuck, nuf said.'³⁰ As it turned out, there had been no good grounds for targeting Pleasants, who retained his job until he later chose to move to another department.

Being picked out for casual accusations and vigilante justice is of course a shocking experience for the people concerned. A few hours after Slater published the first Pleasants post a commenter called Sinner left a message on the blog. Responding to another commenter who had said 'If this Simon Pleasants is guilty...', he wrote, 'he is clearly guilty, he should be fired, he should be bankrupted, his family thrown in the gutter, he should [be imprisoned] for at least 6 years, then he should be banned from any civil service position...' Then he said, 'Ah fuck it. Shoot him, and shoot his wife and kids if they can't be bothered to pay for the bullet.'³¹

The police investigated the 'Shoot him' comment under the offence of intimidation. In early November a police officer turned up on Slater's door-

step with an ultimatum. He could either remove the comment – and another that proposed ‘cut[ting] the bastard’s throat’ – from his blog, as they risked legitimising violence, or go to the police station. Slater removed the comments. The same Sinner had written about 2000 Whale Oil comments, often aggressive, under a range of names. For instance, a few days after the ‘Shoot him’ comment, when another commenter questioned the importance of Slater’s scoops, Sinner responded: ‘How many fucking bureaucrats have you personally driven to suicide? None, right? so fuck off!’³² The rest of Sinner’s comments remain on Slater’s website.

If a minister had suspicions about a staff member, there were formal processes to follow. But, despite knowing the character of Slater’s blog and the reaction that would follow, Collins instead collaborated with Slater, leaking information and having the employee publicly tried and hanged, comfortable in the knowledge that her role would remain secret. Slater obscured her involvement by making the accusation sound as if he had merely noticed a ‘curious set of circumstances’. As with his work for John Key’s office, he was conducting a political attack to help the government. It was also Collins’s and Slater’s double rule in action, except that the minister of police and future minister of justice apparently felt no need to have evidence before inflicting punishment. The police had taken the threatened violence and intimidation seriously and moved to stop it. Little did they know that their minister had helped to organise it.

Another leak hit the news dramatically in 2012 when Collins was minister for the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC). Bronwyn Pullar, a former National Party activist, had been accidentally sent details of 6700 ACC clients while she was in dispute about her own ACC support following an accident. Pullar’s ‘support person’ in negotiations with the ACC was former National Party president Michelle Boag, whom Slater regarded as an enemy and attacked on his blog at every opportunity. (Boag had displaced his father, John Slater, as party president many years earlier.)³³ Boag sent an e-mail to Collins about the Pullar case in March 2012. It was leaked to the *Herald on Sunday* about a week later, revealing for the first time Pullar’s name as the claimant, Boag’s role in her case and, embarrassing for them both, an alleged attempt to do a deal over Pullar’s ACC payment before returning the client list. The leak was instantly controversial.

Collins strenuously denied that she or her office leaked the letter and began defamation proceedings against two Labour MPs who made the accusation. Cameron Slater initially became interested in the issue in a peripheral way.

A friend of his, an ex-prostitute, feared that she was one of the clients whose details had been accidentally released and asked for his help. At that stage no one outside the government knew the name of the person to whom the ACC information had been sent. Slater's friend had been told the ACC file went to a man and she said she was going 'fuckin nuts': as an ex-prostitute her ACC file was 'flammable' and would 'bust some big balls for sure'.³⁴

Slater said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do, I will call Collins and get the real story.'³⁵ After talking to Collins, he rang his friend the next day to say, 'The file was an excel spreadsheet ... there is fuck all info in it except names and numbers.' He reassured her that 'your file wasn't leaked or anyone else's'.³⁶ And Collins had told him more. 'The person who got it was a woman,' he said, 'she then tried to blackmail ACC into giving her something or she would release the file ... she is now likely to be prosecuted for extortion.' That evening his friend was still worried. 'Yeah but I spoke to the minister,' Slater repeated, 'it was a single excel spreadsheet ... a goddammed spreadsheet ... and the silly bitch tried to get money for it ... There is a lot of misinformation and overreaction. Judith has never lied to me.'³⁷

The reason for describing this conversation is that it shows Slater was in communication with Collins about the case in the days between her receiving the Boag–Pullar e-mail and when it was leaked. Collins was giving Slater confidential information about what the e-mail contained and the possible ACC reaction to it. Collins, as ACC minister, was sharing sensitive information about her department's business and about one of its clients.

The first time that the public heard about the leaked e-mail and its contents was in the *Herald on Sunday* on 18 March 2012.³⁸ Until then, the only people who could have known about the leak were presumably the leaker and the journalist, and perhaps the newspaper editor. But, as often happens, Slater got excited and hinted in advance about his role in political schemes. Another conversation with his ex-prostitute friend suggests he was aware the leak was coming.

