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“Drill, baby, drill”: right-wing populist culture wars in Aotearoa New Zealand 2023-25

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Abstract

In March 2024, Aotearoa New Zealand's newly elected coalition government, comprising the traditionally conservative National Party, libertarian ACT Party, and nationalist/populist New Zealand First Party, introduced legislation to override decades of environmental protection and expedite infrastructure projects, including mining on conservation land. Framed as a solution to bureaucratic red tape and economic stagnation, the Fast-track Bill provoked unprecedented opposition. The coalition Government's response to critics was not primarily policy engagement but culture wars escalation, using anti-woke rhetoric to delegitimise environmental advocates, Māori rights activists, and scientific expertise.

This thesis explores how the struggle for hegemonic dominance operates through culture wars discourse, revealing a strategic cooperation between neoliberal extractive interests and right-wing populism. A political speech by Resources Minister Shane Jones published to YouTube, audio-visual opinion pieces from three right-wing media figures, and eight one-on-one interviews with New Zealanders are analysed through critical discourse analysis and discourse theory. The analyses, informed by Hall's encoding/decoding framework and theories of affect and fantasy, reveal how "woke" functions as an empty signifier capable of linking disparate issues into a unified threat to "commonsense", giving voice to resentment and validating gleeful transgression.

Culture wars rhetoric represents a faultline in contemporary New Zealand political discourse. It splinters potential progressive coalitions, delegitimises expertise, reframes democratic participation as obstructive, and provides the propaganda infrastructure through which environmental deregulation and resource extraction gain popular

consent. With Resources Minister Shane Jones' culture wars rhetoric as its anchoring focus, this thesis reveals dynamics that extend beyond one politician; Jones provides a lurid articulation of anti-woke sentiments that characterises the governing coalition's broader approach to democratic contestation.

Keywords: culture wars, right-wing populism, neoliberalism, propaganda, encoding/decoding, critical discourse analysis, discourse theory, fantasmatic narratives, empty signifiers, antagonism, chains of equivalence.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Disruption, rhetoric, and the reception of anti-woke environmental discourse

On 7 March 2024, the recently elected New Zealand coalition government introduced a Bill to fast-track consents for infrastructure projects. The Fast-track Approvals Bill in its draft form would allow corporations to bypass well-established environmental legislative protections and – by giving direct and final power to three Ministers to approve or deny projects – sidestepping public consultation (White, 2024). Following the introduction of the Fast-track Bill there was a high level of public interest and well-organised pushback, including a 20,000-strong “March for Nature” protest march in Auckland and almost 27,000 submissions from individuals and organisations – one of the highest numbers of submissions ever received on legislation in New Zealand (Edwards, 2024). This determined opposition came up against an equally determined propaganda effort from all three coalition parties, third-party organisations and right-wing media, the construction and reception of examples of which this project will examine.

Political proponents of the Fast-track Bill have repeatedly claimed its enactment in law would allow New Zealanders to retain a “first-world standard of living” (ignoring that a first-world standard of living would arguably require a thriving natural environment as well as wealthy corporations) and would address the “obstruction economy” (Bishop, 2024). Government politicians such as Shane Jones, Resources Minister and now Deputy Leader of New Zealand First (hereafter referred to as NZ First), led the propaganda effort championing the Bill. Jones, well known for his bombastic rhetoric, first drew on stereotypes of environmental campaigners as, for example, earnest idealists in order to minimise or negate their objections. He dismissed alternative solutions as idealistic and

mocked environmental concerns as risible “piety and earnestness” (Young, 2024). Politicians and right-wing media sought to establish what this study will describe as discursive “chains of equivalence” to link different demands, identities or concepts together so they could be seen as representing the same thing. They also attempted to claim floating signifiers – words or phrases that can be used and interpreted in very different ways by speakers and listeners with very different objectives, biases and motives (Farkas & Schou, 2018). When interviewed about the sweeping new powers the Fast-track Bill proposed to give to Ministers shortly after its introduction, Minister of Infrastructure Chris Bishop’s comments morphed into a general opposition to “the system”:

We are deliberately disrupting the system. I make no apologies for it. The status quo is failing New Zealand. We were elected on a mandate to “do things”. This is deliberately designed to disrupt the system (TVNZ, 2024).

A disruptive business strategy is seen as one that can result in transformation and growth (Raynor, 2011) and the term “disruption” is an often-used, if perhaps less-often-understood, buzzword in business and technology circles (Lee, 2014). Christopher Luxon, leader of the right-wing, business-friendly National Party, and New Zealand Prime Minister since November 2023, has made much of his business credentials achieved before entering Parliament. He has been framed by commentators as viewing politics through the lens of his corporate experience and background in managing teams (Murphy, 2024). However, the concept of disruption and its co-option into Fast-track Bill propaganda was not just a clumsy shoehorning of business jargon into National Party policy. Techniques of disruption are central to neoliberalism, an ideology which depends

on rejecting tradition to create new markets, values, and commodities (McManus, 2019). Harvey (2020) characterises the neoliberal process as “creative destruction” (p.3) – reminiscent of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s motto to “move fast and break things” (Taplin, 2017). While neoliberalism has been theorised in different ways (Harvey, 2020; McManus, 2019; Monbiot & Hutchinson, 2024; Phelan, 2014), it is generally associated with state-supported regimes, policies and ideas that favour individualised, market-based solutions to economic and societal problems. Monbiot and Hutchinson (2024) cast neoliberalism as the class war tool used by the very rich to gather more wealth and power, with the public seen as consumers rather than citizens and systemic failures such as the climate catastrophe framed as individual failures. For example, household recycling is offered as a viable, household-level solution to climate change in order to divert attention from the far more damaging actions of global, corporate polluters. Persuasive neoliberal discourse simultaneously masks and legitimises its project to overcome barriers to capital flow and to change the distribution of wealth (Fairclough, 2015, p.33).

Beyond these general observations, it is helpful to situate this research within the articulation of neoliberalism specific to the current political moment in Aotearoa New Zealand. Neoliberalism is the broad ideology guiding much of the National Party’s approach to governance and, in a more doctrinaire form, that of their coalition partner the ACT Party (Boraman, 2023). The third coalition party, NZ First, segues between affirming the neoliberal prescriptions of the coalition government and articulating anti-neoliberal rhetoric. The discursive strategies of populism and neoliberalism find common ground in a politics of disruption grounded in culture war rhetoric, which

denigrates woke “elites” while being deeply embedded within the logic of the existing system (Ansell, 2024).

Disruptive right-wing populists benefit from the affordances of digital media, which thrive on affective strategies and reward audience engagement with wide amplification through digital engagement. Habermas’ vision of a rational public sphere evolving through communicative action (Habermas et al., 1974) did not imagine a world of affective digital populism and culture war politics creating and embedding class and economic power for a new aristocracy of corporations and financiers (Harvey, 2020). In an additional dystopian twist, capitalism has monetised emotion online, turning interactions into data points for marketing and persuasion (Boler & Davis, 2021); in this arrangement, profit or political advantage depends on capturing the attention of the audience. As audiences and advertisers turn to social media platforms, politicians as well as traditional and privately-funded media are taking advantage of culture war strategies online that have affective power in shaping public opinion: “events are replaced with opinions *about* events, and the most compelling narrative wins the day” (McManus, 2019, xix). Phelan (2019, p. 468) emphasises that:

the political rationality of neoliberalism is generative of a politics of disidentification, where antagonism to social justice, socialism, communism, society, politics, and government become key nodal points in the construction of ideological identities that are now finding transgressive expression in different online cultures.

This project examines how the current government, and particularly the party political strategy of NZ First, produces a form of anti-woke populist politics that constructs such antagonisms. It focuses first on efforts to delegitimise any politics that questions the assumed commonsense logic of the Fast-track Bill, and then broadens to examine both the construction and reception of “woke” as a pejorative signifier. Throughout, I will demonstrate how culture wars discourse, and particularly the construction of woke antagonists to unite disparate groups, serves as a tactic to benefit a project which aims to remake all of life in the form of “the market” – neoliberalism.

My background and motivation in approaching this project

Beyond my participation in New Zealand politics as someone concerned with environmental protection and social justice, I have a professional interest in how ordinary citizens receive and interpret the messages constructed by political and media elites. Between 2006 and 2017 I was employed by New Zealand Parliamentary Services in a communications capacity working first for the Green Party Leaders and then the Labour Leader’s Office. I occasionally provided communications support for Shane Jones (a Labour MP until 2014), whose florid and combative rhetoric in his current roles as Minister for Resources and a New Zealand First MP looms large throughout this project. Having observed first-hand over ten years the wide contrast in the success of construction and reception of communication strategies by a range of politicians including Jones and (now Dame) Jacinda Ardern, it has long been my ambition to not only analyse the construction of political performances and rhetoric, but also to explore how they are received by New Zealand voters. The election of a right-wing coalition government encompassing both populist and neoliberal elements, and their almost

immediate deployment of culture wars tactics to advance their “disruptive” legislative agenda has provided that opportunity.

Overview of thesis

My thesis is broadly situated within what Baym (2015) identifies as a mixture of the interactionist and culturalist paradigms of political communication research, which is given specific expression here as a critical approach informed by discourse theory (Howarth, 2000). I interrogate how discourse operates within structures of power and ideology, treating the audio-visual texts and participant contributions as data to be critically analysed rather than as perspectives to be reported uncritically. This approach departs from positivist assumptions that typically presume strict boundaries between objective and subjective knowledge, positioning the researcher as neutral observer. My examination of both the construction and reception of culture wars discourse in Aotearoa NZ 2023-25 therefore reflects my “active and intentional effort to intervene in the social construction of reality, and to shift the terms of the real toward emancipatory and critically desirable spaces” (Baym, 2015, p. 9).

The rest of this thesis is organised as two broad parts. Part 1, Chapters 2 and 3, first establish the research context, situate the project within relevant literature and establish its theoretical foundations and methodological frameworks. Part 2, Chapters 4 to 7, present empirical analysis of the media/political texts and the eight one-on-one interviews and then discuss these findings from a more expansive theoretical perspective. This second part concludes by reflecting on the research questions, methodological approaches, and alternative approaches for better understanding and countering culture wars strategies as New Zealand approaches another general election.

Chapter 2 situates this project within relevant scholarship and establishes some initial theoretical and empirical foundations for examining anti-environmental propaganda. It examines how right-wing populism and culture wars rhetoric provide scaffolding for anti-environmental messaging, constructing antagonistic frontiers to establish ecological concerns as culture wars battlegrounds. The performance of political authenticity emerges as crucial for creating a stage for transgressive narratives reinforced through humour and ridicule. A variety of approaches by scholars to the reception of culture wars rhetoric are introduced.

Chapter 3 builds on the insights gained through a review of the literature in Chapter 2, and describes the theoretical and methodological frameworks I will use to carry out my textual analyses. While Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory provides the central standpoint for this study, the complexity of culture wars discourse invites several complementary frameworks already introduced in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes how a combination of Hall's encoding/decoding theory, Boler and Davis's concept of affective digital politics, Glynos's concept of fantasmatic narratives, and Phillips and Millner's concept of deep memetic frames will inform and guide the textual analyses. It conceptualises propaganda as deliberate persuasion with affective dimensions that bypass critical thinking, exploring how performative authenticity and discursive tactics construct antagonistic frontiers. Methodologically, the chapter integrates discourse theory and critical discourse analysis, with discourse theory providing contextual tools and CDA enabling close textual examination. The research employs a two-stage methodology: textual analysis of five political and media texts revealing encoding strategies, followed by semi-structured interviews with eight New Zealand participants

illuminating how culture wars rhetoric is decoded and how subjectivities are produced.

The chapter ends by outlining the two key research questions guiding this study, namely:

RQ1. How have politicians in Aotearoa New Zealand's right-wing coalition government and their media allies constructed "anti-woke" culture wars rhetoric since the 2023 election, with a particular focus on (Resources Minister) Shane Jones' advocacy for the governing coalition's Fast-track Approvals Bill?

RQ2. How have citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand received "anti-woke" culture wars rhetoric, particularly concerning environmental issues, since the 2023 election?

Chapter 4 is the first empirical chapter, examining four audio-visual political and media texts: Minister for Resources Shane Jones' speech to the NZ First 2024 Convention, Michael Laws' monologue on "woke environmentalism" on privately-funded, right-wing online media broadcaster The Platform, Sean Plunket's wide-ranging anti-woke roundup (also on The Platform), and Duncan Garner's critique of Prime Minister Luxon on his podcast, Editor in Chief. I analyse each text through two complementary frameworks: first, critical discourse analysis to examine lexical, grammatical and rhetorical choices, and then, at the contextual level, discourse theory to discuss the use of empty signifiers, chains of equivalence, and antagonistic frontiers. The chapter reveals consistent tactics across texts: "woke" operates as a empty signifier linking disparate concerns, performative authenticity positions speakers as truth-tellers against elites, and affective strategies bypass critical engagement through mockery and outrage. These discursive

tactics delegitimise environmental protection while obscuring extractive interests benefiting from the denigration and fragmentation of opposing formations.

Chapter 5 is the second empirical chapter, examining eight semi-structured interviews during which participants viewed audio-visual excerpts of the political and media texts analysed in Chapter 4. Using Hall's encoding/decoding framework as scaffolding, and supplemented by theories of affect, deep memetic frames, and fantasy narratives, the chapter reveals complex reception patterns. The analysis explores how "woke" operates as an overarching empty signifier, how antagonistic frontiers are decoded across dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings, and how effectively the performance of authenticity resonates. The participants' responses demonstrate mediation by personal experience, media consumption patterns, and largely unconscious fantasmatic mechanisms.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings of the two empirical chapters from a more expansive theoretical perspective, with Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory at its centre. It examines how culture wars discourse functions as a strategy to secure consent for environmental deregulation, and traces the flexibility of "woke" from episodic articulations to a central empty signifier that links disparate constructed threats into unified antagonists. Through the analysis of the chains of equivalence, centring the wider rhetoric of the coalition government, the chapter demonstrates how – for example – environmental advocates, Māori politicians, and transgender people can be discursively constructed as equivalent enemies threatening "ordinary people". I argue performative authenticity is key to enabling these articulations, as political and media figures position themselves as transgressive truth-tellers and privileged insiders. The chapter concludes

by examining how the discursive reification or “thingification” of nature enables extractive, deregulated objectives.

Chapter 7 addresses the research questions, reflects on the study’s theoretical and methodological approach, discusses how progressive movements can inadvertently validate anti-woke stereotypes, and argues for urgent development of alternative strategies to expose extractive interests behind culture wars rhetoric as the 2026 New Zealand General Election approaches.

PART 1

Chapter 2 – Theoretical and empirical foundations to studying anti-environmental propaganda and right-wing culture war strategies

In this chapter I review existing academic literature to examine how anti-environmental propaganda operates within contemporary political discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand. I begin by distinguishing between the terms “propaganda”, “rhetoric”, and “discourse”, as they are specifically deployed throughout this thesis. The chapter then explores how propaganda has evolved in response to digital affordances and ecological crises, creating new opportunities for the manipulation of public opinion through digital reach and affective strategies. I examine two intersecting discursive formations that provide frameworks for anti-environmental messaging: right-wing populism and culture wars rhetoric. Right-wing populism, understood variously as a thin ideology (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017) and a performative political style, offers a platform upon which antagonistic frontiers between “the people” and “the elite” can be constructed and mobilised. Culture wars rhetoric provides the content and targets for this mobilisation, turning social and cultural grievances into political formations through binary narratives and the exploitation of fears. The convergence of these formations with environmental issues demonstrates how ecological concerns can be reframed as culture wars battlegrounds, enabling politicians and their allies to denigrate environmental advocates as disconnected elites.

Having established these broader frameworks, the chapter narrows its focus to examine how right-wing populist discourse is embodied and made credible through performative authenticity. The strategic presentation of self becomes crucial for establishing politicians as genuinely representative of “the people”, creating a stage from which

transgressive narratives gain and lend legitimacy. This discussion of performance leads to an examination of specific discursive tactics – empty signifiers, chains of equivalence, antagonistic frontiers, and conceptual flipsiding – through which meaning is mobilised, fixed, and contested.

The chapter concludes by turning to the crucial question of how audiences receive and interpret these messages. Drawing on encoding/decoding theory, affective tactics, deep memetic frames, and fantasmatic narratives, this final section sets out the theoretical tools necessary for examining not only how culture wars messages are constructed but how they are decoded. In doing so, it identifies a gap in existing literature: the limited research examining audience reception of right-wing populist culture wars rhetoric, particularly in the New Zealand context.

Propaganda, rhetoric and discourse

It is important to first distinguish how the terms “propaganda”, “rhetoric”, and “discourse” are used within this project. Propaganda refers to the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions and direct actions towards political ends. This term thus emphasises the goal of persuasion. In the context of this project, propaganda is a useful term for the calculated, purposeful techniques used to achieve public support for legislation such as the Fast-track Bill – the choice of language, the targeting of audiences, and the use of affective strategies. Rhetoric operates at a more tactical level, referring to specific stylistic choices employed within propaganda. These may include turns of phrase, humour, mockery, and performance – linguistic and symbolic tools through which propaganda is communicated. Discourse, understood through Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) discourse theory, encompasses entire systems of meaning-making that shape

and are shaped by social reality, establishing and re-establishing boundaries and antagonistic faultlines within the possibilities afforded by social and historical contexts. Unlike propaganda (which implies manipulation) and rhetoric (which focuses on technique), discourse in its theoretical sense acknowledges that all societal participants operate within, reproduce, and contest discursive formations. It is important to note that “discourse” can also be used in an empirical sense – as discrete ways of speaking about topics that can be analysed and compared. For example: “environmental discourse”, “anti-woke discourse”, “economic development discourse” are statements, ways of operating, and conceptual frameworks competing with one another to fix meaning, and can be identified and analysed. These conceptual distinctions inform the analytical chapters that follow: the media and political text analyses demonstrate propaganda as an intentional strategy, and rhetoric as a tactical deployment is observed in textual examples such as Jones’ speech. Discourse as a meaning-making system that shapes and is shaped by social reality underpins this thesis throughout, and is explored specifically through the contextual text analyses in Chapters 4 and 5.

The concept of “propaganda” in its modern sense has been traced to the social and political upheaval of World War I and its aftermath, along with concerns about the rising influence of mass media communications (Bolin & Kunelius, 2023). This provides necessary context to the emergence of new forms of propaganda in our age of datafication and existential ecological crisis. However, propaganda – typically understood negatively as a misinformation tool to manipulate public perception – is now usually more acceptably labelled as public diplomacy, strategic narratives, information management, or simply, often in a corporate context, “communications”. Propaganda

methods and channels may include leveraging computational reach – profiling, targeting and manipulating population segments through online platforms and the weaponisation and monetisation of emotion (Boler & Davis, 2021).

Culture wars rhetoric coupled with affective online affordances represent a new incarnation of propaganda opportunities and strategies responding to popular fears. When a political opponent is linked into a chain of equivalence along with terms such as “woke” or “social justice warrior”, propaganda ends are served by defining and othering political enemies (Phelan, 2023). New online affordances have provided the ideal setting for disinformation, fake news, bots, and troll farms (Farkas & Schou, 2019; Phillips, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). Since the 2024 US presidential election, Elon Musk has increasingly used his X platform as a MAGA mouthpiece, removing bans on disinformation, and spreading false claims, amplified by the platform’s algorithm, to his 200 million followers (Mallinder, 2024). Seizing control of the production of meaning (in Musk’s case, literally) is a key strategy for defining and claiming power (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002), and right-wing populist propaganda exploits commonsense understandings of ideological concepts to its advantage.

The propaganda strategies outlined above operate within broader formations that shape political discourse. Two discursive frameworks – right-wing populism and culture wars rhetoric – provide scaffolding through which anti-environmental propaganda gains power, and chains of equivalence with other political positions can be established.

Scholars agree that populism, closely related to the spread of democracy, emerged in the late 19th century in Russia and the United States as essentially agrarian movements

(Stone, 2022). The economic crises of the 1970s created fertile ground for the global re-emergence of populism. Alongside this reinvention of populism, a shift to neoliberal thinking and fragmentation of the media have driven increasing ideological polarisation. Mudde (2017) casts populism as a “thin ideology” with a deeply moral core (contrasting the pure people with the corrupt elite), an approach flexible enough to be adopted by politicians with widely varying objectives. Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary, strengthens his populist party’s message by presenting himself as an “ordinary man” on social media (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). George Simion, leader of the radical right Alliance for the Union of Romanians, uses colloquial language to convey emotional messages on his Telegram channel (Grapă & Mogoş, 2023). Despite Donald Trump’s open misogyny, racism and ableism, or rather *because* he puts that real self on display, he is viewed as authentic and true to himself (Herman, 2023). Mudde’s approach, however, has been described as best suited to authoritarian or exclusionary forms of populism (Barker & Vowles, 2020) and may be therefore too narrow to fully define the New Zealand governing coalition’s brand of right-wing populism. Moffitt (2017) argues there is a “distinct Antipodean populism” (p.122), situating it between the identity-focused and anti-immigrant attitudes of European populism and the rural concerns and economic protectionism of its North American counterpart, characterised by colourful and down-to-earth political performances and discourse. As will be demonstrated by the empirical analysis of Chapter 4, New Zealand right-wing populists, both politicians and media, have eagerly adopted the international playbook on staged political authenticity and culture wars rhetoric.

James Davison Hunter coined and popularised the term “culture wars” to describe political and social conflicts arising from opposing moral worldviews (Hunter, 1991). While Hunter was analysing an American phenomenon, these conflicts have been strategically deployed in this way by political actors internationally, with culture wars discourse often functioning as a gateway through which authoritarian politics gains mainstream acceptance. Jon Ronson, a longtime observer of the culture wars in Britain and the US, defines culture wars as “everything people yell at each other about on social media”, or “the battle of dominance between conflicting values” (Day, 2024), underscoring that culture wars rhetoric is not something exclusively produced by the right. Populism – both left- and right-wing – thrives on binary narratives that finds new opportunities to pit “the people” against “the elite”. Culture wars are key to perpetuating these divisions, as populist leaders leverage social and cultural identity issues to create easily understandable heroes and villains (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), frame themselves as defenders of traditional values, and use media and social media to sensationalise culture war issues, often spurning traditional political strategies. Relevant to the focus of this thesis, scholars have characterised the contemporary iteration of right-wing culture wars as discursive conflicts designed to delegitimise progressive ideas that challenge traditional social hierarchies and neoliberal economic objectives (Ferguson, 2009). In this framing, culture war issues provide both the content and targets for right-wing populist mobilisation, constructing antagonistic frontiers between “us” and “them” while articulating chains of equivalence – strategically linking disparate grievances into a coherent populist opposition to cultural and political elites. In short, culture wars provide populists of all political persuasions with ready-made issues to rally their base, turning often minor or fleeting social and cultural grievances

into political action through the exploitation of prejudices and fears (Boler & Davis, 2021). Their efforts are often amplified by a mainstream media desperate for engagement and advertisers (Phillips, 2018).

Culture wars propaganda in Aotearoa New Zealand is not the exclusive preserve of politicians; they depend on other organisations and the media to spread their messages. “Astroturf” organisations are those set up to amplify a political ideology (Hager, 2014). In New Zealand these include the Taxpayers’ Union (founded in 2013) and the Free Speech Union (founded in 2021). These “astroturf” organisations are closely aligned, funded by wealthy reactionary interests (Sachdeva, 2019), and exist to communicate arguments aimed at preserving a privileged status quo. One of the ways in which they do this is by introducing culture wars into public discourse to achieve pre-agreed political ends. An example of this is the Taxpayers’ Union’s support for right-wing farming advocacy group Groundswell’s “Stop Three Waters” campaign which hinged upon misinformation about Māori co-governance (Williams, 2024), and which is further discussed in Chapter 7.

Culture wars and the environment

Part of the success of culture wars rhetoric is due to the fact it is responsive and flexible in the face of fast-moving political issues. The converging crises of climate change, the social and economic impacts of COVID-19, and global political uncertainty, amplified by the affordances of social media, have created fertile ground for anger and fear. This convergence has created a receptive audience for culture wars propaganda accompanying the New Zealand coalition Government’s policy. There is wide variation in the approach to ecological issues taken by populists elsewhere in the world (Duina & Xiaoqing Zhou, 2024). If we rely on the characterisation of populism as a “thin ideology”

centred on “the people” and anti-elitism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), environmentalism is essentially a “second-tier” issue. However, the New Zealand coalition Government’s Fast-track legislation raised it to a first-tier issue in terms of communication priorities. This may have been largely due to the political and economic stakes for corporations and investors, many also political donors, who hoped to profit from new or resurrected development projects once the Bill passed. This pressure on the governing coalition to succeed demanded aggressive propaganda techniques. Widespread opposition to the Bill presented rich opportunities for divisive rhetoric articulating environmentalists as idealists, out of touch, pious, or lofty elites. Politicians intent on concentrating power in the hands of the powerful and wealthy need to fragment and weaponise opinion towards civil groupings such as indigenous organisations, environmental groups, and trade unions, a task made easier by the reality that the power of public policy has been largely given over to governments captured by corporations (Ghosh, 2016).

Another key objective of those using culture wars rhetoric to intervene in ecological discussions is to deny there is any crisis, and challenge the legitimacy of those who seek to publicise and address it (Ferguson, 2009). This discourse is articulated through sets of overt or implied binary relationships, such as the distinction between reason and emotion; between economic progress and needless delay; between getting things done and “unicorn-kissing” detachment from reality; between urban and rural concerns; between Treaty of Waitangi partnership with Māori and submerging of indigenous culture; and between “piety and earnestness, or the ability to enjoy a first-world existence” (Young, 2024). These dualisms become key nodal points in the anti-environmental discourse. Its myths include the prioritising of human interests above the

interests of other beings, and the premise that the world can sustain indefinite economic growth. The Government's downplaying of risks to environmental protections reflects its commitment to neoliberalism, which sees economic growth as paramount, supports minimal regulation in environmental protection and minimises the existence of most environmental problems (Ferguson, 2009).

Political performative authenticity

Right-wing populist discourse gains much of its mass appeal by dramatically articulating its core positions – claims to represent “the people” against “the elites” and denigration of “others”. This discourse must be embodied and mediated to achieve its political effects. The violation of normative boundaries, of populist transgression and disruption, therefore demands an element of performativity (Aiolfi, 2022; Bucy et al., 2020) to establish the politician as genuinely representative of “the people”. Performative political authenticity is not a new political strategy. In the 1600s, Machiavelli counselled the strategic management of self as necessary for statecraft (Corner, 2000). Voters want to be sure that depictions of the people to whom they will entrust political decisions reflect their real selves (Lilleker & Veneti, 2023), and that the messages they receive are trustworthy. Goffman (1959) employs the metaphor of theatrical performance; if someone plays their part well, their audience will accept that their real self is being presented. However, in the “calculated unintentionality” of presentation (Goffman, 1959, p. 9), the message that is intended and the message received are not always the same (Hall, 1980). Corner (2000, p. 387) similarly describes the staging of one's public self as a “calculated deceit”, and notes that the production of politicians’ mediated persona is distinguished by the deliberate strategy behind their performances and the

much wider reach they achieve. The representation of authenticity has itself become a political campaigning strategy, because a politician judged as inauthentic risks being rejected by voters (The Dominion Post, 2016). Enli (2016) theorises that this is because, in a mediated democracy, there is nothing more important for a politician than being regarded as worthy of trust. A right-wing populist politician who has established a reputation for being true to themselves can take advantage of their manufactured credibility to roll out a strategy of transgressive “us” versus “them” narratives and thereby construct antagonistic groupings against which supporters can be mobilised. Humour and mockery are invaluable tools for this construction. Humour can deflect objections, challenge norms, experiment with the unexpected (Morreall, 2009), and reinforce displays of performative authenticity (Sorensen, 2024). Humour and ridicule are therefore important tools of culture wars rhetoric, and have become part of the right’s social media strategy (McSwiney & Sengul, 2024).

Discursive tactics of culture wars propaganda

Having established a broader view of culture wars rhetoric, this section examines specific discursive tactics through which meaning is mobilised, fixed, and contested. These tactics – the use of empty signifiers, the linking of chains of equivalence, the construction of antagonistic frontiers, and conceptual flippingsiding (see further discussion in Chapter 3) – represent processes through which hegemonic projects attempt to fix particular understandings of social reality.

Political propaganda uses the shared, yet contested, understandings of ideological concepts to its advantage. As first outlined in Chapter 1, it seeks to claim floating signifiers - words or phrases that can be used and interpreted in competing ways (Farkas

& Schou, 2018). For example, when French president Emmanuel Macron addressed the US Congress in 2018 about “fake news”, Trump supporters heard a criticism of the New York Times and CNN, while others asserted Fox News was the target (Borchers, 2018). Floating signifiers are to be distinguished from empty signifiers, which can be harnessed to support certain viewpoints or legitimise political agendas as they can be subverted to give hegemonic coherence to a discourse (Laclau, 2005).¹ “Woke” is such a signifier with wide interpretive flexibility, allowing opponents to apply it or one of its variations (wokeism, wokery and so on) to any individual, group, or activity they wish to delegitimise. The term “woke” can be traced to pre-WWII African Americans responding to persecution: folk singer-songwriter Lead Belly warned potential victims of racist violence “best stay woke” in the song Scottsboro Boys. “Woke” came to mean being fully politically conscious, and was revived during the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign 2014–15 (Curtis, 2024). Social media memeification made the term popular, but it was also cynically commercialised by corporates to market to young, leftwing people. Antipathy towards the BLM and “woke-washing” (Mahdawi, 2018) was amplified by conservative media, and the term woke began to be used pejoratively to target progressive figures, similar to antecedent signifiers like “social justice warriors” (Phelan, 2019). This new form of woke politics was framed as performative, inauthentic and self-indulgent. The term’s associations with empowered anger against racism were replaced with criticisms of celebrity self-indulgence. This disassociation from authenticity and

¹ A floating signifier is a term whose meaning is contested, not evacuated. The signifier “floats” because it has not been totally captured by any single hegemonic formation. An example is “freedom”, defined by different political actors in competing ways. An empty signifier, while often overlapping with floating signifiers, emerges when an identity has been partially or wholly emptied of its content and transcends its origins to symbolise a broader imaginary that can become hegemonic or commonsensical. The iteration of “woke” examined in this thesis is an example of an empty signifier for those who oppose a broad array of progressive positions. Therefore, the terminology “empty signifier” is used throughout this project to analyse the primary hegemonic construction at work (Laclau, 2005).

new association with “the elite” – corporations, institutions, political formations – enabled “woke” to be co-opted into right-wing media and political narratives about perceived leftwing cultural hegemony (C. Davies & Macrae, 2023). Scholars argue that pejoration of the signifier has expanded to encompass a general “conspiracy-focused and punitive orientation to social change” (McWhorter, 2025), demonstrating the supremely flexible, empty, and contestable nature of the term.

The signifier “woke” becomes even more powerful when co-opted into chains of equivalence – different concepts, ideas, or signifiers linked together by discourse, so they come to be seen as similar or even a unified political identity (see further discussion in Chapter 3). Chains of equivalence can unite different groups against or for one cause and reduce complex issues to a common cause or solution (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For example, an anti-environmentalist chain of equivalence can be constructed from concepts and identities as diverse as: environmental protection = Green Party = virtue-signalling = economic growth obstruction = performative earnest piety = “woke”. In this way chains of equivalence make connections that are actually deliberately constructed seem obvious, inevitable, or “commonsense”.

Conceptual flipsiding is the reversing or twisting of key social and political concepts to strategically redefine them via public discourse for illiberal or even anti-democratic ends (Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2024). Dutta (2024) uses the term communicative inversions – the reversal or distortion of material reality through rhetoric to create a false narrative – identifying them as the “propaganda infrastructure of the far right” (p.5) ²

² I use the term "right-wing populist" rather than "far-right" throughout this project. There is a no academic consensus on the correct terms for the broader movement of those on the right (those who believe inequalities are natural and positive) who are "anti-system", i.e. hostile to liberal democracy. Of this group,

Illustrating this tactic in action, in 2024 accusations of racism were levelled against a New Zealand university that set aside a quiet space for Māori and Pasifika students in a largely white learning environment in which many of these students felt marginalised. Opponents of the students' attempt to establish a safe space attempted to establish a definition of "racism" that meant merely excluding someone from a situation on the basis of their skin colour. In trying to shift the concept of the term, many argued that the overwhelmingly white student population benefiting from an institutional structure based on European-derived ideals, norms, and culture were themselves the victims of "racism" (Simon et al., 2024). Right-wing media pundits and politicians framed structural inequalities as "against equality". Another example of conceptual flipsiding is the co-opting of the signifier "freedom" by neoliberal interests to describe relief from environmental regulations, from transparency obligations, from health and safety frameworks, and so on. Enthusiastically vaunted by political and media figures, "freedoms" such as these have in practice produced immense power for corporations, shareholders, and landlords, leaving little for citizens struggling with the cost of living other than the opportunity to choose between grocery brands. Societal freedom from environmental destruction, corrupt arrangements and unsafe labour practices delivered by regulations is, in contrast, denounced as unfreedom (Harvey, 2020). The rhetorical technique of conceptual flipsiding can be challenging to counter because it mimics valid

Mudde (2019) distinguishes between the extreme right, which rejects democracy entirely, and the radical right, which accepts popular sovereignty but opposes elements like minority rights and separation of powers. The contemporary radical right is predominantly populist. NZ First, the party on which this thesis focuses heavily, has retained its populist foundation – the appeal to "the people" against elites – while shifting rightward through anti-immigration stances, transphobia, climate change denial, and conspiracy theories. As demonstrated by this project, much of the "anti-woke" energy they exemplify is also strategised by their coalition partners. "Right-wing populist" avoids the potential imprecision of the term "far-right", which can sometimes collapse the radical/extreme distinction and obscures the specifically populist dimensions of much of the discourse examined in this project.

critique while inverting its substance. Due to its effectiveness, it is rapidly becoming a central discursive strategy of the far-right (Krzyżanowski & Krzyżanowska, 2024).

Audience reception of culture wars discourses, and a research gap

When considering the construction and interpretation of culture wars propaganda, a key consideration is that the audience for whom these messages are constructed are not a homogenous receptive mass; they are complex individuals with varying interests, knowledge, and other fragmented preferences (Lilleker, 2012). Hall (1980) theorised a cyclical continuum of ways any message may be constructed and decoded, through discursive production, circulation, reception, and reproduction, emphasising that semiotic structures are deeply interwoven with social and political perspectives (Fornäs, 2024). Hall's theory of encoding and decoding acknowledges the discursive political and ideological power struggles that arise in this loose articulation of communication moments. Both the production of messages and their reception will assign meanings that depend on the producer and receiver's framework of knowledge, perspective, and context. Chapter 3 therefore examines the texts through encoding/decoding theory (Hall, 1980), affective digital propaganda tactics (Boler & Davis, 2021), deep memetic frames (Phillips, 2016) and fantasmatic narratives (Glynos, 2021) to more closely examine the factors that shape the way in which an audience receives and reacts to culture wars rhetoric.

Online searches for peer-reviewed papers on "right-wing populist discourses + reception", "culture wars + audience interpretation" and the like yielded very little of direct relevance to the two-pronged empirical objective of this project. Indeed, there appears to be a gap in political communication literature for studies that not only focus

on how right-wing populist propaganda messages are constructed, but also on how they are received. Walton and Boon (2014) have presented an analytical method based on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory for managing organisational conflicts. To illustrate its use, they carried out an analysis on arguments for and against native tree logging on the West Coast of New Zealand, including qualitative interviews. However, their main objective was to establish a methodological framework for analysing societal conflicts in general. (Phelan, 2019, 2022, 2023) has critically examined culture wars discourse and anti-wokeism in New Zealand and internationally, but not explicitly from the perspective of audience interpretation.

Conclusion: The discursive landscape of anti-environmental propaganda

This chapter has established the theoretical foundations for understanding how anti-environmental culture wars propaganda operates within New Zealand's contemporary political landscape. After clarifying the terms propaganda, rhetoric, and discourse as used in this thesis, the chapter traced propaganda's evolution alongside digital affordances and ecological crises. It argued that two intersecting discursive formations provide scaffolding for anti-environmental messaging. Right-wing populism provides a performative platform for constructing antagonistic frontiers between "the people" and "the elite." Culture wars rhetoric supplies the content, transforming social and cultural grievances into political action through binary narratives and fear, enabling politicians and their allies to denigrate opponents as disconnected elites. The chapter's focus then shifted to performative authenticity, and how it establishes right-wing populists as genuinely representative of "the people". This led to an examination of specific discursive tactics through which culture wars propaganda operates: empty signifiers,

chains of equivalence, antagonistic frontiers, and conceptual flipsiding. Finally, the chapter turned to audience reception, identifying theoretical tools for examining both how culture wars messages are constructed and how they are decoded. This revealed a significant gap in existing literature: limited research on audience reception of culture wars messages, particularly in New Zealand.

Chapter 2 has mapped the discursive landscape of anti-environmental propaganda and the tools through which it operates. Building on this work, Chapter 3 will outline a multi-theoretical and methodological approach for examining both the encoding of culture wars messages in political and media texts and their decoding by New Zealand audiences.

Chapter 3 – Examining culture wars discourse through a multi-theoretical framework

Building on the work of Chapter 2, this chapter establishes the theoretical framework and methodological approach through which this project examines the coalition Government's framing of the Fast-track Bill as a discursive struggle to fix meaning. While Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory provides the central theoretical standpoint, the complexity of culture wars discourse in digital environments invites engagement with other, complementary theoretical frameworks. This approach recognises the richness of analysis afforded by a multi-theoretical approach, capturing as it does a broad picture of how propaganda operates across production, circulation, reception, and recirculation in contemporary politics.

The chapter begins by outlining these distinct frameworks – Hall's encoding/decoding theory, Boler and Davis's affective digital politics, Glynos's fantasmatic narratives, and Phillips and Millner's deep memetic frames. Each of these illuminate different dimensions of the same processes, revealing complementary aspects of meaning-making and reception dynamics. While these theories have their distinct elements and assumptions, they are brought together with the pragmatic objective of creating a more complete understanding of how culture wars discourse operates. Having established this integrated theoretical framework, the chapter says more about a specific concept animating this research: propaganda (see Chapter 2). Drawing on definitions from Jowett, O'Donnell, and Postman, I examine how propaganda operates as deliberate, systematic persuasion designed to shape perceptions. The discussion emphasises propaganda's affective dimensions, including its capacity to trigger emotional responses

that bypass critical thinking, to simplify complexity, and to connect with audiences' deep hopes, fears and lived experience. Performative authenticity, culture wars narratives, and the tactical use of empty signifiers and conceptual flippings emerge as key propaganda strategies through which right-wing populists construct antagonistic frontiers and attempt to fix meaning.

The chapter then addresses the methodological combination of discourse theory and critical discourse analysis. Discourse theory provides a theoretical paradigm for understanding how meaning is constructed, contested and temporarily fixed through hegemonic projects. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers, in contrast, more specific methodological tools for examining the linguistic dimensions of these processes. This section explains how these approaches will be articulated together throughout the empirical analysis, with discourse theory providing contextual analytical tools and CDA enabling close textual examination.

The chapter concludes by clarifying the precise empirical foci of the thesis: a textual analysis of four political and media audio-visual texts and semi-structured interviews with eight New Zealand participants. This two-stage empirical approach enables examination of both how culture wars discourses are encoded in political and media performance and decoded by audience members responding to extracts from the same texts. The media and political texts reveal performative techniques, persuasive strategies, and discursive tactics. The interviews illuminate reception patterns: the way in which participants use, modify, or challenge key signifiers, in particular the overarching signifier "woke"; how they decode antagonistic constructions; and to what extent discursive chains of equivalence shape their responses.

Combining different theories for a more complete understanding of culture wars discourse

No single framework adequately captures the full complexity of how culture wars discourse operates. While Hall's encoding/decoding framework illuminates the communicative cycles and social contexts shaping production and reception, it does not fully explore the unconscious and emotional dimensions of discourse. Boler and Davis's theory of affective politics reveals how emotion is strategically weaponised in digital spaces, complementing Hall's framework by foregrounding the deliberate manipulation of emotion enabled by new technological affordances. Glynos's fantasmatic narratives identify unconscious investments and affective attachments, acknowledged as a contextual factor by Hall's theory but not explicitly examined. Phillips' deep memetic frames explore why, and not just how largely unconscious meaning-making is experienced differently by audiences, shaped by lived experience that determine what aspects of discourse are visible to different audiences. While Hall acknowledges the importance of social and cultural context, Phillips & Milner aim to explain *how* social context and background creates specific frameworks. Boler and Davis's affective digital politics operates as essential infrastructure theory, explaining how Hall's communicative circuit now functions through algorithmically-mediated platforms that detect deep memetic frames (Phillips & Milner) and amplify fantasmatic investments (Glynos). Digital platforms enable encoding strategies crafted for shareability and designed for reception patterns such as online echo chambers.

To briefly illustrate these different layers of the encoding/decoding process, it is useful to examine a statement such as Jones' "Goodbye Freddy!" through a series of theoretical

layers. (Jones is mocking concern for an endangered species of New Zealand frog; “Freddo the Frog” is also a frog-shaped chocolate bar.)

Encoding, coded for affective potential: (Jones’ speech, Hall, Boler and Davis) – Jones performs “Goodbye Freddy!” in an online video for digital shareability.

Digital circulation: (Boler and Davis) Algorithmic amplification based on likelihood of viral spread (outrage, humour).

Reception: (Hall, Phillips and Milner): Different audiences decode the performance into dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings based on social location, lived experience, and pre-formed frameworks of understanding.

Fantasmatic investment: (Glynos, Boler and Davis) Unconscious enjoyments, transgressive delight or disgusted outrage re-amplify platform algorithms.

Digital recirculation: (Boler and Davis, Phillips and Milner) Audiences share, comment, and react based on their reception pattern and deep memetic frames, creating new networks of distribution

Encoding redux: (Hall, Boler & Davis) Jones revisits and doubles down on “Goodbye Freddy” during his speech. Media figures such as Laws refashion and repeat the joke for their own audiences on digital platforms. The cycle repeats.

The New Zealand government elected in 2023, particularly its junior coalition partners, use a populist articulatory logic which constructs symbolic enemies, or antagonists, in order to render their way of thinking and acting commonsensical. The struggle to fix

meaning in this way can be attempted through culture wars propaganda on several levels: performances of authenticity (Goffman, 1959); affective narratives including culture war narratives to construct the “other” (Boler & Davis, 2021); and tactics such as the use of empty signifiers, construction of antagonistic frontiers, and conceptual flipsiding to articulate and fix meaning.

Jowett (2019, p. 7) defines propaganda as: “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist.” Postman identified how carefully constructed messages invite the active participation of audiences by making strategic connections to their hopes, fears, and dreams (Hobbs, 2021). He emphasised how someone’s own beliefs and prior knowledge might lead them to interpret the meaning of the propaganda differently (Postman, 1987) and defines propaganda as “language that invites us to respond emotionally, emphatically, more or less immediately, and in an either-or manner” (Postman, 1976, p. 153). Propaganda may attempt to simplify the natural complexity of the world, activating kneejerk reactions that may lead people to bypass critical thinking (Hobbs, 2021) or simply confuse and disorientate rather than persuade (Stelter, 2021). The affective dimension triggered by this form of propaganda operates at both conscious and unconscious levels. While encoding/decoding theory can map the cycles through which these messages move, fantasmatic narrative theory explains the unconscious enjoyments that make certain decoded positions feel compelling regardless of their rational defensibility. Affect theory reveals how digital platforms amplify and weaponise these emotional responses (Boler & Davis, 2021),

making possible the transformation of individual reactions into iterative networks of outrage or pleasure.