On the Friday evening, two days before the Sunday newspaper came out, he boasted to his friend that he had known it was only a spreadsheet and now 'I know who it is too': he had had another conversation, presumably with Collins again, and learnt of Pullar's identity. More important, he had heard what was going to happen to Pullar: 'She is going to get ratfucked hard.'³⁹ ('Ratfucked' is an American term for political dirty tricks.)

Two days later the leak appeared. The media mentioned the possibility of senior ACC staff leaking the e-mail, but the two main suspects for the leak

were Boag, Slater's enemy, and Collins, his close friend with whom he had already been discussing the Pullar case, and who had apparently also told him about Pullar's identity. Which of the two women was more likely to have told him about the imminent 'ratfucking'?

If it was Collins, then the leaked e-mail may have been passed to *Herald* journalist David Fisher via Slater, who had given a series of other stories to the same journalist in that period and would have been happy to make trouble for Boag.⁴⁰ Collins could then say with a straight face that she was not the leaker. By then it would have been just another piece of the constant flow of tips and documents going from Collins to Slater. It could have been sent from Collins's private e-mail address or, like the Amy Adams e-mail, been printed out, rescanned and then e-mailed, leaving no trace on the ministerial e-mail system.

But this was much more risky than passing on titbits to mock Labour MPs. Boag had her own friends in Cabinet and was furious about the leak. Only a tiny number of people had had access to the e-mail before it was leaked and Collins was an obvious suspect. She was repeatedly asked if she was the leaker. She responded that 'I've been very clear all along ... I am 100 percent sure there was no leak from me or my office.'⁴¹ She said she had printed out the e-mail in her office and her assistant had forwarded a copy to ACC, but she had not leaked it. John Key said he was 'utterly convinced' the leak did not come from Collins or her office: 'She has absolutely assured me that it didn't come from her office and I've got no reason at all to question her.' He had felt the need to 'directly [ask] her the question on two occasions'.⁴²

On most Sundays, Slater prepared a series of filler posts in advance, many of them cut and pasted stories from foreign newspapers, that were published automatically throughout the morning, allowing him some quiet time off. But this Sunday he was hard at work early. He posted about Pullar and the *Herald on Sunday* story at 9.18 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1 p.m., expressing great approval that 'someone has shone a very bright light into a very dark corner and exposed [Boag] and her bully tactics'.⁴³

His journalist friend Jonathan Marshall contacted Slater the next morning via Facebook about the leak blog posts. '[David] Fisher will be pleased with you,' he said. 'Why?' Slater asked. 'Acc stuff. She [Pullar] sounds like a mole,' Marshall said. 'She is a mole, a blackmailing mole and it has got Boag a beauty,' Slater replied. 'Yeah I loved it. Well done,' Marshall said.⁴⁴

There were then the days of allegations and denials about who was respon-

sible for the leak. The following week, on 28 March, Slater joked with Jordan Williams over Facebook about iPredict running stakes on who had leaked the Pullar e-mail. 'See i predict?' Jordan asked. Slater asked on what and Williams said the 'acc leaker'. 'Heh,' Slater replied, 'who is winning?' Williams, who had been spending money to move the stakes, said, 'Collins or acc official. I've shorted Simon [Lusk] quite a bit, brought him right down.' Slater said, 'Heh, he had nothing to do with it, neither did Crusher [Collins]. My pick is [ACC deputy chair John] McCliskie.' Williams said, 'Course he didn't. Crusher would talk to you [but] Simon doesn't deal with media, ever.' Slater said, 'Nope ... you should start pumping up Boags stocks, hehe.' Williams replied, 'Lol.'⁴⁵

But the same day when he was chatting over Facebook to Aaron Bhatnagar, Slater suddenly burst out angrily, 'Time to take the c**t out. Hamish is involved in this up to his neck.' Bhatnagar replied, 'Hamish Price? I know he's a gossip, but what has he done?' Price was a well-known figure in the Auckland National Party. Slater said, 'He was telling anyone who would listen that Collins leaked to me and i leaked to Fisher.' Bhatnagar said, 'For gods sake. Its this kind of crap that will see us out of office in 2 years.' 'Yep,' said Slater.⁴⁶

This chapter raises a number of concerns about Collins: she was apparently unworried about the leak of police evidence; she was directly involved in providing information about and attacking a Ministerial Services staff member; she disclosed confidential departmental and client information, not to mention possibly leaking the controversial Pullar e-mail; she made it her business to feed a stream of information, gossip and documents for use on the Whale Oil site. She was also a close friend and trusted confidante of Cameron Slater, which says much about her as a politician.