It is therefore against these characterisations of propaganda that this research evaluates right-wing populist discursive tactics constructed to persuade. Authenticity displays provide the “stage” by which politicians attempt to connect with audiences” hopes, fears, and dreams. On this stage, politicians perform being “true to oneself”, “trustworthy”, and “telling it like it is” – all aimed at convincing that this “front-stage” self accurately reflects their “back-stage” self. Right-wing populists also use this stage to perform a transgressive and disruptive identity, often using humour and mockery designed to break norms and construct common antagonists. Throughout these performances, the emotional impact can bypass critical thinking on the part of the audience, and distract from substantive, nuanced issues that warrant deeper consideration. Insults directed at environmentalists such as “Communist”, “barnacles”, and “mannikins” are likely to prompt an emotional reaction, perhaps laughter or annoyance. The non-human nature of many of these “othering” descriptors reveals that a central, historical objective of propaganda remains relevant: “The propagandist’s purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human” (Huxley, 1936, p. 99). Whether the audience agrees or vehemently disagrees with that dehumanisation, the very act of engaging with this framing helps strengthen the articulation of a “green other” and ultimately excludes consideration of environmental protection from “tackling the obstruction economy” or “need for economic growth” discourses.

Political discourse tries to achieve closure by fixing, or articulating, the meaning of empty signifiers – words or phrases that can be used and interpreted in very different ways by speakers and listeners with very different objectives, biases and motives (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Examples of such signifiers include “growth”, “free” and “woke”. Another tactic is the flipsiding of concepts such as “rational” and “scientific” in order to claim them for one’s own argument, for example during a debate in which an opponent presents rational and scientific facts. This tactic not only has the potential to confuse and disorientate, but also obliges one’s political opponents to defend and explain their position.

This project also examines the interconnectedness of disparate media systems through the framework of deep memetic frames (Phillips & Milner, 2021). Deep memetic frames develop from what we learn and experience during our lifetimes. People are barely aware they possess this framework for consideration of everything around them, although it may guide a lifetime of choices, beliefs, and experiences. To demonstrate this in terms of this project, in response to an “othering” transgressive statement from a coalition politician or amplifying media, one person could feel renewed concern about the removal of environmental protections, and another could confirm their deep contempt for “Greenies” who stand in the way of economic progress and individual enrichment. One or both members of the public may repost the statement to their followers on social media with a personal statement reiterating their stance, and the simple encoding–decoding model becomes a widening network of commentary. Both Hall’s encoding/decoding framework and Phillips and Millner’s deep memetic frames are concerned with the way meanings are assigned or interpreted by members of an

audience, and the discursive struggle that arises as messages are received, reacted to – and in a digital world, responded to, reworked or reposted.

Combining discourse theory and critical discourse analysis

Discourse theory and critical discourse analysis are informed by different ontological assumptions³. However, both approaches acknowledge that social reality both shapes and is shaped by discursive practices, that power relations are inherent in discourse, and that context is key – that words (and signifiers) only gain meaning in relation to other words, and are shaped by the social and historical context in which they are produced. While Laclau and Mouffe do not provide concrete methods for empirical analysis – as discourse theory is an expansive conceptual framework of meaning rather than an off-the-shelf methodology (Howarth, 2000) – their theory captures the idea that all objects and actions are meaningful. In other words, both perspectives highlight that every discourse is a social and political construction, and our knowledge of material objects is discursively mediated. For example – in the context of the Fast-track Bill – a river may be targeted for damming and development by industry and large-scale farming, with political backing. The proposed dam may be seen as a much-needed project for economic development in the region, an existential threat to biodiversity, or a symbol of the intergenerational significance of the waterway for mana whenua (Māori with an ancestral connection to nearby land). The meaning of the dam is constituted by the different discourses that make up its identity. In discourses of economic development,

³ Critical discourse analysis is characterised by “its insistence on an ontological distinction between discursive practice and social practice” (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011, p. 9), and analyses how discourse reproduces or challenges power structures. Discourse theory, in contrast, reflects an ontology wherein discourse fundamentally constitutes, shapes, and is shaped by the social world. There is no fixed reality that language points to – social and political identities are created through ongoing struggles over meaning. Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory centres my thesis, with CDA as an analytical supplement.

it is a necessary means to maintain and grow wealth. In environmentalist discourses, the dam threatens ecosystems and ignores the science of nature-based solutions. Alternative hegemonic projects – for example, discourses fronted by politicians who introduced the Fast-track Bill – will also try to dominate the field of meaning and fix identities, at least temporarily. The identification of discourses may not always be as clear cut as is suggested by this example, of course; people are complex and changeable, and can construct identities across fragmented, often contradictory discourses. This will be explored in detail in this study, particularly when analysing how research participants interpret right-wing populist discourses and antagonistic constructions, or the construction of an “other” as a threat to the identity of an “us”. Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) suggest methodological guidelines can arise from Laclau and Mouffe’s theoretical point that discourses are never uncontested: What different understandings of reality are at stake in both discursive construction and interpretation? Where are they in antagonistic opposition to one another? What are the consequences if one participant hegemonically captures the meaning of a floating signifier, such as “rational” or “scientific”? Many of Laclau and Mouffe’s concepts can also be drawn upon for empirical analysis. As already outlined, I will examine the use and reactions to chains of equivalence which invest key empty signifiers with meaning; the antagonistic construction of identities and groups – for example, “everyday Kiwis” versus “the elites”; and construction of antagonists in political discourse.

Fairclough (2015) describes the fixation of meaning as naturalisation, in which a discourse appears to become commonsense practice with no link to any ideology. In contrast to discourse theory, however, CDA focuses closely on the linguistic dimension

at a textual level, and systematically analyses social practice as a dimension of discursive practice (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). CDA will thus provide textual analytical tools for this study, but as part of an iterative and fluid approach that draws on discourse theory throughout for contextual analysis.

Analysis of the construction and reception of culture wars discourse

This overview situates the empirical chapters within the broader methodological framework and research questions. The two main research questions are supplemented by two sub-questions, which specify the key discursive mechanisms under investigation and avoid the risk of an overly broad interpretation of the main questions:

RQ1. How have politicians in Aotearoa New Zealand’s right-wing coalition government and their media allies constructed “anti-woke” culture wars rhetoric since the 2023 election, with a particular focus on (Resources Minister) Shane Jones’ advocacy for the governing coalition’s Fast-track Approvals Bill?

RQ1a. What discursive strategies – including “us” versus “them” binaries, affective tactics (such as mockery), and performative authenticity – characterise New Zealand’s culture wars discourse, particularly in relation to environmental discourse?

RQ2. How have citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand received “anti-woke” culture wars rhetoric, particularly concerning environmental issues, since the 2023 election?

RQ2a. How do citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand respond to "us" versus "them" constructions, affective tactics, and right-wing populist displays of performative authenticity?

This thesis approaches its central questions from two interconnected perspectives – the encoding and decoding of culture war messages. I first analyse a selection of political and media audio-visual texts to examine ways in which culture wars discourse may be encoded. These four texts were selected from a wealth of examples of New Zealand's online culture wars for their anti-woke rhetoric, political performance, contemporary relevance, and distinct characteristics: Minister Jones speaks freely and humorously to party faithful; Laws' discourse exemplifies an explicitly racist dimension; Plunket's "war on woke" framing anticipates an NZ First campaign with the same title (1News, 2025); and Garner's podcast reveals how "anti-woke" discourse can target even its usual beneficiaries. Two of the audio-visual texts – Jones and Laws – feature environmentalism and the Fast-track Bill specifically. The other two – Plunket and Garner – exemplify a broader anti-woke sentiment which can link different identities in opposition to a common antagonist. They span nearly nine months from soon after the Fast-track Bill was introduced in early 2024 until March 2025. All four are publicly available on YouTube and other social platforms. Although Jones' speech was filmed during its original delivery to an NZ First audience and then uploaded to NZ First digital channels, the other three are delivered to camera with a primary online audience in mind. With good reason: video provides an affective, performative multi-modal experience that a written text cannot, capturing an unseen audience's laughter and applause (in Jones' case), facial expressions and gestures, and giving the impression of spontaneity and connection with

the audience. It is through growing systemic integration of the internet into political campaigning, showing and amplifying politicians' and media figures' enthusiasm, authenticity, and purpose (Chadwick, 2017) that politicians and media figures achieve wide audience reach and engagement.

The construction of culture wars discourse

Text one – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention 2024

October 12, 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq5kmE02L9Y>

The longest video clip shown to participants was Resources Minister Shane Jones' October 2024 speech to NZ First party faithful. This speech introduces Jones' distinctive flowery rhetoric and bombastic delivery style. Since joining NZ First in 2017, Jones has cultivated a performative populist strongman persona. In this speech, he employs anti-woke rhetoric for his partisan audience, targeting various antagonists including environmental advocates, and, of the four examples, arguably demonstrates the most effective use of mockery and humour as key discursive tactics.

Text two – Michael Laws, The Platform: The wokery of environmentalism

June 20, 2024

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReJ_hQPBXug

In the second clip, Michael Laws, a former politician and now a right-wing fringe media presenter on privately funded broadcaster The Platform⁴, lambasts the “wokery of environmentalism” more explicitly than Jones. It is worth noting that Laws’ show aired four months before Jones’ speech, demonstrating the circulation and recirculation of strategic talking points between politicians and their media allies. Laws’ style includes racist “dog whistling” and a focus on the cost of living.

Text three – Sean Plunket, The Platform: Why we wage war on woke

December 5, 2024

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_b7bK9fuzM

The third text, again on The Platform, focuses on the determined hegemonic contestation of the empty signifier “woke”. Sean Plunket set up The Platform with funds donated by a wealthy Tauranga-based family, the Wrights, who were “not very happy with the direction of the country” and whose collaboration with Plunket “tapped into a fuming and hyper-engaged audience” (Greive, 2022b). Like Laws, Plunket has a controversial past, and has built The Platform around older, white male hosts who have lost their once prominent positions in New Zealand media (Greive, 2022a). In this text, which foreshadows NZ First’s campaign for a “war on woke” (1News, 2025), Plunket explicitly constructs diverse

⁴ The Plunket and Laws YouTube clips analysed here are the same as those broadcast on the Platform’s own website. “Enhanced access and features”, including live on-air listening and the ability to call in to or text talkback hosts – rather than paywalled content – are offered through the Platform Plus app (The Platform Media Ltd, 2021-26).

antagonists for his audience, using mockery and an appeal to “commonsense” to connect different issues under the “woke” banner and incite affective engagement.

Text four – Duncan Garner, Slam Dunc: Is Luxon National’s biggest liability?

March 5, 2025

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CI0hPNC3Gkc>

Duncan Garner, like Plunket, worked for decades in TV, radio and print journalism, and for some years headed the Parliamentary Press Gallery. He set up an independent podcast, Editor in Chief, available on most social channels. after “representing other people’s brands for 30 years” (Garner, 2024). Editor in Chief includes episodes categorised under the title “Slam Dunc”, which focus on criticism of political figures. The Slam Dunc episodes, running for no more than 20 minutes each, are introduced as “honest opinion” editorials. Garner commits to “roast[ing] a few idiots along the way”, and promises “irreverent, current, authentic, and enlightening content”. Of the four 50+ men represented in these texts, Garner is the one least obviously identified with a right-wing political stance, at least publicly; he positions himself as a critic of both left-wing and right-wing parties. Garner’s podcast has been included as it demonstrates that the use of culture wars rhetoric, affective discourse, and displays of insider authenticity are not necessarily exclusive to those on the populist right. However, the way in which Garner uses these tactics is very similar to the other three texts that will be analysed, and audiences who wish to hear only messages that align with those that Laws and Plunket are constructing can easily pick and choose from Garner’s links across several social platforms. Garner, while trying to cover all the bases, could arguably be seen as a former

political insider using populist culture wars tactics to retain market share in the rapidly growing “formerly relevant 50+ male media figure” online media space.

The full political / media transcripts and interview excerpts are to be found in Appendix 1. At the end of each interview all of the participants except P4 (who had an unexpected visitor towards the end of the interview) were shown a post on X.com by Winston Peters “the definition of woke” to prompt further reflection on the use of the signifier. An image of this post is also in Appendix 1.

The reception of culture wars discourse

Eight one-on-one semi-structured interviews with New Zealand individuals of voting age (see full transcripts in Appendix 2) were then analysed to investigate how culture wars discourse encoded in the texts are decoded by their audiences: they illuminate how right-wing performative populist rhetoric is received, and specific persuasion tactics are accepted, contested, or resisted.

These people were not previously known to me, the interviewer. The small group was broadly representative of Aotearoa NZ public in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, living situation (urban/rural) and education level. Three of the group were Māori. A Hastings District Councillor provided an initial introduction to older people (Positive Ageing Hastings), younger people 18+ (Youth Council members), more traditionally conservative and mainly older, male community members (Rotary Hastings), representatives of the rainbow community (Rainbow Hastings), farming and horticultural groups (rural dwellers), and immigrant communities (Multicultural Association Hastings). Three participants in this project came through these introductions. The other

five responded to posters on online community noticeboards, professional connections, and a sports club.

Participants were shown excerpts from the texts listed above, and were asked to report their reactions. As the interviews were semi-structured, there were no set questions, and a general discussion, led by the interviewee's initial reactions, ensued after each clip. There were, however, some loose expectations arising from discourse theory as to the type of information that could be yielded by each interview. One intention was to observe the extent to which interviewees used, modified, or challenged key signifiers such as "woke". This would give insight into how successfully populist articulations are becoming normalised in everyday discourse. How participants decoded anti-environmentalist turns of phrase – "munchkins", "cling-ons", "climatism as a new religion" – could illuminate to what extent they accept, negotiate, or reject the antagonistic frontier between economic development and environmental protection (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011). Analysis of participant responses could reveal chains of equivalence that create and shape social relations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). For example, a chain of equivalence may have been established in conversation between removing frustrating consent processes for householders, upholding private property rights, contempt for earnest "Greenies", and necessary decisions at a time of economic upheaval. Another may have been established between short-sighted greed, benefits accruing to the wealthy and powerful, ushering in corruption, and potentially destroying irreplaceable biodiversity.

Conclusion: Culture wars discourse as propaganda

This chapter has outlined a combined theoretical and methodological framework for examining how culture wars discourse operates as propaganda, from strategic encoding in political performance, through algorithmic amplification, to varied reception by audiences. By combining Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory with Hall's encoding/decoding model, Boler and Davis's affective digital politics, Glynos's fantasmatic narratives, and Phillips and Millner's deep memetic frames, this project captures multiple dimensions of how meaning is constructed, contested, and temporarily fixed in contemporary New Zealand right-wing populist discourse.

The question is whether this framework illuminates what is actually happening in New Zealand's political discourse. Chapter 4, the first in Part 2 of this thesis, turns to the empirical stage: a close analysis of how various political and media figures encode culture wars rhetoric. Chapter 5 then explores the reception of these texts, analysing how eight New Zealanders decode these performances: which articulations gain traction, which are resisted, and how diverse audiences navigate the affective and fantasmatic elements these texts invoke. Together, these chapters give insight into the extent to which the discursive construction of environmental protection as "woke overreach" may prompt affective engagement by the public, and in which ways the coalition government and their allies' culture wars tactics have been successful in fixing "anti-woke" sentiments as commonsense.

PART 2

Chapter 4 – Encoding culture wars discourse

This chapter analyses a YouTube speech and three online media monologues, all drawing on culture wars rhetoric, performative and affective elements. The full transcripts and interview excerpts can be found in Appendix 1. One is a speech by a political figure, Shane Jones, NZ First Minister of Resources, who exemplifies the performative populist strongman. The next three are former politicians and media figures who have established new careers on fringe media platforms: Michael Laws, championing an imagined past; Sean Plunket, a self-styled alternative media pragmatist; and Duncan Garner, who presents himself as an expert political insider. I demonstrate there are elements common across both the media and interview texts: the ultimate antagonist “woke”, the construction of othering chains of equivalence, performative techniques, anti–elite discourse, “commonsense” rhetoric, and belittling language. I also demonstrate that the self-styled performative positioning of the political and media figures, driven by unconscious or fantasmatic narratives, influences the way in which they each encode their culture wars messaging.

After first examining the lexical, grammatical and rhetorical elements of each text with reference to Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2015), I will turn to discourse theory to examine how each text works to ignite “anti-woke sentiments” within the wider social and political contexts that make this discourse possible, and how each speaker builds discursive barriers to those who might effectively counter their arguments. Together, these approaches reveal both the mechanics and politics of anti-woke discourse.

Text 1: Shane Jones speech to the NZ First Convention, October 12 2024

Minister of Resources Shane Jones was scheduled to deliver the final speech of the day before dinner at the NZ First Party Convention on October 12, 2024. His bombastic and provocative rhetorical style was welcomed by a crowd of mainly older NZ First Party members after a long day of speeches and meetings. Jones, previously a senior politician in the New Zealand Labour Party, has embraced right-wing populist rhetorical techniques since joining NZ First in 2017. In doing so he has followed the cue of a singular populist figure who has featured memorably in New Zealand politics for over thirty years: Winston Peters, the leader of NZ First since 1993. NZ First entered a three-way coalition with National and ACT after the 2023 election with 6.08% of the party vote. Jones' speech to the NZ First Party faithful represents an attempt to position NZ First as the defender of national, economic interests against both environmental and targeted identity-based political movements. By positioning his opponents in contrast as anti-growth, anti-nationalism, and driven by ideology rather than rationalism, his discourse attempts to delegitimise alternative political formations.

Text 1 (Jones): textual analysis

Jones is welcomed on stage by the conference Master of Ceremonies (MC):

We've got the Prince of the Provinces, the veteran of vocabulary, the Slayer of Frogs. We're about to invite the Honourable Shane Jones up, someone who's been out in regional New Zealand, spreading the gospel of growth, speaking to absolutely everyone who now sees hope come to their area.

The MC sets up the frame for Jones' political persona to take the stage: as Jones frequently reminds his audiences, he is a showman who walks in both indigenous Māori and European / Pākehā worlds, a Harvard-educated rhetorician fond of showing off his intellect with high-flown language, and a red-blooded, plain-speaking champion of regional New Zealand. The MC introduces combative terminology as part of Jones' political persona – “slayer of frogs” refers to Jones' previous threats to endangered native frog habitats threatened by economic development projects (New Zealand First, 2023).

Jones cheerfully picks up this combative cue after greeting his audience and acknowledging their “eyelids are drooping”. His opening lexical choices confirm his rapport with his listeners and establish his everyman authenticity. He first reminds his audience of their shared antipathy towards former Prime Minister Dame Jacinda Ardern: “thank the Lord it's spelt with a T and not a bloody D” (of Australian Senator Jacinta Price), before segueing to a “bugger you” to the “woke tribe” and those who “don't want to be known as a he or a she”. He implores his fellow New Zealand First members to send the Greens “to the bloody knacker's yard”, using informal, colloquial language in contrast to his often high-flown turns of phrase: “trash-talking”, “had our guts full”, “hide it out, Freddie!” The rhetorical devices of mockery and humour thus denigrate and delegitimise his conservation-minded opponents.

The conference MC has introduced Jones admiringly as “spreading the gospel of growth”. Jones also uses metaphors of religious devotion, but to mock climate concerns: “religious obedience to the climate god” and “the ideology we stand against”. This mockery is in contrast to the God he invokes in an intertextual excerpt from the New Zealand national anthem: “God save New Zealand, New Zealand First, you, me, your

neighbour ...". Jones contrasts "our" God and "their" God when speaking of climate change, evoking a latter-day paganism that reinforces the imagery of Green Party MPs and environmental activists as grotesque and otherworldly "Green cling-ons / Klingons" worthy only of mockery and dismissal. Boland (2025) observes that the "just like a religion" critique is employed frequently in right-wing culture wars discourse, serving to frame opponents' positions as delusional dogma or superstition and the protagonist as observing from a superior vantage point. It is a versatile form of critique, lending itself to both Jones' mocking, idiosyncratic rhetorical style and in lofty observations such as that by techno-libertarian Palantir CEO Alex Karp: "I think the central risk to ... the world is a regressive way of thinking that is corrupting and corroding our institutions that calls itself "progressive," and is called "woke," is actually a form of a thin pagan religion"(Hays, 2024).

Caricaturing those with environmental concerns as neopagan lunatics certainly makes for compelling content. Right-wing populists like Jones are skilled media performers who understand that ideas are important, but emotions give them power (Mouffe, 2022). By creating opportunities for his audiences to identify emotionally with his rhetoric, Jones aims to build support for the policies of the governing coalition. To this end, Jones employs emotive binaries: "facts versus feelings", "New Zealand First" versus "climate first". Jones' narrative reinforces the "us versus them" approach by positioning himself and his party as heroic defenders against ideological opponents, the repetition of "on your behalf" and his frequent use of the first-person plural ("we", "our") reminding his audience of his commitment to representing their interests and reinforcing a shared identity. His rhetoric exhibits frequent shifts in genre and style as he moves between

anecdotes, policy points, and attacks on opponents, creating a sense of urgency and multiple threats. Short sentences give emphasis: “We have to grow”, and rhetorical questions frame problems as simple and self-evident: “Why are the roads we build in New Zealand the most expensive?”, “Jacinda cancelled the oil and gas industry” (of former Prime Minister Dame Jacinda Ardern).

Jones’ mockery of Jacinda Ardern is reinforced by his performative scorn directed at female-coded emotional reactions: “shrillness”, “feelings overwhelming facts”, “not allowed to hurt your feelings”. In contrast, he frames the masculine-coded institutions of military, industry, science, and “economic rationalism” as commonsense. Emotional responses are framed as obstacles to progress, and anti-Jacinda Ardern sentiment is thereby blended with extractive industry advocacy. Jones chooses diminutive language that feminises his opponents – “munchkins” are small, powerless creatures. He performs traditional patriarchal authority to an older audience that presumably grew up familiar with corporal punishment: “I can hit them with the left hand and the right hand in either language”. His performance is that of a charismatic populist strongman, a man of urgent action and commonsense solutions (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), boldly rejecting “expert” advice such as the broad scientific consensus around climate change. He asserts brisk masculine nationalism in contrast to a feminine “other” that cares for small creatures and emphasises emotions, personifying this feminine “other” as Jacinda Ardern, who when Prime Minister encouraged New Zealanders to “be kind” as part of her daily COVID-19 media briefings (Te Papa Tongarewa, 2020).

In America, Trump supporters’ T-shirts and flags proclaiming “Fuck your feelings” are an overt tribal statement of belonging to a group, “us” versus “them”. In New Zealand, Jones

achieves a similar grouping effect in a less overtly aggressive way through mockery and humour, and a predominant use of first-person plural (we, us, our) to construct a collective “us” identity in contrast to “them” – not as environmentalists with arguably legitimate concerns, but “green-riddled munchkins”. Humour of this type invites everyone who feels even mildly frustrated by political events to join in the joke and laugh at “them”. His performative representation of authenticity is effective, as he embellishes informal, colloquial language with idiosyncratic metaphors for dramatic flourish: “I was the guy with the kabuki faces”. If a politician is a natural comedian – which Jones is, as demonstrated by former entertaining appearances on political comedy shows such as TVNZ’s/Prime TV’s Back Benches – his audience will conceivably accept that the real self is being presented (Goffman, 1959), and is more likely to accept and engage with that politician. Humour is therefore a marker of authenticity that allows the populist politician to speak about politics in an everyday way, to trivialise important issues (Morreall, 2009), and to communicate ideology “innocently” (Beck, 2024). It is also a way to articulate antagonistic frontiers, which I will now examine within the framework of discourse theory.

Text 1 (Jones): contextual analysis

Jones employs discursive binaries to unite diverse interests. Laclau and Mouffe understand political discourse as necessarily antagonistic, a manifestation of which can be the construction of an “us” versus a “them” in a discursive landscape that shapes and is shaped by the relationships between identities. Broadly speaking, Jones constructs antagonistic frontiers between what he presents as practical, rational governance versus ideologically-driven opponents. For example, he favourably contrasts practical

rationality to ideological extremism (“we’ve inherited a situation where science, economic rationalism plays second fiddle to ideology and falsehoods”). Identity politics (at least in the form othered by Jones) is presented as anathema to the national interest in phrases such as “New Zealand first, not climate first”. The need for economic growth is presented unquestioningly, and regulatory barriers to (assumed) prosperity are personified and belittled (“we have to grow” versus “tiny groups able to weaponise discussions”).)

It is useful to examine the way in which Jones attempts to fix meaning around certain discursive points and establish chains of equivalence, by which different identities become linked in opposition to a common antagonist or “other”. A useful point to start is by identifying the two key empty signifiers doing discursive work in his speech. Their very emptiness allows them to be filled with different meanings and linked in a chain of equivalence to unite diverse grievances and construct an antagonistic frontier.

“Woke” is the primary negative empty signifier of the othered identity constructed by Jones. Although the word itself appears only twice in the speech, proxy discourses (Ekström et al., 2025) about gender politics, media bias, and environmental activism are invoked by Jones to unite a range of anxieties in opposition to an unspecified “woke” antagonist. These include allusions to gender diversity, speaking directly to an audience that grew up entertained by Dame Edna Everage and Corporal Klinger (M*A*S*H), but who now resist grassroots challenges to the gender binary: “if you don’t want to be known as a he or a she”; dark hints at suspicious belief systems and mysterious foes – “the ideology that we stand against”, “they cancelled that industry”, “tiny groups”; and of course, “the elite media-oriented, woke, green-riddled munchkins”. The resultant anti-

woke energy thus links environmental activism, Te Pāti Māori politics, bureaucracy of the COVID years, and “feelings-based” (in many instances a proxy term for female-coded) governance and activism as equivalent threats.

“Growth” is, by contrast, a positive empty signifier which Jones invokes to enhance his position. Growth, in this speech, is the answer to energy affordability, the catalyst for reinstatement of liberties and rights, and the justification for infrastructure development. His discourse leaves unquestioned what kind of growth, who benefits, and at what cost to the environment. Nor does it examine the actual feasibility of constant growth within the constraints of finite resources, and climate concerns have already been dismissed as a deluded belief akin to religious idolatry. Having established the empty signifier “growth”, Jones constructs major economic policy positions around it, including funding geothermal energy to reduce fuel costs, reopening New Zealand’s only major oil refinery, and reversing the previous Government’s oil and gas exploration ban.

Thus Jones’ speech articulates a chain of equivalence around each of the following two signifiers:

1. **Growth** = NZ First = economic rationalism = science = commonsense action = masculine energy = nationalism and citizenship = **“us”**
2. **Woke** ideology = climate alarmism = Māori activism = bureaucracy = hypocrisy = feelings = feminine energy = global orientation = **“them”**

Jones’ speech is part of a hegemonic project attempting to fix meaning in particular ways, but is always potentially vulnerable to other projects that may challenge these attempts.

Therefore it is important for Jones to create barriers to new political formations that might, for example, try to rearticulate the notion of the economy. Through ridicule (“Lone Ranger” of Te Pāti Māori Co-leader Rāwiri Waititi, who wears a cowboy hat), dehumanisation (“munchkins”), and accusations of hypocrisy and moral posturing (“they’re not on one of the original seven wakas” – of climate change activists and indigenous New Zealanders taking commercial flights in contrast to the “great fleet” myth of Māori settlement of Aotearoa from Polynesia), his speech actively stigmatises opponents organised around the “woke” chain of equivalence.

Jones also positions his opponents as unpatriotic, to be categorised alongside those who do “not take pride either in our flag, our name”. This stigmatisation helps Jones to frame environmental or indigenous rights movements as incompatible to economic wellbeing, positions alternative political positions in opposition to nationalist interests, and reduces complex social, economic and environmental issues to matters of elitism and “wokeism” versus commonsense. Environmental regulations are portrayed not as democratic safeguards but as illegitimate constraints. The solution Jones proposes to “the large energy companies raking in inordinate profits” is not stronger regulation but rather deregulation through mechanisms like the Fast Track legislation.

For Laclau and Mouffe, the “conditions of possibility” of any discourse are much wider than “context”, or fixed structures determining political outcomes; rather, they are the underlying discursive structures that make certain formations possible or impossible within a given historical context (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). There are several key political contexts that make Jones’ speech possible. He does not just respond to these conditions; he actively participates in shaping and contesting them. These political

conditions include post-COVID examination of state power versus individual rights: Jones comments that “bureaucracy during COVID ... will cripple us”. The undermining of scientific consensus on climate change creates the conditions that allow Jones to frame environmental concerns as shrill or hysterical. Tensions around Te Tiriti o Waitangi, New Zealand’s founding document, create opportunities for competing interpretations of Māori rights. Economic anxiety in New Zealand and globally allows “growth” to function as an empty signifier for diverse concerns. Connected to all of these topics, the broader global rise of anti-elite sentiment has created conditions in which populist positions against diverse “elites” (environmental, academic, cultural) can be politically effective, and Jones’ “anti-woke” discourse finds fertile ground.

Text 2: Michael Laws, The Platform, June 20 2024: “The wokery of environmentalism”

Laws is one of the hosts of the fringe right-wing media outlet The Platform. This media outlet was launched in 2022 by broadcaster Sean Plunket (featured in Text 3) initially with private funding from a New Zealand multi-millionaire (Greive, 2022b). The Platform’s content appeals particularly to those who actively avoid what they term “mainstream” media (Sowman-Lund, 2023). It regularly champions culture wars issues, such as those involving transgender rights. Laws is a former MP, Mayor, and radio host. His career in central government was not without controversy. Initially an MP for the National Party (from 1990), he voted frequently against his own party and defected to Winston Peter’s newly founded New Zealand First Party in 1996. This was a short-lived new role; the same year, he resigned from Parliament following a corruption scandal. He went on to become a Councillor and later Mayor of Whanganui District Council, and is remembered for leading a campaign against correcting the mis-spelling of the Māori name of the town (Stuff, 2009). In this monologue, Laws targets environmentalism, framing protection of species as a threat to economic growth and linking environmental protection and Māori rights as similar ideological delusions.

Text 2 (Laws): textual analysis

Laws is working within the genre of radio / online commentary, which allows for a more informal, apparently off-the-cuff delivery than Jones’ political speech. He maintains a conversational tone throughout which creates a rapport with his audience – “can I just say”, “good on you mate”. He appears to be casual or uncertain about some details, whether – for example – Tama Potaka is MP for Hamilton East or Hamilton West. In contrast, Laws is specific that Māori rendered at least fifty species extinct before

European settlement, although ensuring the accuracy of that number would undoubtedly be more challenging than a simple internet search for Potaka's electorate. However, his dithering on this latter inconsequential detail allows him to perform everyman relatability. Like Jones, Laws employs profanity and irreverence ("bloody good job") to signal anti-establishment positioning and uses a joke about MP baldness to gently poke fun at political conformity. Laws is clearly familiar with Jones' jibes at conservationists (he repeats the phrase "Freddy the blind frog"), and like Jones he uses diminutive and trivialising language for environmental concerns: "some beetle", "some guppy", "small inanimate object – or animate object".

Laws' intertextual discursive strategies include using pre-European extinctions to delegitimise Māori environmental guardianship, the concept of kaitiakitanga. Laws pronounces "kaitiaki" with exaggerated care, as if performatively exasperated at having to utter a Māori word. He adopts a patronising tone when addressing Māori environmental concerns, performing as if from a Māori perspective:

If you want to deify us and put us in some form of ideological view that we are some sort of just one step descended from the gods, go for your life, white people.

This speaking at one remove allows him to dismiss indigenous environmental authority while appearing to defend Māori from white idealisation by naïve leftwingers (or "Greenies"). When talking about pre-colonial extinctions, he employs a form of whataboutism that uses historical events to justify present-day environmental damage and conflates pre-colonial environmental impact with today's industrial-scale extraction techniques. This allows Laws to argue that environmental protection is not

authentically Māori and thereby sets the scene, on behalf of his predominantly non-Māori audience, to dismiss contemporary environmental concerns as imposed “wokery”. Loaded terms such as “deify”, and “ideological view” further serve to frame environmentalism as irrational. Laws packages these assumptions within apparently reasonable economic arguments, which can allow his listeners to absorb racist framings while feeling they are engaging with pragmatic policy discussions.

Laws invokes economic rationalism to frame conservation as an unaffordable luxury rather than a necessity: “hundreds of millions of dollars (on conservation)/struggling to provide for our own”. New Zealand’s burgeoning cost of living (particularly since the Covid pandemic) has created conditions in which environmental spending can be framed as luxury: “we are a poor country, getting poorer every day”. He makes brief reference to the threat of uncontrolled immigration with a nod to the far-right Great Replacement Theory (GPAHE, 2025): “the ones who are wanting to come flooding into this place from every other country as New Zealanders are heading out the other door”. Centrally, his discourse conjures false binaries, most noticeably human welfare versus environmental protection. This culture wars framing transforms a science-based policy debate (humans can only thrive long-term in a healthy environment) into an identity conflict, effectively blocking rational discourse.

Text 2 (Laws): Contextual analysis

Laws attempts to naturalise hierarchies in which economic concerns trump environmental ones, resource scarcity justifies abandoning conservation measures, and historical actions extinguish contemporary indigenous environmental authority. As seen in Jones’ speech, this is achieved by invoking empty signifiers, linking chains of

equivalence and thereby constructing antagonists. In Laws' discourse the term "wokery" functions as the primary negative empty signifier. It links environmental protection and Māori rights in "idealistic and unrealistic thinking" framing. By contrast, "truth" operates as a positive signifier, representing realism in contrast to delusion: "congratulations, Tama Potaka, for uttering an enormous truth"; "the truth of the matter is".

Laws constructs a chain of equivalence around each of these signifiers:

Wokery = environmentalists = Greenies = ideological thinking = economic illiteracy = fake deification of Māori = unrealistic = costing the country millions of dollars = "**them**".

Truth = economic pragmatism = historical realism = prioritising humans = addressing the cost of living = practical governance = "**us**".

While Jones positions himself as a charismatic populist leader, Laws presents as a truth-telling commentator who reveals uncomfortable realities and talks plainly: "The truth of the matter is, you do have to pick and choose what you're going to save". "I mean, we've got plenty of beetles." His discourse works to normalise abandoning environmental protection measures by framing them as naïve idealism rather than urgent necessity. Laws packages casual racism as well as anti-immigrant dog whistling within – on first listening – reasonable economic arguments. His discourse illustrates how politicians championing extractive industries and supportive media outlets can ignite resentment in receptive audiences by framing climate action and ecosystem protection as elite impositions, while avoiding direct engagement with environmental evidence.

There is increasing scepticism towards governmental interventions since the global pandemic, part of a delayed backlash against collective sacrifice and “being kind”. Laws’ discourse is usefully analysed within the conditions of possibility of COVID-19 public health measures, the reaction against which has also led to increased questioning of regulatory powers at both central and local governmental levels. His monologue taps into climate action fatigue, in which environmental concerns can be framed as elite, performative preoccupations disconnected from the reality of everyday lives. Ongoing race relations tensions, demonstrated by NZ European anxieties about “special treatment” and inverse racism in which they see themselves as the victims are reflected in Laws’ dismissive talk about pre-European Māori. In addition, the realities of the talkback radio format online include the engagement-generating power of controversial opinions, and the reality that anti-establishment views appeal to audiences who feel disconnected from mainstream politics and media.

Text 3: Sean Plunket, The Platform, December 5 2024: “Why we wage war on woke”

Sean Plunket, a former mainstream media journalist for over 30 years, founded independent online radio station The Platform in 2022 with funding from a New Zealand multimillionaire family with stated reactionary views (Greive, 2022b). In this text – largely a monologue with some asides to producer and contributor Ben – Plunket constructs a wide-ranging anti-woke manifesto that positions diverse social policies as inherently opposed to commonsense interests. His rhetoric demonstrates how alternative media figures can establish themselves as truth-telling voices against carefully selected examples of institutional “wokeness” to mobilise popular resentment. Through three examples – Wellington street cleaning contracts, TVNZ’s coverage of housing problems faced by the LGBTQI+ community, and funding for academic research – Plunket constructs a narrative wherein disparate instances all confirm the existence of a problematic “woke” worldview that stands opposed to the interests of “real New Zealanders”.

Text 3 (Plunket): Textual analysis

Plunket employs combat metaphors throughout his monologue, most explicitly in his title “Why we wage war on woke”. He uses confrontational language such as “push for change” and “revolution against this kind of thing”, positioning “wokies” and “Marxist political campaigning” as the enemy. This militaristic framing positions his commentary not as neutral analysis but as active resistance against perceived ideological oppression. The combative stance is apparent also in his hyperbolic descriptions: “lunatic asylum”, “woke gone mad” and dismissive terms: “nonsense”, “rubbish stories”, “crappy journalism”.

The structure of the text reflects talkback radio conventions; Plunket positions himself as both entertainer and educator. His opening warning – “make sure the cat’s nowhere near you in case you kick it” – establishes an expectation of content likely to enrage while creating intimacy with his audience. He employs rhetorical questions throughout that create an artificial dialogue with the audience: “You’d want that to be their primary expertise, wouldn’t you?” and “How important do you think the Treaty of Waitangi is to cleaning streets?” His deliberately informal tone “out of whack”, direct audience address “You can’t tell TVNZ that!” and conversational fillers “Well, I’m going to share with you” create the atmosphere of a cosy chat, albeit online.

Plunket quotes extensively from Wellington City Council documents. By reading bureaucratic language out laboriously and incredulously and conflating it with the original Māori name of Wellington, Te Upoko o Te Ika a Maui (the head of the fish of Maui), he transforms routine requirements into evidence of institutional overreach. His commentary – “That is “Jaguar rebrand” right there” – links reasonably bland Council requirements to other perceived examples of “woke” corporate excess, and he signals moral outrage through self-commentary: “that’s left me speechless”.

Plunket’s treatment of TVNZ’s housing story is an example of anti-woke discourse repositioning legitimate journalism as advocacy. By framing Pacific Islander housing deprivation as the “real” story, Plunket advocates for one marginalised group while delegitimising another – “victim, victim, victim” (LGBTQ+ people). This prevents collaboration between different disadvantaged communities to advocate for better housing policy for all, while he appears reasonable, and drawing from evidence. Plunket’s ridicules imaginary academic research topics as “gay lesbian whales in

wheelchairs” and “my grandmother’s menstrual cycle in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi”. This mockery serves to make engagement with serious humanities and social sciences research appear absurd – while Plunket positions himself as the voice of commonsense.

Text 3 (Plunket): Contextual analysis

Despite the objective dissimilarity of the issues Plunket chooses to highlight, his discourse demonstrates the construction of a common antagonist (“woke excess”). He links this constructed foe against an imagined community of “commonsense New Zealanders” (“people ... who don’t live in a lunatic asylum”) – an embattled majority whose practical concerns are threatened by woke elites. His discourse establishes several frontiers with boundaries between the commonsense New Zealander “us” and the woke elite “them”.

These antagonistic frontiers include commonsense versus bureaucratic absurdity: (“They could have saved a lot of time by just asking, are you any good at cleaning streets and how much do you cost?”), taxpayers versus ideological, unnecessary spending: (“eye-watering amounts of money for completely woke, diverse rubbish”), and real problems versus victim mentality: (“Pacific Islanders most at risk” versus LGBTQI+ people who “found a statistic to feel victimised by”).

Plunket constructs these antagonistic frontiers by linking chains of equivalence between disparate issues and concepts. He forms a positive chain:

Commonsense = efficient service delivery = value for taxpayers = scientific research = transparent media = sensible governance.

Commonsense New Zealanders” serves as the central positive empty signifier, uniting those annoyed by bureaucratic demands and regulations, those who view academics as disconnected from everyday concerns, those who feel mainstream media doesn’t represent their interests, and those resentful of Treaty obligations.

Plunket creates an effective negative chain:

Woke = diversity requirements = Treaty obligations = LGBTQI+ advocacy = academic social sciences = mainstream media bias = bureaucracy = madness

“Woke” is the catch-all negative linking otherwise unconnected instances in a dangerous, sanity-threatening miasma. These two chains create a powerful “us vs them” antagonistic frontier with a clear “us” side along which Plunket’s listeners can rally.

Several broader discursive conditions enable Plunket’s anti-woke commentary. In the post-Trump context, the global anti-woke discourse is gaining prominence and power. Local right-wing policy changes initiated by New Zealand’s coalition government (for example, regarding academic funding or equity measures) appear to endorse anti-woke positions, allowing Plunket to position himself as reporting on, rather than advocating for change. Media fragmentation creates opportunities for alternative platforms to position themselves as more authentic than mainstream outlets. Plunket links “mainstream media” and “the wokies” and contrasts The Platform’s willingness to listen to its audience via online comments (“if you want to read the story and comment on it, go to Sean Plunket on Twitter”) with TVNZ’s decision to close comments on a potentially contentious Facebook article. Economic uncertainty and a national cost-of-living crisis

render public spending particularly vulnerable to scrutiny, allowing diversity initiatives to be framed as unaffordable luxuries and humanities and social sciences research to be depicted as absurd and indulgent. Finally, tensions around Te Tiriti o Waitangi allow Plunket to reframe Treaty obligations as elite excess rather than legitimate governance. His question – “How important do you think the Treaty of Waitangi is to cleaning streets?” – positions the Treaty as an irrelevant add-on imposed by “woke” bureaucrats rather than the foundational document of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Plunket presents a worldview in which “woke” initiatives are inherently opposed to practical, economic interests. His discourse works not only through the creation of antagonists, but also through the disarticulation of potential alternative coalitions. He sets different marginalised groups against each other by separating housing inequality from LGBTQI+ concerns, positioning “diversity” as harming efficient service delivery and framing some concerns as legitimate but others as manufactured. He undermines academic connections by positioning humanities and social sciences study as political rather than scholarly and self-serving. He mocks social sciences research as absurd, inventing research projects with titles involving LGBTQI+ people and the Treaty of Waitangi to dismiss research as “nonsense”, “crap”, and “a cobbled-together mess”. Throughout this text, he prevents the formation of complementary coalitions by positioning economic benefit to the ratepayer and social justice as mutually incompatible, and obscuring how diversity might enhance services as well as benefit the people employed by them.

These culture wars tactics are highly effective in positioning The Platform and its audience as representatives of commonsense against powerful, out of touch elites (local

government, television media, and academia). His strategic use of humour and mockery makes serious engagement with diversity initiatives appear naive, while his celebration of policy changes like the Marsden Fund reforms provides material evidence that the “war on woke” is being won.

Text 4: The Duncan Garner Podcast “Editor in Chief”, March 5 2025: “National Party begins process of replacing Christopher Luxon”

Duncan Garner, a former political editor for TV3 and Parliamentary press gallery journalist, frames damaging economic policies as directly linked to the failure of an indecisive and struggling Prime Minister to lead on anti-woke positions. Garner does not focus on environmentalists or the fast-tracking of infrastructure projects. However, his podcast was chosen for this project as it demonstrates how culture wars tactics are flexible enough to not only link identities in opposition to diverse issues (as analysis of Plunket’s monologue reveals) – the same tactics can be used effectively even against those who are usually the originators, and beneficiaries, of anti-woke discourse. In this case, Garner’s target is Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, leader of the National Party in coalition with NZ First and ACT.

Garner’s rhetorical approach may now appear familiar when set alongside the patterns of right-wing populist media discourse established by the previous analyses. However, what differentiates this text from others is not only the way in which anti-woke energy is directed towards a politician who would normally benefit from culture wars discourse; it is also the way in which Garner attempts to establish his own credibility and ability to solve political problems through claims of insider knowledge, access to information networks, and political predictions. A former establishment media voice who has now self-branded as a critical voice of authority (“Editor in Chief”), Garner taps into anti-woke sentiment to construct a narrative of political crisis.

Text 4 (Garner): Textual analysis

Garner uses emotive negative language to describe Luxon: “weak”, “indecisive”, “struggling”, “unpopular”, “flop”, “empty vessel”. This terminology contrasts with his certainty in predicting Luxon’s impending political demise: “it’s over”, “he stands for nothing”. The single host podcast format demands narrative colour similar to talkback radio, so Garner employs rhetorical questions “It’s astonishing, isn’t it?” as well as repetition: “no,no,no,no ... Just no.”

Garner positions himself as uniquely qualified to diagnose New Zealand’s political condition: “As a political journalist for 20 years at Parliament, I was there, I saw this.” This autobiographical reminder distinguishes his commentary from other opinion pieces, positioning him as an eyewitness. Garner’s recounting of a 1997 New Zealand prime ministerial coup serves multiple functions: it demonstrates his access to elite political circles, establishes his ability to recognise patterns of political instability, and supports his argument of an inevitable trajectory toward Luxon’s downfall. His repeated assertions about pattern recognition – “I saw coups develop early. I saw the lies, the tricks, the denials” – position him not merely as a commentator but as a previous insider whose predictions draw on years of experience. Garner’s references to his insider knowledge extend to claims about private conversations among National MPs, creating an impression of an extensive network providing him with confidential information: “National MPs are talking”, “lifetime National supporters” “at barbecues all summer”. This strategy presents speculation as fact, bolstering his political predictions while positioning other media as disconnected from grassroots knowledge. The urgency pervading his commentary – “It’s now just a matter of time,” “the clock is ticking” –

creates pressure for immediate political action while reinforcing his insider knowledge and positioning his audience as recipients of privileged information.

Although Garner presents himself as transcending traditional political roles due to his privileged outsider position, in this text he actually amplifies traditional conservative values and right-wing culture wars motifs. When media figures position themselves as both journalists and political actors, traditional boundaries between reporting and advocacy become blurred. As more senior journalists move into alternative or “fringe” commentary roles due to cutbacks in the fragmenting media landscape, having been caught up in scandal, or “swimming the wrong way when the tide of history went out, still debating yesterday’s issues using framing and language from another time” (Greive, 2022c), the public will inevitably find it increasingly more difficult to consistently identify and source information which is – as far as possible – independent and nonpartisan.

Text 4 (Garner): Contextual analysis

Garner’s text constructs “the people” as an embattled majority whose values and economic interests are threatened by an ineffectual and “woke” Prime Minister. The text addresses an imagined audience of “lifetime National supporters” and “the thousands of parents in the middle” who are in opposition to elites who have betrayed them. “Real New Zealanders” therefore operates as the primary positive empty signifier, encompassing various identity positions unified in opposition to political and cultural elites. This signifier brings together “lifetime National supporters” experiencing political disillusionment, parents concerned about children’s education and gender development, regional New Zealanders feeling neglected by Wellington politics, and voters seeking “commonsense” approaches to governance.

The construction of a positive empty signifier “us” requires an opposing, negative signifier – “them”. As in previous texts, this primary negative signifier, implicit or stated, is “woke”. “Woke” functions as the primary negative empty signifier, allowing for multiple interpretations. “Woke” is implied in terms such as “divisive language and politics”, “activist left-wing”, “anti-Pākehā”, “like Jacinda Ardern” and explicitly referenced in the teacher’s letter: “why are you allowing this wokeness and confusion into schools?” Garner’s discourse identifies a variety of “woke” antagonists against which the “real New Zealanders” he has assembled are unified: the Māori Party, representing racial threat to national cohesion, LGBTQ+ advocacy, threatening traditional family structures, elite media, disconnected from grassroots concerns, and the “weak and ineffective” Luxon. Garner constructs the link to Luxon by conflating cultural grievances around LGBTQI+ rights and “wokeness” with economic concerns. This articulation serves to blame economic difficulties on cultural identities rather than policy decisions, and positions “anti-woke” conservative social values as necessary for national prosperity. In short, Luxon’s “woke” position in relation to the rainbow community provides confirmation that he is weak.

Luxon = **woke** = weak = indecisive = unpopular = supporter of LGBTQI+ community
= = “like Jacinda Ardern” = failing economy

Garner thereby creates an implied opposing chain:

Strong conservative leader = decisive = popular = **anti-woke** = economic prosperity.

Garner's description of the Te Pāti Māori / Māori Party as having an "anti-Pākehā approach reprehensible and entirely inappropriate for government" establishes a frame wherein Māori political assertion is incompatible with legitimate governance. Garner warns that including the Māori Party in government would cause a national exodus: "Put them in and watch the country completely empty out to Australia." This statement reveals not only the assumption that non-Māori New Zealanders' preferences should be prioritised in political arrangements – but also that Māori political participation itself threatens the stability of Aotearoa New Zealand. Garner's claimed statistic that "90% of New Zealand" actively oppose the Māori Party's approach allows him to position himself as spokesperson for this supposed majority, and present their "activist, left-wing" impulses and their "anti-Pākehā approach" as an existential threat to a weak, Luxon-led National Party.

Like Jones, Garner uses gendered language to critique political weakness while reinforcing traditional masculine authority. His repeated characterisation of Luxon as "weak and indecisive" is set against traditional frameworks that associate effective leadership with masculine decisiveness. Garner's extended comparison between Luxon and Jacinda Ardern – "just how much like Jacinda Ardern Luxon really is" – feminises Luxon's leadership style while invoking Ardern as a negative. Ardern functions as a metaphorical bogeywoman for "woke" politics, emotional governance, and inappropriate feminine influence in public sphere. The promise to "rid the country of the Jacinda years" can be read as shorthand for returning to more traditionally masculine political arrangements. The repeated references to Luxon's "pausing" and consultation before answering his correspondent can be read as contrasting with assumed

immediate, decisive action taken by masculine leadership. The feminising of perceived political weakness thus reinforces traditional gender hierarchies while delegitimising alternative approaches that include consultation, collaboration, and thoughtfulness.

In introducing the story upon which his criticism of Luxon rests, Garner amplifies a conservative voice – Bob McCoskrie, Chief Executive of “traditional values” advocacy group Family First NZ⁵. The story Garner platforms on McCoskrie’s behalf can be read as a first-person account of moral panic. The teacher’s identity as a “caring woman of God” provides moral legitimacy for concerns about children’s gender expression, and her emotional distress – “she was in tears” personalises anxieties about social change. Her story is neither fact-checked nor corroborated. Garner’s treatment of Luxon’s supportive response to the LGBTQ+ community reveals how support for minority rights – therefore taking the “wrong” side in the “woke” debate – can be constructed as political vulnerability within right-wing discourse. Rather than engaging with substantive policy or questioning this hearsay account, Garner frames Luxon’s response as evidence of his disconnection from conservative and centrist New Zealand values, asserting the only appropriate response would have been outright rejecting the “trans pre-schoolers” scenario suggested in the letter.

Political leaders receive hundreds of messages daily, ranging from highly credible to questionable; Garner is presumably well aware Prime Ministers and their staff do not have “all the time in the world” to respond to every piece of correspondence. It is probable that Luxon’s staff member responded with a careful message acknowledging

⁵ In 2022 the Supreme Court found Family First’s advocacy to be “not fair, balanced or respectful” and overturned a previous decision giving the organisation registered charity status (Bhamidipati, 2022).

his official position towards the LGBTQI+ community rather than risk escalating largely unverifiable allegations. Garner does not explore this context. Rather, his discursive strategy actively directs apparent concern for children and parental rights towards the revelation that the Prime Minister is “woke” – and without “the command and respect needed to hold the PM’s office”.

Several broader discursive conditions make Garner’s commentary possible, and these are by now familiar from the analysis of the preceding three texts. Post-pandemic anxieties create opportunities for questioning state authority and expert knowledge, allowing alternative voices like Garner to position themselves as more authentic than official sources. Economic uncertainty and cost of living anxieties provide conditions for populist appeals that promise apparently simple solutions, for example political leadership change. As also shown by The Platform, media fragmentation allows alternative commentators such as Garner to appeal to audiences who are suspicious of traditional media channels.

Conclusion: Overview of the four political/media texts

Analysis of the four texts reveal consistent discursive strategies that work together to delegitimise positions often framed as “progressive”, including environmental protection, while mobilising populist resentment. The empty signifier “woke” operates with strategic flexibility. Jones uses it sparingly, preferring proxy discourses (“climatism,” “Green cling-ons”), while Peters deploys the term 23 times in his 2025 convention speech. Laws invokes “wokery” to link environmental and Māori concerns. Garner levels an accusation of wokery at the right-wing National Party Prime Minister. Across all texts, “woke” functions as an important empty signifier precisely because of its emptiness and flexibility – it can simultaneously designate biodiversity protection, Māori language use, transgender inclusion, and even perceived pandering to progressive interests, anchoring chains of equivalence that position diverse concerns as a single elite threat.

Performative authenticity provides the setting for hegemonic work across all four texts. Whether through Jones’ bumptious transgression, Laws’ mocking of Māori environmental concerns, Plunket’s mock outrage, or Garner’s “insider” critique of Luxon’s lack of anti-wokeism, these performances position speakers as truth-tellers against politically correct elites. Their performances actively create positions from which environmental concern appears irrational and economic development appears commonsense. All four texts demonstrate inversion of progressive framings through conceptual flipsiding. Environmental regulation becomes “obstruction”, democratic participation becomes “piety”, scientific consensus becomes “elite ideology,” and deregulation becomes “freedom”. This technique proves particularly effective because it mimics objective critique while inverting its substance, often eliciting defensive

arguments from environmentalists that can then further be criticised as “woke”, “pious”, or “shrill”. Affective strategies bypass critical engagement. Mockery (“munchkins”, “Freddy the blind frog”, “cabbage patch kids”), triggering alarm (framing woke ideology as a kind of cancer), and transgressive rhetoric (Jones’ “I say to them, bugger you!”) generate emotional responses that preclude engagement with environmental evidence. The humour is not incidental; as audiences laugh along, the commodification of nature feels like commonsense rather than a contested construction.

These tactics work to reinforce one another. “Woke” as an empty signifier enables chains of equivalence linking disparate targets. Performative authenticity makes articulations feel genuine rather than strategic or forced. Conceptual flipsiding pre-emptively neutralises counter-arguments. Affective intensity ensures emotional rather than rational engagement. This constellation of tactics creates a discursive formation that successfully delegitimises environmental protection while obscuring the extractive interests that benefit from deregulation.

Chapter 5 – Decoding culture wars discourse

During July and August 2025, individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight volunteer participants. The interview transcripts can be found in Appendix 2. Each participant was shown an excerpt of the four texts analysed in the previous chapter (Shane Jones' speech; Michael Laws on The Platform; Sean Plunket on The Platform; and Duncan Garner on his podcast, Editor in Chief) and asked to describe their responses to the content of each clip. The interviewees were told they were free to respond in any way they chose, with the flexibility to reconsider their answers during and after the interview, deviate from discussion of the clip itself, or choose not to answer at all. In addition, each interviewee was told they could withdraw at any time up until the point where they had had the opportunity to review and correct or change their own responses, triggering the deletion of all interview videos and anonymisation of transcript data on August 16, 2025.

Although the interviewees demonstrate a reasonably broad range of demographic characteristics, the intention from a comparatively small sample of interviews was not to achieve representative findings in some strict statistical sense. Rather, the value of these hour-long interviews was that they captured a rich seam of political subjectivities as they relate to the reception, internalisation or resistance of different culture war discourses and talking points. To maintain focus upon the subjectivities articulated by the interview subjects rather than on their individual characteristics, this chapter is organised as a theoretically-informed examination of reactions to each of the political/media clips in Appendix 1. The following sections examine how the eight participants received, negotiated, or resisted different facets of culture wars messaging

through a range of theoretical lenses that illuminate different dimensions of the reception process.

The analysis of the interviews is informed by different theoretical elements: Hall's encoding/decoding framework provides the foundational structure for understanding the dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings reported by the participants. The examination of the spectrum of encoding/decoding possibilities is then more deeply examined through supplementary theoretical approaches which can be characterised as descending from a conscious awareness of response to the unconscious, instinctive shaping of reaction patterns. These theoretical layers include attention to affect, or how emotions shape reception (Boler & Davis, 2021), deep memetic frames, the largely unconscious interpretive structures that determine what becomes visible from individual standpoints (Phillips, 2016), and the role of fantasy, or the unconscious enjoyment and investment in certain narratives (Glynos, 2021). Together, this multi-theoretical approach reveals how culture wars discourse operates not just through rational argument but through emotional resonance, transgressive pleasure, and pre-existing interpretive frameworks. This examination from several theoretical perspectives reveals complex political communication processes and nuanced insights.

The interviews as discursive constructions

The interviews were analysed as discursive constructions based on a dialogical interplay between the interviewee and the media/political text, encouraged but guided as little as possible by open-ended questions from me, the interviewer. It is important to acknowledge the research project context when considering the participants' responses. They had each volunteered for a study examining responses to culture wars rhetoric after being provided with background information regarding the method and objectives of the project, so it can be assumed they had at least some interest either in the topic, being part of the research process, or in sharing their own experiences. As a result, it is likely they approached the viewing of those clips with more attention than they might have done in a non-research context. Two participants were open about having been immersed in culture wars rhetoric for some time before the interview took place – indeed, they may have conceivably volunteered for the study in order to be free to talk about their views in an academic context. For all participants, it could be hypothesised that the interview presented an unusual “front-stage” opportunity when they were asked to articulate positions they might normally only express “backstage”(Goffman, 1959). This “back-stage” position may have been as extreme as deliberate disengagement from political rhetoric, rather than attempting to conceal an oppositional decoding of political messages. The interviews were conducted with as little intervention as possible beyond open-ended prompts, so pressure the participants to express opinions which might align with the interviewer's own views, or be seen as “correct”. By approaching the interviews through an overall discourse theoretical frame, and drawing on theories of encoding/decoding, affect, deep memetic frames, and fantasy, the personalised culture

wars imaginaries of each participant could be more clearly analysed from several illuminating perspectives.

Interviewee demographics

Interviewees were recruited during May and June 2025 through online community noticeboards, business and personal connections, and initial introductions to local community groups through a Hastings District Councillor.

- Four participants identify as male, four as female.
- One participant is an immigrant of South African Indian descent.
- Three participants are Māori.
- One participant identifies as queer.
- One participant is Muslim. The others did not volunteer any religious affiliation.
- Two participants are in their 20s, two in their 40s, two in their 50s, and two 65+.
- Their primary occupations include retired (2), retail (1), self-employed (1), unemployed (1), military (1), community worker (1).
- All participants were interviewed in New Zealand. Seven participants live in Hawke's Bay, and one in Palmerston North.

As this project involved individual interviews, formal ethical notification and clearance was required before proceeding. A full ethics application received final approval in May 2025, Massey University Human Ethics Otu Matatika 3, Application OM3 25/28.

Core Treaty of Waitangi principles guided how this research was designed and carried out for all participants (Massey University, 2017), including acknowledging the ethical implications of multicultural engagement (Appendix 4).

The selected media and political clips, analysed in Chapter 4 and listed as transcriptions and interview excerpts in Appendix 1, include a party political speech (Resources Minister Shane Jones), two online talkback radio station presenters (Michael Laws and Sean Plunket, The Platform), and an independent podcaster (Duncan Garner, Editor in Chief). The clips were chosen for their relevance to the Fast-track environmental legislation as well as examples of wider, anti-woke sentiment. P4, the Indian/ South African migrant, welcomed an unexpected visitor after the fourth clip, so was not shown the final x.com image. As part of my compliance with the ethics process, I had committed to keeping the participants' identities private, destroying the interview videos once each participant had had the chance to check and amend their own transcript, and then anonymising the data. Analysing the interviews one by one in detail could risk obscuring the significance of connected insights, and possibly identify individuals involved, so I have approached the interviews as an aggregated body of data and structured the analysis by the most significant observations instead.

Hall's foundational encoding-decoding framework provides the scaffolding for the multi-layered theoretical approach to interview analysis. Hall proposed three ideal types in which a text can be received by an audience: with a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional reading. The field of audience reception theory has expanded since Hall to encompass how audiences actively reshape and redistribute content on digital platforms. As Phelan (2018) proposes, it is important to make explicit the cyclical nature of the transmission of a media text by also analysing how an audience has been created, shaped and defined by discourse. This analysis therefore approaches Hall's 1970s work on reception theory with a recognition that audience reception nuances resist easy

categorisation. Hall's three categories represent a spectrum of possible reading stances, and deliberate disengagement – as demonstrated by two of the interview participants – is equally valid as an oppositional reading. In addition, it is acknowledged that modern digital affordances now invite audiences to actively reshape and redistribute content, acting not just as interpreters of content but co-creators, encouraging rapid changes of both messages and reception patterns. The role of affect, deep memetic frames, and fantasmatic narratives therefore offer expanded theoretical approaches to the interview analysis, while still relying on the scaffolding of encoding/decoding theory.

The empty signifier “woke”: empty meaning and political identification

The concept of “woke” functions as what Laclau and Mouffe identify as an “empty signifier” (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) – a term participants can fill with meaning according to their existing worldviews. Dominant readings of the anti-woke discourse predominant throughout the media texts emerged from P1 and P3, who embraced definitions of “woke” as false consciousness, viewing it as enforced conformity that prevented independent thinking: “they think they’re being awake, but they’re not”. These two participants viewed wokeness as enforced conformity imposed by the media and other institutions, so they saw “woke” people as unable to think independently. P1 suggests a sinister and unidentified entity may be bribing or forcing “woke” expressions: “And that’s where that whole woke thing is – that people just jump on the bandwagon. They’re not thinking for themselves, they’re not researching it themselves, they’re just going along with it because they’re encouraged to go along with it, partly by being coerced or blackmailed or offered KFC or whatever”. P1’s “KFC” (Kentucky Fried Chicken) reference

introduces a specifically racist dimension, as Māori and Pacific Island people in Aotearoa New Zealand have been negatively characterised as consumers of the brand (Pacific Media Centre Te Amokura, 2013). P1's conspiracy-tinged language suggests the weaponisation of emotion through affective digital politics to fuel fear and resentment towards unnamed, shadowy forces (Boler & Davis, 2021) and operates within what could be described as a broadly normative authentic = good frame (Phillips & Milner, 2021). P3 articulates a similar dominant reading: "Woke is just a term ... for people fighting for control by making everybody kowtow to their needs". P3's intense emotional investment in this interpretation reveals fantasmatic enjoyment in transgressive political positioning. The pleasure derived from pointing out motives of control and manipulation provides what Glynos (2021) terms an alibi for fantasmatic transgressive discourse: P3 can position themselves as simply telling the truth about what is going on. P1 does not derive the same transgressive joy from identifying "woke" coercion methods – rather, they feel embattled by their anti-woke stance.

More nuanced, negotiated readings characterised several participants who demonstrated selective acceptance or rejection of the term while maintaining critical distance. Both P2 and P5 reclaimed the positive meaning of the term for themselves, and P6 understood it to have a positive meaning. P2 rejects the negative framing of "woke", describing themselves as "pretty woke, yeah for sure", but sidestepped opposition to negative framing of the term, preferring to focus on kindness instead: "Be kind, sharing is caring." P5 is tired of being bombarded by "woke" messages on social media reels but when it comes to animal rights, embraces being called a "woke environmentalist" and proclaims "save the beetle". Their changing position demonstrates how decoding

strategies can alter even within a single discourse. Deep memetic frames shape reception based on personal values; P5's positioning in relation to animal welfare issues creates an alternative interpretive frame through which they understand "woke" identity. Animal welfare is the topic with which P5 engages most during the Jones speech text. Later, P5 reports that they quickly lost interest in the texts or did not understand what was being said. Their decoding of the message could be described as disengagement, or fatigued rejection: "[“woke agendas”] ... get a little bit old, you just kind of want to switch it off" – reveals what Boler and Davis (2021) describe as affective exhaustion – the emotional labour required to constantly engage with polarising political discourse. P6 thought “woke” meant open-minded, perhaps associating it with its original positive connotations, but as the interview progressed they recognised how it has become negatively framed. P6 recognised the floating nature of the signifier and its strategic use in the media clips, but did not discard their own understanding of the term – rather, they took a more detached position, observing: “I think, like, yeah, [woke] is just too broad. It can be anything”.

Oppositional readings emerged from participants with more reported progressive orientations who either reclaimed the term positively or rejected its use as divisive rhetoric. P4 rejected the anti-woke message strongly: “the word just annoys me”, and saw it as “a way of separating, a way of dividing”. P4 viewed anti-woke positions as “other”: “These are not people like us”, constructing her own antagonistic other. Their oppositional reading demonstrates not only active resistance to the intended encoding, but also what Glynos (2021) might identify as a fantasmatic investment that could reflect P4's desire to strongly reject populist “everyman” claims. P8, although deliberately

disengaging with social media, sees “woke” positively, as being aware of systemic and political manipulation: “I think someone who’s woke is the most extreme version of someone who is awake to the fact that this [political performance] is a façade at the end of the day”. P8’s oppositional reading transforms the intended meaning entirely, and operates through what Phillips & Milner (2021) describe as a “suspicion of manipulation” deep frame – one that share potential similarities with the conspiracy-oriented interpretations from dominant readers P1 and P3, but results in the opposite conclusion.

The floating nature of “woke” as a signifier was explicitly recognised by several participants. P8 notes: “it’s like turning the meaning of those words into something that doesn’t necessarily exist in relation to what it actually means.” P6 observes: “I think, like, yeah, [woke] is just too broad. It can be anything.” P3 reveals understanding of how empty signifiers gain political power: “You give words power when you take and make them whatever, and that’s the whole thing behind the word.” While participants demonstrate awareness of the discursive power carried by an empty signifier, the affective power of “woke” is still evident in the emotional responses it generated across the interviews. Theoretical insights into fantasmatic investments, deep frames, and affective strategies, operating largely below the threshold of awareness, help explain why recognition of discursive manipulation does not necessarily lead to immunity from its effects. These theoretical perspectives help to explain why “wokeness” maintains an imposing presence as an object of discourse, retaining audience attention even when its intended antagonistic construction is rejected.

Constructing antagonistic frontiers: environmental protection versus economic development

The first two texts (Jones' speech and Laws' monologue) specifically established and reinforced an antagonistic frontier between those concerned about environmental protection and advocates for economic progress, attempting a hegemonic intervention by structuring discourse around the Fast-track legislation into "us" versus "them". This antagonistic framing was decoded differently by participants. Dominant readings emerge again from P1 and P3, who accept the economic framing and environmental scepticism, and in P3's case, celebrate the latter. P1 also expresses pleasure that Jones "tells it like it is" about overblown climate change claims: "[Jones] can stand up and actually say it – "I don't believe there is a climate thing that's being caused by cars or cows farting and stuff like that. That's just ludicrous." P1 also suggested people may suppress their views on climate change for fear of social isolation, or cancellation: "they [people who think like P1] wouldn't talk about the doubting of [climate change] to other people because then people get angry and call them names and stuff like that." This response operates through a "silent/threatened constituency" deep frame (Phillips & Milner, 2021), where P1 positions climate sceptics as a suppressed majority battling against woke excess. Their fantasmatic investment, following Glynos (2021), involves the pleasure of transgressive truth-telling – P1 enjoys the idea that Jones can say what others supposedly think but dare not express, legitimising their own views in the face of feared social exclusion. For both P1 and P3, there may also be an element of what Glynos terms "mourning". Mourning, a process of detachment, can be seen as a process of fantasy construction. These two participants have built up a narrative of elite conspiracy and control to potentially make sense of the loss of something that is important to them – in P1's case, societal acceptance, and in P3, estranged family members. P3 displays

climate change scepticism, using factual claims about volcanic activity to support their ideological narrative:

The Pacific Ocean has lots of volcanoes blowing up under the sea, and you cannot tell me that's the result of mankind burning fossil fuels because it ain't got nothing to do with it. It's mother nature going [gives the fingers].

As Glynos states, a statement may be no less ideological – or invested with enjoyment – for being true. There are indeed volcanoes blowing up under the sea, but for P3 this reality is “caught up in a fantasmatic narrative governed by a logic of desire” (Glynos, 2021, p. 7) – to see anthropogenic climate change discredited. P3 also frames environmental science and institutions as fundamentally untrustworthy: “But listening to the PhDs that were from the science departments, I'm sitting there going “What? And you're giving a PhD for that piece of research?” P3's dismissive gesture and profanities suggest what Glynos identifies as transgressive enjoyment in rejecting elite authority. Their scorn for academic credentials (“Bachelor of Bullshit”) forges an identity with others who reject elite manipulation in P3's online communities.

Negotiated readings appear in P6 and P7's pragmatic middle ground positions. P6 acknowledges environmental concerns while supporting development:

I don't totally disagree with him [Laws], and the majority of what he's saying, it's like sort of human nature to come in and make the area our own. Take over. You know, you have to sacrifice something really. And for progress, I guess, yeah.

This negotiated reading accepts some environmental concerns while characterising the drive towards economic development as an innately human instinct. P6 also demonstrates pragmatic resistance to emotional manipulation: "...most people don't want to see a sheep being killed. You still go to the butcher, though, to get it." This framing takes a pragmatic approach to Freddy the Frog's fate, and maintains a practical compromise position. P7 criticises Jones and Laws for being "too one-sided" with "no engagement with the other side", and advocates for compromise between environmental and commercial interests:

I do believe climate change is a thing. I don't get ridiculous about it, but I think we've all got a part to play. And I think he's not allowing for another voice.

P7's background provides a detached "business commentator" frame that enables recognition of strategic discourse and maintenance of centrist positioning. P7 recognised the strategic function of creating villains: "everyone wants a villain. Like, if you want to unify people, find a villain", demonstrating understanding of how a polarised "us" vs "them" dynamic can be achieved through culture wars discourse to mobilise collective action.

Oppositional readings were evident in strong pro-environmental responses. P4 rejected Jones' dismissive environmental rhetoric: "For me, climate change and the effects is not something that we are preparing for – it's here. So instead of preparation, we need to be talking response, you know." Informed by a central government policy background during COVID-19 and personal loss of family members to the virus, P4 suggested Jones' climate change rhetoric was designed to appeal to "a certain demographic that think

[climate change] is a conspiracy theory.” Their reaction demonstrates how personal experience can mediate reception more powerfully than abstract political positioning. Their migration experience and professional policy background enable recognition, and rejection, of strategic discursive manipulation. P5, despite expressing annoyance at the pervasiveness of “woke” discourse – “it’s like bombarded all the time ... I’m just a little bit over hearing it” – declares willingness to stop a bulldozer to save Freddy the blind frog. This response reveals how affective investment in an issue such as animal welfare can override broader culture war fatigue. P8 called out “the right” for minimising environmental realities: “‘The right’ I guess have an idea ... that a certain way is the best way ... what we can’t argue is the fact that we have got oceans that are full of rubbish.” P8’s oppositional reading could be seen as a frame emphasising empirical evidence over ideological positioning. The affective dimensions of Jones’ discourse become apparent when examining how environmental policy becomes emotionally associated with other culture wars targets through the construction of multiple, connected antagonists. Jones’ speech moves rapidly from transgender identity (“whether you’re a he or a she”) to “climate alarmism” to “Green cling-ons” – creating a chain of equivalence between disparate elements. P1’s response illustrates how this affective strategy can be effective: “Well, like the gender stuff, the ideologies, the closing of Marsden Point and probably the climate thing. I think it’s a bit of – I don’t really think it’s what they make it out to be.” Through the construction of antagonistic frontiers, the everyman populist leads a united, commonsense band of everyman “us” to face off against a discursively assembled, disparate antagonist “them”; in this way, environmental policy and its supporters become delegitimised through affective association with other culture wars targets.

The reception of strategic performance

All participants recognise that politicians and media figures are performing and “strategising” (P4). This recognition operates across different theoretical levels – from conscious decoding of political theatre to affective investment to performance, to unconscious enjoyment of transgressive authenticity. At the level of encoding/decoding, participants demonstrated sophisticated readings that recognised strategic communication no matter whether they agreed with the message or not. P2 noted (of Jones): “I can tell that there’s been time put into avoiding certain words and using other ones.” P7 (of Garner): “..it’s a performative woke response than a real one [of Luxon’s response to “trans preschoolers” concerns]. It’s manufactured.” P4 stated, generally: “politicians are the biggest strategists ever.”

The concept of authenticity emerged as pivotal when participants assessed political credibility, but displayed as affective investments rather than objective opinion. P1 valued Shane Jones’ apparent willingness to speak uncomfortable truths: “So he’s in a position in which he can say these things... he’s not afraid of that. He’s got enough age behind him and experience to be able to say “Well this is what I believe in”. This response demonstrates fantasmatic investment in perceived authenticity – for P1, Jones’ performative authenticity is mobilising their desire for validation while forging an imagined identity with like-minded others. Glynos’s (2021) concept of fantasmatic enjoyment becomes particularly relevant in understanding P1 and P3’s responses to transgressive political figures. P3 expresses “absolute delight” and “total enjoyment” in Jones’ performance, using language that suggests deep pleasure in the transgressive act of “calling out woke bullshit”. P3’s repeated use of “BS”, “crap”, “bullshit” signals not

just disagreement but enjoyment in violating polite norms. Perhaps further emboldened by the transgressive opportunity of being able to speak freely in a research interview, P3 then repeats the word “cunt” in reference to recent media criticism of a coalition politician, who used the word in Parliament. P3 claims it is “just a word” like “fuck”. The pretext for transgression – or “alibi” in Glynos’s terms – is “just stating the truth”. The fantasy provides the framework through which P3 can observe or imagine the confusion and speechlessness of opponents, while P3 themselves maintain that they are simply being logical, “saying what has to be said”. P3 is openly emboldened by the discourse of politicians and media figures whose perceived authenticity they greatly admire. Their transgressive enjoyment is encouraged by right-wing populist figures who claim to stand for the everyday person while legitimising and enabling transgressive discourse.

Deep memetic frames theory helps explain how assessments of authenticity operate through largely unconscious frameworks. An “authentic=good” frame can be discerned across multiple participants, even those with oppositional readings. P6 states [of Laws]: “he was quite funny, because he’s quite offensive to people, but he’s straight”. This suggests that authenticity operates as a positive frame regardless of political position or messaging. However, some participants expressed exhaustion with polarised messaging that they perceived as performative manipulation. P2 noted: “I would much rather spend a lifetime on a change that’s worth it than spend a second listening to this guy [Jones] talk about this shit.” P5 expressed a desire to be able to “switch the [anti-woke] stuff off”. The affective labour required to resist manipulative culture wars discourse became apparent in several responses. P8 described: “It’s been very confronting. But I’m grateful that I’m who I am and that I’m able to just say – not quite

literally say ‘fuck off’ but with my polite actions that’s what I’m doing.” This suggests that oppositional readings require emotional work and conscious resistance to attempted hegemonic interventions.

Affect and frames in digital media spaces

Phillips’ (2016) concept of deep memetic frames provides a framework for understanding how participants’ responses are shaped by largely unconscious sensemaking mechanisms that determine what is visible from their particular social standpoint. All participants reported use of online media, and a “suspicion of media” frame emerged across several participants, representing what could be understood through Hall’s framework as a fundamental oppositional stance toward media encoding itself. P1 attributed “woke” thinking to media manipulation: “mostly the television tells them [“woke” people]. Media or television, particularly the television and the papers.” P3 reports deliberate (legacy) media avoidance: “I don’t watch TV. Every once in a while the TV goes on, but very rarely” but also admits to spending “more hours on YouTube than is sensible”. P7 expresses concern about media independence: “when your media take money from a government, you lose your independence.” This media suspicion frame suggests that for some participants, their opposition is so fundamental that there is not even a message to decode – they have withdrawn from mainstream media consumption entirely. P8 reports that they “removed myself from .. media for [their] mental health”. P5 is a passive and disinterested media consumer: “I don’t purposely listen to the radio. It’s just on in the background at work”. P3’s choice to “live on YouTube” reveals how user-driven content on alternative media platforms provides reinforcement for fantasmatic narratives, including suspicion of legacy media – which

may or may not involve conspiracy thinking. A “silent/threatened constituency” frame appears in several responses, suggesting fantasmatic narratives that position the participant as part of a marginalised group. The “silent majority” framing was first used by US President Nixon, attempting to blunt support for anti-Vietnam war protests by drawing an antagonistic frontier between protesters and “ordinary Americans” (Thelen, 2017). This frame operates through what Boler and Davis (2021) identify as an affective strategy that presents the conservative right as an “embattled ... cultural identity defending itself from villainous [left-wing] political elites” (Boler & Davis, 2021, p. 35). P1 claims: “people are generally not really frightened but they are on that level of being afraid to say what they think.” P5 too feels “a little” marginalised: “I think we cater a lot to [woke people]. We’re going so far that I don’t know – mainstream”’s kind of like the odd one out now.” P7 provides explicit analysis of how threatened identity positions can mobilise affective strategies in relation to Laws, Plunket, and Garner: “white men had a lot of power and now they are really under threat. And when an animal is under threat, they usually attack.”

There is some correlation to age in participants reporting different relationships to digital media consumption and deep memetic frameworks. Both older participants (P1 and P3, 65+) reveal links with conspiracy groups and fringe media platforms online, using “woke” as clearly pejorative framing. P3 describes daily consumption of “YouTube videos from far right and fringe groups” and expresses admiration for far-right politicians such as “Farage, Orbán and Netanyahu”. Younger participants demonstrate more analytical understanding of strategic language use. P8 observes: “when I hear the word woke, I feel like it’s ... someone who is awake to the manipulation that goes on in terms of our

political climate.” P2 (20s) focuses on the combative nature of culture wars discourse: “With politics, I just think it’s crazy that we can have sides and separation... the whole point of politics is to serve the people, and it seems as though everybody’s purpose in politics is to serve themselves.”

Chains of equivalence: te reo Māori as a discursive battleground

The media clips” treatment of te reo Māori (the Māori language) provide insight into how the linkage of race relations with environmental concerns operates through chains of equivalence and affective political strategies. For example, Michael Laws’ dismissive pronunciation of “kaitiaki” and conflation of Māori with species extinction conflates calls for environmental protection with racial resentment. Oppositional readings emerge from participants who identify mispronunciation of the Māori language as intentional disrespect. P4: “Yeah, so quite disdainfully. That’s the word I would use – disdain. ... I find a lot of ... white people do that, and they butcher the pronunciation.” P8 connected the mockery of Māori words to real-world hostility they encounter in their retail role: “People such as Sean Plunket who proactively try to extinguish the native culture of New Zealand by ... mispronouncing Māori words when he certainly very easily could – it really angers me. When greeting someone with “Mōrena!” or “Kia ora!” ... I have now got [customers] who will actively avoid me in the store.” P8’s account of customer hostility to Māori language greetings (“Don’t you dare say that shit to me”) reveals how culture wars discourse translates into interpersonal conflict, and demonstrates the affective labour required to resist what participants recognise as the construction of strategic cultural antagonists.

Negotiated readings appeared from two Māori participants, who both gave Plunket and Laws the benefit of the doubt regarding their pronunciation of Māori words. P6 explained: “you know it’s just the way you are taught in English, and ... Māori is a lot different on the pronunciation” . P6 goes on to question the premise of Laws’ historical claims. P5 was prepared to excuse mispronunciation, but perceived mockery in Plunket’s laboured pronunciation of “Te Upoko o te Ika a Maui”: “I don’t think he maybe deliberately mispronounced it, but I think he deliberately ... raised his voice, and kind of in a mocking kind of tone. It was definitely in a mocking tone.” P1, who revealed their own Māori ancestry as the interview began but then dismissed it as irrelevant, actively extends Laws’ argument equating blame for present-day species extinctions with pre-European Māori, arguing that the concept of Māori as “kaitiaki” (guardians, including of the environment) is a recent one: “their whole concept of being the gatekeepers of the place doesn’t come from their original beliefs”, distancing themselves from their Māori whakapapa (kin connections) by the use of the third-person plural pronoun, rather than “our”. P4, however, recognises the strategic historical manipulation but dismisses its premise: “He [Laws] was kind of letting Europeans off the hook [by saying] ‘so if Māori didn’t worry about the environment, why are we supposed to be worried about the environment?’”

Hall theorised that reception varies according to personal background, experiences and existing worldviews. The participants’ responses aligned predictably with their reported lived experience: P1 and P3, already dismissive of progressive politics, found validation in anti-woke messaging; P4, an immigrant who has received anti-Muslim abuse, immediately and strenuously rejected divisive rhetoric. However, other participants

demonstrated more complex mediations between background and reception. P2's experience as a performer enabled their recognition of political theatre, leading to dismissal of culture wars as surface-level distractions. P6, a trades apprentice with a young family, recognised tensions between progressive values and practical realities. P7's business orientation framed culture wars discourse through strategic power struggles and performative authenticity, while P8, who avoids social media, related this discourse to real-life encounters. Despite their diverse political orientations and backgrounds, participants shared three key response patterns: all demonstrated recognition of political and strategic performativity, reported fragmented media consumption, and expressed concern about societal division – including, for some, within their own families and friendships. Perceived authenticity emerged as pivotal in assessing political credibility, with participants often recognising strategic or performative elements, and from there deciding whether to accept the messages as genuine. However, these commonalities did not always translate into simple binary alignments (pro/anti-woke, economic development vs environment). P7's business background enabled sophisticated analysis of political strategy and rejection of right-wing performative strategies, while P2 (unemployed) and P5 (military support role) both report political disengagement. P4's migration experience and their COVID-19 policy work lead them to connect terminology like "climatism" with "conspiracy theory" thinking.

Conclusion: Reflections on the interview analyses

This chapter has examined how eight participants decoded culture wars rhetoric in New Zealand political and media texts, revealing the complex processes through which

hegemonic interventions succeed, fail, or are partly successful. Hall's encoding/decoding framework provided a theoretical base from which to explore the interviewees' reactions. Theories of affect, deep memetic frames, and fantasy illuminated deeper patterns of reception that shape participants' responses. These theoretical approaches, while loosely representing a descent through conscious awareness, yielded mutually reinforcing conclusions. For example, affect and fantasy narratives gave insight into how participants navigate the signifier "woke", and to what extent they engage with the chains of equivalence linking disparate cultural and political issues. Fantasy studies provided insights into transgressive enjoyment of populist performance and, along with the power of affect, revealed how chains of equivalence can link disparate cultural and political issues to form "us vs them" antagonisms. Deep memetic frames provided another way of examining why performative authenticity resound with some audience members and not others, and why some respondents reported – for example – feeling part of an embattled majority.

The next chapter will explore more fully how discourse theory, affect theory, and fantasmatic logics intersect in the encoding and decoding of right-wing populist culture wars to operate as a hegemonic strategy. Building on the interplay between the theoretical insights guiding this project and the empirical findings from the text and interview analyses, I will examine how culture wars discourse can serve as connective tissue between right-wing populism and neoliberal projects benefiting from attempts to restructure the political field through affective mobilisation, the construction of antagonistic frontiers, and the strategic deployment of empty signifiers.

Chapter 6 – Division and extraction: the role of culture wars in anti-environmental discourse

Culture wars discourse functions as a sophisticated strategy for New Zealand’s coalition government in attempting to secure consent for environmental deregulation and resource extraction. However, the energising of anti-woke sentiment through culture wars discourse extends far beyond one politician or one area of policy. Shane Jones provides a lurid articulation of anti-woke sentiments that characterises the coalition government's broader approach to democratic contestation. This chapter situates the findings of Chapters 4 and 5 within the broader political landscape since 2023, examining how the discursive strategies revealed in my empirical research operate as part of a wider governmental strategy. Drawing on discourse theory’s emphasis on construction of antagonists and hegemonic contestation, I examine the rhetoric of other coalition members such as ACT’s leader Seymour, National Party leader Luxon, and National Party ministers and backbenchers to demonstrate how anti-woke rhetoric functions across coalition actors to enable neoliberal ends while fragmenting potential opposition.

After first recapping on the fast-evolving context of this study, I discuss the broad political-economic context in which these culture wars function. I then proceed to show how my empirical findings illuminate broader patterns in the coalition’s governing strategy. First, I return to the floating nature of “woke” and expand my exploration of its use by the wider governing coalition. I then analyse how antagonistic frontiers are constructed through chains of equivalence, uniting disparate groups in either opposition or support. Next, I examine how performative authenticity operates as a crucial element in culture wars discourse, exploring the blurring of media and political identities as right-

wing populist figures position themselves as truth-telling, uniquely positioned mavericks against elite excess. Drawing on Glynos's (2021) concept of fantasmatic narratives, I then explore how transgressive pleasure and fantasy shape both the construction of messages and reception. Finally, I discuss how right-wing populist discourse enables neoliberal economic goals, using culture wars framing to delegitimise environmental protection while obscuring the true beneficiaries of regulation in the service of capitalist interests. As part of this discussion, I focus on the reification, the "thingification" of nature that enables this discursive work.

Anti-woke rhetoric as governmental strategy

In October 2024, Shane Jones used the signifier "woke" only twice in his speech to the NZ First annual convention. He invoked the divisive framing behind the term and linked diverse antagonists through proxy discourses (Ekström et al., 2025), including framing environmentalism as a pagan religion. A year later, NZ First leader Winston Peters, addressing the same party faithful audience, uttered the word "woke" *23 times*, referring to environmentalists as "sandal-clad, greeny-eyed activists who for ideological extremism would rather see our economy tank than to progress better lives for ordinary Kiwis". In Peters' framing, the wokery of environmentalism, pronouns, transgender people, the media, and his political opponents was no longer a thin pagan ideology, but a more terrifying cancerous infection:

The woke agenda of the left has crept in like a cancer that has spread so deep into our divisive thinking that has become their sole focus ... The woke left are willing to kowtow to the few and isolate the vast majority of Kiwis who just want to be left alone to live their lives without the constant wokeness being pushed down their

throats. That’s why New Zealand First is fighting this war on woke for your right to just get on with your lives without fear of being cancelled, gaslit and shut out (New Zealand First, 2025b).

The escalating anti-woke rhetoric was not confined to NZ First. ACT leader David Seymour used similar framing throughout the period of this study, describing diversity and inclusion policies as “woke” (ACT New Zealand, 2025a), and urging – in his capacity as Associate Education Minister as well as through ACT Party social channels – that parents should stop demanding foods such as “woke” quinoa and hummus in supplied school lunches (ACT New Zealand, 2024; Seymour, 2024). More consequentially, Seymour’s Treaty Principles Bill, ostensibly about constitutional clarification, was promoted through culture wars framing that positioned Māori rights advocates as divisive radicals, conceptually flipsiding “racism” to frame white New Zealanders as an embattled majority (Salmond, 2024). Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, faced with flagging polls in early 2025, said he was open to joining coalition partner NZ First’s anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) crusade, citing concerns about wellbeing budgets, co-governance with Māori, and setting targets to reduce prisoner numbers: “when we took the keys to the place, it was pretty woke” (McCulloch, 2025b). The analysis that follows traces how this discursive work operates across different situations: in legislative battles over environmental and indigenous rights, in the reification of nature that enables neoliberal extraction, and in the affective and unconscious dimensions of reception that shape how such discourses may be received.

“Woke” discourse across the coalition government

In the textual analysis of Chapters 4 and 5, it became evident that antagonistic environmental rhetoric gained far greater power as part of an overarching strategy centred on an ultimate, othered identity – the empty signifier “woke”. An empty signifier appears to ground meaning while actually remaining fundamentally ambiguous. “Woke” functions in this way – simultaneously encompassing everything (environmentalism, indigenous rights, transgender inclusion, even food choices) and nothing at all – thereby enabling maximum flexibility in constructing antagonistic frontiers.

The empirical analysis of Chapters 4 and 5 reveals how this operates in practice. Shane Jones begins his NZ First Convention speech with a direct “bugger you” to the “woke tribe”, immediately establishing an antagonistic frontier before segueing into attacks on environmental policy, such as conservation of endangered native species and the previous Government’s ban on oil and gas exploration. His mockery of “shrillness” and “feelings overcoming facts” feminises his opposition, while diminutive language like “munchkins” infantilises environmental advocates. These performative choices accomplish hegemonic work beyond bombastic grandstanding; when Jones casts concern for environmental protection as hysterical or infantile, he naturalises a masculine-coded commonsense position that views concerns about species and habitat destruction as irrational. Yet Jones – while at the forefront of the Fast-track propaganda push – is not the only voice in a broader governmental chorus. Illustrative supplements to the core empirical analysis of Chapters 4 and 5 include ACT Leader Seymour, whose rhetoric has positioned Treaty principles as having been captured by “woke elites” and representing an erosion of “equal rights” (Ashworth, 2024). Winston Peters has criticised a compulsory tikanga Māori course for law students: “how has this

insipid, cancerous, woke indoctrination taken a hold within our education system?” (Harris & Plummer, 2024; Peters, 2024). National ministers including Bishop and Prime Minister Luxon, who, while more circumspect in their language, reinforce the same antagonistic frontiers: environmental protection becomes “red tape” and equity initiatives become “divisive” (Meyer, 2025a). Attorney-General and former National Party leader Judith Collins has been central to efforts to remove DEI requirements from the public service. Luxon has described Collins as “definitely not woke”. Collins agreed, saying: “I am the least woke person, possibly because I’m already well awake” (Ensor, 2025). Collins is indeed not new to anti-woke tactics, although her recent rhetoric has focused more on public service reform and – as a kind of anti-woke proxy – the discourse of “meritocracy”. During her 2020 campaign to become National Party leader, Collins criticised NCEA for having “too much woke stuff” (Curtis, 2020), dismissing subjects like photography, media studies, and arts education.

Not all politicians are as rhetorically nimble as Jones. Aspiring NZ First list MP Stuart Nash – sacked from the Labour Cabinet in 2023 for disclosing confidential information to donors – was a surprise speaker at the 2025 NZ First Conference, where he participated wholeheartedly in anti-woke discourse, including criticising “toilets for transgenders” (Casey, 2025) and condemning Labour as “woke” in a post-speech press conference. In a subsequent interview with Sean Plunket on The Platform, however, Nash clumsily overstepped the anti-woke line. Asked by Plunket to prove his anti-Labour credentials by describing what a woman is – transphobic culture wars territory well-traversed by Peters – Nash missed the cue to denigrate, for example “out-of-touch pearl-clutching virtue signallers who cannot define what a woman” is (Peters, 2025b) (and see Appendix 1), and

replied: “A woman is a person with a pussy and a pair of tits.” (Burr, 2025). Having casually conflated culture wars rhetoric with a sexist slur, Nash faced immediate public backlash and professional repercussions. He stepped down from his role in international recruitment and was dropped from a government trade delegation amidst acrimonious leaked text exchanges. It remains to be seen if NZ First will appoint Nash as a list MP for their 2026 election campaign despite these gaffes. If Nash’s presence on the NZ First party list is deemed likely to draw new votes, his offensive misstep may eventually be reframed as a spontaneous, amusing example of masculine locker-room talk and thinly veiled anti-Jacinda Ardern sentiment, as seen already on X.com (Holidays have hoofed it, 2025).

The escalation from Jones’ thinly-veiled allusions to “woke” in his 2024 speech to Peter’s explicit and foregrounded use of “woke” in 2025 illustrates what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) describe as the fixing of an empty signifier into a nodal point – a privileged sign around which chains of equivalence are constructed in an attempt to establish hegemonic formations. As this project has revealed, the meta-antagonist “woke” can operate to harness mass populist anger, invoke transgressive glee, suppress alternative formations, and create new alliances ranged along discursive antagonistic frontiers. What is in no doubt that the signifier is intended to arouse strong emotions: Plunket’s warning to his audience – “make sure the cat’s nowhere near you in case you kick it” – signals that his content is designed to enrage. Plunket’s (and later NZ First’s) “war on woke” can thus be seen as a successor to antagonistic constructions inviting disparagement of any left-wing identity or argument labelled as “social justice warrior” (Phelan, 2019), “politically correct” (Weigel, 2016), or “cultural Marxist” (Wilson, 2015).

At time of writing, “leftist” appears to be gaining ground among some NZ journalists and media commentators as the newest iteration of this antagonistic construction, following the US (du Plessis-Allan, 2024). Like its discursive forebears, “woke” can be usefully employed to entirely disparage ideas of environmental protection or climate change action, enabling ideological affinities between neoliberal and far-right discourses (Phelan, 2019). The invoking of “woke” can distract from and create new consent pathways for underlying objectives such as clearing the way for extractive industries despite scientifically established climate change risks, or the destruction of irreplaceable biodiversity for short-term profit.

The Government’s coordinated anti-woke energy has extended even to issues not directly analysed in my empirical material but connected through chains of equivalence. Following international patterns, pro-Palestine solidarity protests in New Zealand faced accusations of “virtue signalling” and “hysteria” that paralleled accusations against climate activists, Green Party MPs, and Māori advocates (1News, 2025; Dunlop, 2025). Shane Jones referred to a Green Party MP’s keffiyeh as a “terrorist tea towel” in January 2025 (McConnell, 2025). P3’s invocation of the term “genocide” in discussing “woke” vocabulary resonates with this wider context, although widespread international protests in response to genocide in Palestine emerged during and after my primary data collection. This illustrates the flexibility of anti-woke rhetoric; it is capable of incorporating new targets into its chain of antagonistic equivalence without sacrificing any affective impact.

The chains that bind: forming collective identities

Seemingly unrelated political struggles or entities can be linked and mobilised as either “us” or “them” through the articulation of equivalence – the practice of establishing relationships between elements to form a collective identity. To examine this practice in the wider New Zealand political context, I return to the rhetorical tactics that linked the objectives of the Fast-track Approvals Bill and the Principles of the Treaty of Waitangi Bill, both introduced to Parliament during 2024. At first glance there were few obvious similarities between the two; the former concerned with establishing a fast-track approvals regime for infrastructure projects, the latter aiming to relitigate the principles of New Zealand’s founding treaty between the British Crown and Māori signed in 1840. However, the same discursive strategies mobilised against environmental protection were (and are) used against Māori rights. Jones explicitly links the issues of environmental protection and Māori co-governance in his speech to the NZ First Convention:

We need to make those trade-offs on the basis of science, economic rationalism and open debate. Not tiny groups able to weaponise the Resource Management Act. Not tiny groups able to weaponise discussions ... either around wahi tapu [sacred places, or sites of spiritual and cultural significance to Māori] or species.

Seymour’s promotion of the Treaty Principles Bill tapped into this anti-woke energy, positioning Māori political formations as the recipients of preferential treatment ahead of other New Zealanders, conceptually flipsiding “equality” and “racism”, and thereby emboldening a vocal online base. Seymour observed at the beginning of 2026 in relation to the Bill, voted down at its second reading : “yes, Māori have rights, but actually everyone has rights, that project is still very much alive” (Sachdeva, 2026). This chain-

constructing discursive work extends beyond specific legislative objectives. Jones' chains of equivalence link growth, economic rationalism, masculine energy, strength, and nationalism, while he constructs an opposing chain linking climate alarmism, environmentalism, transgenderism, the threat from Māori political groups, and the risk of a contracting economy.

Performances of populist authenticity make Seymour's and Jones' construction of chains of equivalence seem natural rather than forced. These performances proved effective with some interview participants. P3: "He [Jones] calls out what he sees to be the woke bullshit." P1 recognises the links and extends them to their own conspiracy thinking:

Well, like the gender stuff, the ideologies, the closing of Marsden Point and probably the climate thing ... I don't really think it's what they make it out to be ..."

P3, who expressed "total delight" in Jones' performance, accepts the constructed equivalences without question: "climate change is a rort transgenderism is a rort identity politics is a rort."

Once established, chains of equivalence can make it difficult to argue for environmental protection without being positioned within the entire antagonistic chain. In this way chains of equivalence make certain positions untenable while legitimising others. P7's advice to "if you want to unify people, find a villain" can therefore be expanded: "if you want to unify people, bring several 'villains' together under one discursive banner so they are seen as equivalent and linked threats." The coalition's success in constructing such

chains has created conditions for advancing policies across disparate domains while fragmenting potential opposition coalitions.

The earlier textual analyses demonstrate how the power of these chains can become evident in wider, real-world effects. Laws links “wokery” with environmentalism, dismissing endangered species as “some beetle”, and conflates te ao Māori (the Māori worldview) with naive mythologising. He thus offers his listeners racist absolution from collective environmental responsibility. P8 reports customer hostility triggered by Māori-language greetings, demonstrating how sustained culture wars rhetoric has normalised antagonism towards Māori cultural expression. More broadly, the Government’s policies have both shaped and acted upon this antagonistic discourse: government departments were instructed to reduce their usage of te reo Māori, bilingual road signs have faced renewed contestation, and funding for Māori broadcasting has been sharply reduced (Corlett, 2024). Exemplifying this specifically anti-Māori anti-woke energy, in December 2024, despite support from the Geographic Board, Hutt City Council, local iwi groups, and 75% of submissions in favour, National Party Minister for Land Information Chris Penk rejected a proposal to correct the colonial misspelling of Wellington suburb “Pito-One” (with historically significant meaning) from the existing “Petone” (RNZ, 2024). Penk has been tipped as a rising star in the coalition government (The Post political reporters, 2025). Penk’s decision runs counter to that made by the National Party-led government in 2015 to correct the (misspelled) town name Wanganui to Whanganui, against which Michael Laws, Mayor of Whanganui 2004-10 and a Councillor from 2013-14, had led a bitter, years-long campaign (Stuff, 2009). Laws’ Whanganui rhetoric shows clear parallels with the performative impulses of the current coalition government:

Mr Laws was angered by a New Zealand Transport Agency sign on State Highway 3 which referred to Whanganui (Stuff, 2010).

Just over a decade after calling the government's Whanganui decision "wrong" and "racist" (Herald online, 2009) Laws is now amplifying the culture wars rhetoric of a National-led coalition far more aligned to his anti-woke views.

Performativity and authenticity: the hybrid media-political landscape

The impression of political authenticity emerges when a politician or media figure's communicative style successfully aligns with pre-existing cultural codes about what "genuine" looks like – the "everyman" speaking plainly, the transgressive figure "saying what everyone's thinking", the person unafraid of elite disapproval. Contemporary New Zealand politics operate within what Chadwick (2017) terms a "hybrid media system" wherein boundaries between political and media roles increasingly blur. The video texts analysed for this project – from politician Jones to media figures Laws, Plunket, and Garner – exemplify this blurring, with everyone displaying their authenticity through populist tactics such as the use of colloquial language, performative transgression, anti-intellectual posturing, and affective intensity.

The hybrid media-political landscape is crucial for understanding how culture wars discourse circulates and achieves its effects. Garner presents speculation as fact, and styles himself as an informed insider and journalist who is all about "the facts". Laws constructs everyman authenticity through casual asides "can I just say", "good on you mate" and apparent unscripted spontaneity. Plunket establishes transgressive authenticity, positioning himself as a provocative truth-teller. Jones operates

simultaneously as Minister and media performer, his professionally curated social media presence reaching audiences through channels such as YouTube that bypass traditional journalistic mediation (Finlayson, 2022). P2 recognised of Jones:

he used some loaded words and specific words as well throughout that to really make sure he didn't land too far on one side or the other, which is quite impressive.

“Loaded words and specific words” can be seen as useful shorthand for techniques designed to construct authenticity. Jones mocks “Freddy the blind frog” to violate respectful discourse norms, inviting his audience to share in his performative transgressive pleasure. Plunket laments “millions of dollars to researchers, often for things like gay lesbian whales in wheelchairs.” Such strategic short-circuiting of rational argument through affect is an effective performance tactic that resonates with audiences’ existing frames for recognising authenticity.

These authenticity performances contrast sharply with Prime Minister Luxon’s perceived deficit on this front. As demonstrated in Garner’s discourse analysed in Chapter 5, Luxon’s measured, corporate communication style left him vulnerable to accusations of performative “wokeness” when his office responded cautiously to the “trans preschoolers” controversy. Where Jones’ bombastic transgressions register as authentic truth-telling to receptive audiences, Luxon’s policy-focused, professionally cautious staff-mediated communication registers as inauthentic – a perception Garner explicitly exploited in positioning himself as revealing insider truths about weak leadership. P7 recognised that Luxon’s response felt “performative woke... rather than a

real one... it's manufactured." This perception gap reveals how authenticity may be discursively encoded and decoded within populist versus establishment frames, creating strategic challenges for Luxon's coalition management.

The strategic challenge for progressive politics, on the other hand, is not simply presenting "better facts" but understanding how authenticity is discursively coded within populist versus progressive registers, and why measured, policy-focused communication can register as inauthentic, while bombastic rhetoric registers as sincere truth-telling. Performative authenticity and everyman appeal is particularly central to a prevailing right-wing populist persona. Wodak (2014) sees the ideology of authenticity and the performance of straightforward thinking as connected to reactionary nationalism, a foundation of NZ First's ideological platform. Yet this performative mode has proven adaptable across the coalition's diverse political traditions. Seymour performs anti-elite racist dog-whistling irreverence, criticising – for example – event expenditure by the Ministry for Pacific Peoples: "In my fantasy, we'd send a guy called Guy Fawkes in there and it'd be all over", and then protesting that his comment was "clearly a joke" (Doyle, 2023). Bishop performs pragmatic expertise: "The time for excuses is over. The culture of "yes" starts now" (Bishop, 2025). Backbench National MPs perform a Greek chorus of "commonsense", "pragmatic", "sensible" messages in their constituent communications: "we are making councils take a commonsense approach to road cones ... A sensible Transport Minister making practical policy!" (Wedd, 2025).

The real-time evolution and refinement of right-wing, populist, "authentic" culture wars messaging and strategies is fast-moving, responsive, and iterative, operating across the

hybrid media-political landscape with increasing sophistication (Finlayson et al., 2021). Seymour cultivated an awkward, nerdy persona early in his political career, performing self-deprecating “gawky comedy” that appealed to voters (Vance, 2014). Jones’ presence on social media and party channels demonstrate that he not only understands the power of performative authenticity, he is prepared and equipped with Parliamentary and Ministerial resources to take full advantage of the fragmented and mediatised political landscape (McSwiney & Sengul, 2024). Both Seymour and Jones’ performances have themselves become a political campaigning strategy (Sorensen, 2024), and their respective styles of humour demonstrate that their use in the right context can be key in uniting audiences through “the language of the common people” (Beck, 2024). The construction of right-wing populist messages has become increasingly more strategic and contextually aware, taking lessons from the strategies of overseas self-styled populists. Jones enthusiastically uses variations of the US Republican and Trump 2024 campaign slogan “drill baby drill” in his messaging (Jones, 2025) – frequently brandishing a baseball cap bearing the slogan, and inspiring the title of this thesis.

Fantasmatic narratives and the spectrum of reception

Analysis has identified elements common across the media and interview texts – the ultimate antagonist “woke”, the construction of chains of equivalence, and performative techniques. To these commonalities can be added anti-elite discourse, “commonsense” rhetoric in contrast to “ideological excess”, and dismissive, belittling language. While Chapter 5 examined how these elements operate within specific texts and were received by individual participants, this section explores how fantasmatic

narratives – understood through Glynos’s (2021) framework – function to provide affective investment in culture wars discourse across the broader political landscape.

The media texts analysed in Chapters 4 and 5 each construct distinct fantasmatic appeals while sharing common elements. Jones performs the populist strongman, co-opting his audience as fellow fighters in cultural battle and victims of elite betrayal. His performance of empowerment turns audiences from passive observers to part of an anti-woke resistance movement, cosplaying a nationalist fantasy: New Zealand as a self-sufficient country that can drill, mine, and build its way to prosperity despite threats from environmental activists. Laws performs the veteran truth-teller, targeting anxious conservative middle New Zealand worried about cost of living, convinced that environmental protection is an unaffordable luxury. Plunket positions himself as the alternative media pragmatist, offering simple explanations for complex decisions while validating suspicions that academic elites and government bureaucracies waste money on frivolous projects. Garner performs the expert political insider turned outsider, speaking as though his audience are insiders sharing his frustrations with weak leadership.

These distinct performances nonetheless share crucial fantasmatic elements. All invoke nostalgia for conservative values and traditional energy sources. All depict progressive formations as simultaneously powerful elites and absurd weaklings – a contradiction that apparently poses no logical problem for fantasmatic investment. Most significantly, all offer transgressive pleasure in violating progressive and institutional norms. Indeed, the consistency of transgressive enjoyment across texts – as demonstrated particularly by P1 and P3’s responses – suggests this is a key element in right-wing populist discourse

in New Zealand, operating to create collective identification and build political momentum.

Beyond the empirical material, similar fantasmatic narratives characterise discourse across the coalition government. Seymour's promotion of the Treaty Principles Bill invoked a fantasy of "equality" as seen from a settler-colonial point of view as well as a fantasy of simple constitutional definitions, appealing to people who feel threatened and displaced in a nuanced and complicated world. National ministers, while more cautious, nonetheless participated in fantasmatic construction. Finance Minister Willis's budget messaging invoked fiscal responsibility narratives that positioned progressive spending as naive idealism in contrast to the Government's "decisive, disciplined" economic plans (Walters, 2024). Infrastructure Minister Bishop's discourse promised national prosperity through extraction, reviving fantasies of New Zealand's mining past (Bishop & Jones, 2025).

Chapter 5's analysis revealed how fantasmatic narratives are decoded, negotiated, and reconstructed by participants, from P3's complete alignment expressing "absolute delight" and "total enjoyment" in transgressive performances, to P1's elaborate conspiracy narratives extending Jones' anti-elite discourse, to oppositional readings from P4 and P8 who recognized strategic construction of fantasy. A core strength of right-wing populist discourse lies in its ability to offer compelling fantasmatic narratives that provide emotional satisfaction, community belonging, and frameworks for understanding complex realities. Whether embracing Jones' promise of growth through extraction (P1, P3), negotiating pragmatic narratives (P6), or constructing narratives of resistance (P4, P8), all participants engage in fantasy construction to make sense of the

political landscape. This universality of fantasmatic investment underscores why progressive politics cannot simply counter with “better facts” but must understand and engage with the affective dimensions of political discourse (a point I will return to in Chapter 7).

A discursive struggle: economic development versus environmental protection

The initial impetus for this research was the flourishing of culture wars propaganda that accompanied the newly introduced Fast-track Approvals Bill, which aimed to speed up infrastructure development while deprioritising existing environmental protections. This legislative push was accompanied by explicit anti-environmental rhetoric that positioned conservationists as economic obstacles. There was an immediate public outcry after this legislation was introduced; a pro-environment March for Nature in Auckland attracted over 20,000 people and nearly 27,000 submissions against the Bill were made in the short timeframe given for public feedback (Hancock, 2024).

Retaliation from the coalition government was swift and furious as they recalibrated their initial public relations narrative of creative “disruption” and “one-stop shop” convenience. Their new, fiercer, tactics, led chiefly by Shane Jones, whose rhetorical tactics examined in Chapter 4 include culture wars rhetoric, mockery, and the discursive linking of disparate groups to set commonsense “growth” against otherworldly, diminutive, female-coded foes. However, the propaganda push has been shared across coalition partners: National Party Infrastructure Minister Chris Bishop reinforced the economic imperative framing (Bishop, 2024), and ACT’s Seymour castigated existing regulations as the “red tape” his party was elected to eliminate (ACT New Zealand, 2025b). Prime Minister Luxon has claimed fast-track initiatives will “change the game for

ambitious Kiwis who want to ... contribute to a stronger economic future for New Zealand” – positioning environmental protection as an obstacle rather than a safeguard. Right-wing media commentators picked up the cues, and Laws’ Platform monologue reveals similar trivialising language – “some beetle” “some grassland” – diminishing environmental concerns while framing conservation spending as an unaffordable luxury. What could have been a straightforward policy dispute was packaged as a struggle over meaning, with political and media rhetoric working to articulate environmental concerns with elite arrogance, radical indigenous claims, and eccentric, childlike naivety. This framing resonated strongly with some interview participants. P1 and P3 embraced dominant readings that positioned “woke” environmentalism as enforcement; P3 celebrated Jones’ ability to “tell it like it is” about climate change. As with Laws’ discourse, which used pre-European extinctions to delegitimise contemporary Māori guardianship of the environment, framing kaitiakitanga as “wokery” rather than genuine cultural practice, Jones’ rhetoric worked to set New Zealanders concerned about protecting the environment (“them”) against everyday New Zealanders (“us”). The interview data reveals how effectively this discursive strategy operated at the level of reception. While participants like P4 recognised Jones’ rhetoric as appealing to “a certain demographic that think [climate change] is a conspiracy theory”, others like P1 found validation in Jones telling it “like it is” about climate doubts they felt unable to express for fear of social ostracisation. In this way, culture wars discourse can effectively restructure policy debates into identity conflicts, with tangible consequences for environmental protection in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The Fast-track Approvals Act became law on 23 December 2024 (Ministry for the Environment, 2025). Final ministerial decision-making power had been removed in August 2024 as the potential for conflicts of interest had drawn ongoing criticism. This concession was not enough to quell public concern. The final passing of the Bill into law was interrupted by members of the climate movement 350 Aotearoa, who dropped banners from the public gallery. The protesters were removed and barred from parliament. Forest & Bird called the passing of the bill a dark day for New Zealand and pledged to continue to oppose “destructive” projects enabled under the legislation (Hancock, 2024).

Culture wars as a strategic tool for neoliberal extraction

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the discursive strategies of right-wing populism have been in an effective tryst with neoliberal ideology since November 2023. The coalition leaders – Luxon, Peters, and Seymour – clash at times due to ambitious leadership personalities and strategic policy differentiation. However, business as usual for New Zealand’s governing coalition sees neoliberalism and right-wing populism operate to achieve a mutually beneficial discursive landscape in which the flow of capital is freed from the restraints of environmental regulation, democratic demands for redistribution are ignored or denigrated, and respect for collective rights and alternative groups is eroded. Part of the reason for this success has been the fast-moving pace of the coalition’s legislative programme: nimble campaigns, aligned with Parliamentary timetables, seizing on issues of the day, and taking full advantage of the flexible nature of culture wars politics. Social media affordances allow messengers to filter issues of the day through diverse discursive strategies and targets ranging from demonisation of

transgender people, the denigration of Māori, to the destruction of biodiversity for short-term economic gain.

Jeff Deist, President of libertarian thinktank the Ludwig von Mises Institute, celebrated Trump's victory in 2016 as "the gift of populism ... our job is to unwrap it: to turn the nation's contempt for politicians into contempt for politics itself." (Slobodian, 2025). It is helpful to turn Deist's observation back to the context of this project and explore how the "gift of populism", including culture wars rhetoric, benefits those intent on corporate enrichment, privatisation of public assets, weakening of civic and indigenous groups, and fomenting distrust of democratic institutions. From this standpoint, the battle over environmental policy that is the focus of this project reveals a broader strategic alliance between populist rhetoric and neoliberal objectives. Jones himself explicitly confirms this alliance in his florid, populist speech examined for this project:

Nothing motivates me more as a politician than ensuring that the autocracy, the spread of the state is constantly challenged, which is why I'm solidly on side with the kaupapa, the mission that David Seymour is endeavouring to bring forward in relation to plucking out excessive regulation.

A central culture wars strategy to "pluck out excessive regulation" is the linking of disparate elements into chains of equivalence, constructing antagonisms to unify opposing groups. P1 demonstrates the desired alignment between anti-woke sentiment and support for neoliberal economic policies:

[Jones] aligns with what I feel generally about a lot of stuff ... like the gender stuff, the ideologies, the closing of Marsden Point and probably the climate thing.

P1's opposition to transgender rights has become seamlessly linked to support for reopening an oil refinery – exactly the articulation Jones constructs in his speech when he promises to reverse the previous Government's oil and gas exploration ban while mocking those who “don't want to be known as a he or a she.”

The pragmatic alliance between populism and neoliberalism is not always obvious, possibly due to the fact that at an ideological level they might appear to hold incompatible views. The former celebrates “the people” against elites, while the latter champions market mechanisms over democratic interventions. Yet the interview analyses demonstrate how culture wars rhetoric bridges this apparent contradiction, transforming environmental protections into authoritarian overreach and clearing the path for deregulation. One interviewee (P7) recognises that “everyone wants a villain”. By constructing environmentalists and their chained equivalents as villains (Laws' “hundreds of [expensive] conservation staff”, Plunket's “out of whack and crazy”) the discourse mobilises support for policies that benefit extractive industries. Another interviewee's resigned acceptance reveals how effective this can be: “you have to sacrifice something really ... for progress.” Thus the inevitability of environmental degradation for economic gains becomes naturalised through culture wars framing.

When those who could have united around economic interests are instead divided by perceived identity issues, the outcome benefits capital. This may include an “overwhelmed” response, which emerges clearly from several of the interviews. A constant stream of culture wars issues – what P2 calls being “bombarded all the time” – creates conditions where complex legislation like the Fast-track Approvals Bill passes into law while public attention is consumed by debates over pronouns and toilet

facilities. Aiding this process, culture wars rhetoric can also fragment potential coalitions (for example Māori, rural workers, and low-income households) that might otherwise unite to oppose neoliberal policy advancement. This does not mean, however, that audiences do not recognise the strategic operation of language to block coalition-forming; P2 observes that “I can tell there’s been time put into avoiding certain words and using other ones”, acknowledging the avoidance of terms such as “extraction”, “deregulation” or “corporate profits” in favour of empty signifiers such as “growth”, “prosperity” and “everyday Kiwis”.

The capacity for strategic alliance between right-wing populism and neoliberal goals may not be obvious even to those close to populist parties. At the 2025 NZ First Convention, a speaker preceding Peters described both Trumpism and NZ First as “daggers in the heart of neoliberalism” (Waiwiri-Smith, 2025). And indeed, the victories of Brexit and Trump in 2016 have been framed by political commentators as a showdown between populism and neoliberal globalism, in the context of which global elites have been slowed or even halted in their march to hegemonic victory by the righteous anger of common folk (Slobodian, 2018), which suits NZ First’s own fantasmatic narrative of their role as nationalist champions of the people. However, Jones’ and Peters’ culture wars rhetoric and antagonistic projections cloak the reality that what appears to be a clash of opposites – right-wing populism vs neoliberalism – might in fact be a mutually beneficial relationship, in which, according to Slobodian (2018), conflict is at most a family feud. Jones positions environmental regulations not as democratic safeguards, but as nonsensical quasi-pagan impositions. His speech constructs explicit chains of equivalence that benefit extractive policy, connecting the concepts of growth, economic

rationalism, and freedom from regulation with an immediate policy goal – the reopening of an oil refinery.

The New Zealand coalition Government’s stepped-up culture war efforts in the face of popular protest and engagement with the Fast-track Bill can be at least in part explained by the fact that the external limits of neoliberalism are ecological. Capitalism and democracy are linked by their dependency on extracting fossil fuels and minerals (Dahlberg, 2023). At the first post–Cold War meeting of the Mont Pelerin Society, a neoliberal thinktank founded in 1947, its president declared that the one of the three greatest threats to free-market ideology was environmentalism. Decades later, soon after the fall of communism, a speaker addressing the same gathering warned:

Having fought back a red tide, we are now in danger of being engulfed by a green one ... The forces that once marched under the banner of economic progressivism have regrouped under a new environmental banner (Slobodian, 2025).

The neoliberal objective of “rolling back the state” centres on privatisation and removal of “red tape” – that is, regulations often designed to ensure transparency, rights, and accountability. Without regulations, the government would no longer have power to rein in an unregulated corporate sector. Extractive industries therefore benefit greatly from the removal of regulations, enshrining their right to mine and dam with little to hinder them, as capitalist political leaders generally pursue short-term financial opportunities at the expense of long-term environmental protection. The corporate mentality is about transferring as much wealth as possible to private shareholders, so if only vestiges of corporate regulation remained and privatisation continued apace, most of the citizens of

Aotearoa would be left seeking “shelter from the power of the owners of property” (Harvey, 2020). To obtain an electoral mandate for policy approaches to achieve such objectively unpopular objectives, politicians and their allies need to deflect from issues such as the increasingly limited options for mitigating or adapting to climate change, or the true intergenerational cost of biodiversity loss – presenting rich opportunities to the modern propagandist (Jooste et al., 2018). The fluid ideological landscape of environmental debate and the new affordances of social media provide an ideal setting for debates framed to argue the inconvenience of environmental protection standing in the way of economic progress. Even audience disengagement can serve neoliberal interests. P5 wants to “switch off” from culture wars discourse. P8 has withdrawn from social media “for mental health”. P2 is frustrated that politics is all about “sides and separation” and prefers to work on their own creative projects. All represent forms of political disengagement which prevents organised resistance to the environmental damage that results from the lifting of deregulations and protection in favour of capital, and the transfer of public resources to private interests can proceed with another potential impediment nullified.

The reification of nature as an enabler of deregulation and privatisation

Culture wars discourse operates as an invaluable rhetorical tool for masking the true objectives of neoliberalism and smoothing consent pathways for exploitation of natural resources. The reification of nature serves this worldview – the construction of “the environment” as a separate entity that can be traded off against human concerns, rather

than as a life-support system within which all human activity occurs. This phenomenon⁶ is demonstrated by the project texts' treatment of the environment as a discrete and commodifiable issue.

In the early twentieth century, Hungarian philosopher György Lukács maintained that objects, people, and even one's own feelings are experienced as "thing-like" objects when they come to be viewed in terms of economic transactions (Honneth et al., 2008). Honneth cast reification as forgetfulness of recognition, or the loss of empathy and connectedness (Kortetmäki, 2019). As demonstrated by texts analysed for this project, the "thing-like" status of nature has become "commonsense" thinking for many, with the assumption that "the environment" is separate from human life accepted and perpetuated as self-evident. This reification enables environmental decisions to be reduced to cost-benefit analyses, giving a commonsense aura to statements such as "Mining conservation land is necessary to maintain our first-world status", and dismissing considerations of biodiversity, ecological balance, or cultural significance as irrelevant or targets of derision.

Many of the quotes examined in previous chapters take on new significance when examined through the lens of reification. Jones frames the environment versus the economy as a zero-sum game: "We must have trade-offs and we need to make those trade-offs on the basis of science, economic rationalism and open debate." Laws treats the environment as just another political interest group:

⁶ I approach environmental reification not as a deliberate strategy but as sedimented logic of neoliberal discourse (Dahlberg & Phelan, 2011).

[Minister of Conservation Tama Potaka] is being accused of not just letting down conservation, the environment, and New Zealand's basic ethos ...

As P2 recognised, Laws attempts to separate people and the environment: “people and the environment are so separate in his mind ... it's almost as if his view of the environment is that it's just here for us to take from”. Indeed, Laws reduces nature to “bugs and beetles”, noting of endangered species: “I mean, we've got plenty of beetles.” The reification of nature is so well embedded in contemporary New Zealand culture that even the more critical interviewees engage with terms that reinforce the assumptions of the sedimented discourse. P7 seeks “compromise” between environmental and commercial interests rather than examining profit motives behind such positioning.

However, the treating of ecological systems as discrete, commodifiable “things” that can be owned and exploited is challenged by the Māori worldview which emphasises whakapapa (genealogy and connections) and kaitiakitanga (guardianship). This worldview clearly threatens the progress of legislation such as the Fast-track Bill, explaining why the coalition government has not limited attempts to weaken environmental protections to a single piece of legislation. A failed Treaty Principles Bill – introduced by ACT Party leader Seymour after the Fast-track Bill – aimed to redefine the Treaty of Waitangi's articles, centring libertarian ideals of private property rights and individual sovereignty over collective welfare, sustainable stewardship, and inclusive governance. Such a redefinition would have further undermined Māori institutions and policies already being dismantled or scaled back by the coalition government. To name a few, these include Te Aka Whai Ora / Māori Health Authority, Kāinga Ora Māori Housing,

and Māori wards in local government (Corlett & Tahana, 2024). Nelson (2024) contends that the consequences to Māori (and by extension, to all New Zealanders) of the Treaty Principles Bill would have dwarfed those of the Fast-track Approvals Bill. And ultimately, both Bills' primary beneficiaries would be extractive, corporate interests.

Conflict arising from culture wars discourse deflects attention from the underlying neoliberal objectives of proposed legislation while acting as a propaganda vehicle. The divisive nature of the right-wing rhetoric around the Treaty Principles Bill, particularly that constructed by the ACT Party and amplified by right-wing media, leveraged what commentators termed “pernicious polarisation” (Salmond, 2024) – exploitation of existing and narrow grievances through “us versus them” discourse (Acampa & Nunziata, 2024). Five months of divisive culture wars rhetoric strengthened the resolve of the Māori rights movement but also legitimised increasingly emotive right-wing rhetoric around equity initiatives and the everyday use of the Māori language, te reo Māori, including on signage. P8 reports workplace hostility for using Māori language in a retail environment; hostility legitimised not just by right-wing mockery but by construction of chains of equivalence linking “Māori language” to performative wokery, bureaucratic excess, and hypocrisy.

The trajectory of the Treaty Principles Bill was different than that of the Fast-track Approvals Act. After the largest-ever protest over Māori rights took place across Aotearoa New Zealand in November, and 90% of a record-breaking 300,000 submissions opposed the Bill, a parliamentary committee recommended it should not proceed. The Bill was voted down in April 2025. Yet this “failure” arguably served its purpose – dominating media cycles for months, normalising antagonistic discourse towards Māori rights, and

creating conditions for other, less high-profile policy changes across the government from health system reorganisation to education curriculum changes (Corlett, 2024).

Capitalism, despite massive and ever accruing intellectual and physical resources at its disposal, appears to have no viable solution to the impending destruction of the earth's biosphere in the pursuit of profits (Gerber, 2019), other than denying its approach. Capitalist solutions to climate change further commodify the environment by offering only consumerist solutions such as "green" and "sustainable" products, and heralding economic instruments such as carbon credits to mitigate climate change. As "the view of Nature as external is a fundamental condition of capital accumulation" (Moore, 2015, p. 2) it is in the interest of those intent on the extraction of resources to reaffirm through public discourse the idea that the environment exists primarily as a resource for economic growth and human benefit. Jones' framing illustrates this:

Before you argue about redistributing wealth or carving up the pie, focus on the generation of the wealth [from large extractive projects]. Make the wealth before you bicker as to how you're going to divide it or spend it.

Environmental protection thus becomes positioned as an impediment to wealth generation rather than a precondition for long-term prosperity. When discussing the crises of environmental degradation and climate change, P4 observes "we need to be talking response". However, the discursive space for such conversations has been taken over by culture wars that appear to defend "everyday Kiwis" against elite excess while ultimately serving extractive interests.

Conclusion: Culture wars and democratic contestation

This chapter has examined how culture wars discourse functions as a sophisticated strategy across New Zealand's coalition government for securing consent for environmental deregulation and resource extraction while fragmenting potential opposition. By situating the empirical findings of Chapters 4 and 5 within broader political and theoretical contexts, several key arguments have emerged about the function of anti-woke discourse in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

“Woke” operates as an empty signifier that gains political power through its ambiguity, enabling maximum flexibility in constructing antagonistic frontiers across diverse issues. The signifier's use across the coalition government demonstrates its increasing prominence as a nodal point around which chains of equivalence are constructed. These chains of equivalence, linking disparate groups, serve to delegitimise democratic debate and action while advancing specific economic interests. Performative authenticity is a crucial mechanism for making culture wars discourse resonate with audiences, functioning within a hybrid media system where boundaries between political and media roles increasingly blur. Fantasmatic narratives provide frameworks for understanding complex realities and thus invite affective investment in culture wars discourse; the consistency of transgressive enjoyment across the texts suggest it is a key element in right-wing populist discourse in New Zealand. Finally, and most significantly, culture wars discourse serves as a strategic tool for advancing neoliberal economic objectives, bridging the apparent contradiction between populist anti-elitism and neoliberal market fundamentalism. In Aotearoa New Zealand, this alliance operates across coalition partners with diverse political traditions: NZ First's economic nationalism, ACT's

libertarianism, and National's business conservatism all find common benefits in anti-woke discourse to oppose formations that threaten extractive capitalism.

Having examined the construction and reception of culture wars discourse, I now turn to consolidating these findings. Chapter 7 reflects on the theoretical and methodological contributions of this project and considers implications for understanding how culture wars propaganda operates in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. It also explores an important dimension to culture wars effectiveness; how the left's own communication strategies can perhaps unintentionally validate anti-woke caricatures constructed by right-wing populist actors.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Understanding anti-woke rhetoric and culture wars propaganda

The initial impetus for this research was the Fast-track Approvals Bill introduced in March 2024 and the aggressive culture wars propaganda that accompanied its passage through the New Zealand Parliament. What began as an investigation into the construction and reception of anti-environmental rhetoric gradually revealed something more fundamental: a pattern of discursive cooperation between extractive interests and right-wing populism intent on delegitimising alternative environmental and Māori formations, with culture wars as a mutually beneficial tactic. This conclusion consolidates the conclusions from the textual and interview analyses and reflects on the theoretical and methodological contributions of this project to understanding how culture wars propaganda operates in Aotearoa New Zealand’s contemporary political landscape.

Revisiting the research questions

This project set out to answer two interrelated questions about the construction and reception of culture wars rhetoric in relation to environmental policy since November 2023. The analyses, drawing on theories of discourse theory, critical discourse analysis, theories of fantasy, theories of affect, and Hall’s encoding/decoding framework, demonstrate that both construction and reception are far more complex and layered than initial readings of the political/media and interview texts may suggest.

Research Question 1: Culture wars construction by political and media elites

RQ1: How have politicians in Aotearoa New Zealand’s right-wing coalition government and their media allies constructed “anti-woke” culture wars rhetoric

since the 2023 election, with a particular focus on (Resources Minister) Shane Jones' advocacy for the governing coalition's Fast-track Approvals Bill?

RQ1a. What discursive strategies – including “us” versus “them” binaries, affective tactics (such as mockery), and performative authenticity – characterise New Zealand's culture wars discourse, particularly in relation to environmental discourse?

The political/media textual analyses reveal that culture wars rhetoric targeting environmental protection operates through several interconnected discursive strategies, all underpinned by what Laclau and Mouffe (1985) theorise as the struggle to fix meaning within contested discursive fields. “Woke” as an empty signifier enables chains of equivalence linking disparate targets. Performative authenticity provides the setting for hegemonic work across the texts, making articulations feel genuine rather than strategic or forced. Affective strategies bypass critical engagement, and conceptual flipsiding pre-emptively neutralises counter-arguments. This constellation of tactics creates a discursive formation that can successfully delegitimise environmental protection alongside other progressive positions while obscuring the extractive interests that benefit from deregulation.

While Shane Jones used the term “woke” sparingly in his October 2024 NZ First convention speech, preferring proxy articulations like “climatism” and “Green cling-ons”, Winston Peters' September 2025 speech included 23 instances of “woke”, linking environmentalism, pronouns, transgender people, the media, and political opponents into a unified threat. This escalation demonstrates the fixing of “woke” as a nodal point

around which chains of equivalence can be constructed. The signifier is extremely adaptable across the governing coalition: as has been discussed, David Seymour (ACT) weaponised it against school lunch programmes; Peters (NZ First) invoked it to frame the Māori worldview in tertiary education as “woke indoctrination”; and Prime Minister Christopher Luxon used the term to describe diversity and inclusion measures in the public service. The term’s emptiness is its strength; “woke” can encompass everything from environmental protection to food choices while maintaining its delegitimising power.

Chains of equivalence strategically link disparate elements to construct a coherent antagonist. The analysis of both media/political texts and interviews in Chapters 4 and 5 revealed how anti-environmental discourse articulated links such as:

Environmental protection = Green Party = virtue-signalling = economic
obstruction = **“woke”** = elite ideology = anti-nationalism.

Shane Jones’ rhetoric (as discussed in detail in Chapter 4) exemplifies this process, moving from transgender identity to climate alarmism to indigenous rights, creating affective associations between targets that have little connection. Michael Laws (also see Chapter 4) similarly links the expense of native species protection with Māori claims to environmental guardianship, suggesting both represent threats to economic progress and commonsense. Strategic deployment of humour, mockery, and diminutive language function to delegitimise opponents while performing authenticity. Terms like “munchkins”, “unicorn kissing”, and “cabbage patch kids” achieve several objectives: they trivialise environmental concerns, dehumanise and belittle issue advocates, invite

audience bonding through shared laughter, and position the speaker as authentic in contrast to earnest, childlike opponents. This mockery can result in both speaker and audience experiencing what Glynos (2021) identifies as transgressive enjoyment – the pleasure derived from violating polite and/or progressive norms while claiming the alibi of “just telling it like it is”. Conceptual flipsiding reverses key political concepts for strategic advantage. Environmental regulation becomes “oppression” while deregulation is framed as “freedom”. Democratic environmental protection is cast as authoritarian “wokeness” and bureaucratic overreach. Scientific expertise is positioned as elite ideology while climate denialism is framed as rational scepticism, or dismissed entirely as an opponent’s insult. Even Chris Bishop’s declaration when first in government that National intended to “deliberately disrupt the system” attempts to claim “disruption” – itself an empty signifier associated with business-speak and technological innovation – for a programme of regulatory rollback serving extractive capital. This technique proves particularly effective because it mimics valid critique while inverting its substance, obliging opponents to defend positions that should require no defence.

Performative authenticity provides the stage upon which these discursive strategies play out. Jones’ bumptious rhetoric, Laws’ disparate antagonistic claims, and Plunket’s mocking pronunciation of Māori terms all signal transgressive truth-telling to audiences accustomed to seeing measured, policy-focused communication as elite performance. The affective intensity of these performances – for example, Jones’ gloating “Goodbye, Freddy!” (about an endangered frog species) and Peters’ cancer metaphors in relation to “woke” – bypass critical engagement, deliver a jolt of transgressive pleasure to a

receptive audience, and invite emotional identification. As P1 observed approvingly .of Peters: “he’s not afraid of that. He’s got enough age behind him and experience to be able to say “Well this is what I believe in”.

Research Question 2: Audience reception and interpretation

RQ2: How have citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand received “anti-woke” culture wars rhetoric, particularly concerning environmental issues, since the 2023 election?

RQ2a. How do citizens of Aotearoa New Zealand respond to "us" versus "them" constructions, affective tactics, and right-wing populist displays of performative authenticity?

Critical discourse analysis of the eight interviews in Chapter 5 through a framework of discourse theory and Hall’s (1980) encoding/decoding framework reveals reception patterns resisting simple categorisation. While Hall’s framework provides essential scaffolding, the culture wars subjectivities revealed through the interviews invited theoretical expansion to capture a fuller complexity of how audiences navigate culture wars discourse.

Audience reception can be fluid. Participants shift between dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings even within single texts. P5 demonstrates this fluidity most clearly: expressing “woke fatigue” and disengagement from political rhetoric generally, yet passionately identifying as a “woke environmentalist” willing to “stop a bulldozer” when animal welfare was at stake. This suggests that decoding strategies are not immutable characteristics of individuals, but are shaped by background, experience, and personal

investment in issues. As P2, P5 and P8 demonstrate, this may include choosing to withdraw entirely from the issue under discussion. Their withdrawal represents an often overlooked form of culture wars success, as their disengagement from the discursive field arguably serves neoliberal extractive interests as effectively as mobilisation or opposition. P2 comments: “with politics, I think it’s just crazy that we can have sides and separation” and observes that [politicians] “purpose is to serve themselves”. These statements may be received as a principled rejection of combative politics, or a form of political exhaustion that has persuaded P2 to cede the terrain to those intent on waging culture wars supported by wave upon wave of legislation. In summary, the affective intensity of culture wars discourse (P5: “it’s bombarded all the time”) can exhaust rather than mobilise audiences, producing apathy rather than organised opposition.

Personal experience was observed to powerfully mediate reception across the interviewees. P4’s background as a migrant and their COVID–19 policy expertise enables immediate recognition and rejection of Jones’ “climatism” rhetoric as linked to conspiracy thinking. P7’s business experience provides frames for analysing political strategy and performative authenticity. P8’s retail role exposes them to real–world anti–Māori hostility legitimised by culture wars discourse. P6’s position as a young tradesperson with family responsibilities creates tensions between progressive values and pragmatic concerns about economic development. These observations align with Phillips and Millner’s (2021) deep memetic frames: participants’ largely unconscious sensemaking mechanisms, shaped by lived experience, determine what is visible from their individual social standpoints and shapes their reception of the messages.

Performative authenticity succeeds not because audiences are unaware of being tricked, but because it resonates with these pre-existing frames about what “genuine” looks like – discursive frames shaped by social markers such as socio-economic status, age, and education. Although the participants all recognised that politicians and media figures were performing or “strategising” (as P4 observes), this recognition does not necessarily impede affective investment in the performance. P1 and P3 both acknowledge Jones’ strategic communication while deriving pleasure and validation from his performances. P3’s “absolute delight” in Jones’ transgressive rhetoric operates at an affective level that is not diluted by their recognition of its calculated nature. This suggests that Glynos’s (2021) theory of fantasmatic enjoyment captures something encoding/decoding theory alone does not: the unconscious investments that make certain discourses pleasurable regardless of, or even because of, their recognised strategic nature. An associated observation is that the deep memetic frame “authentic = good” operates across political positions. Participants across the political spectrum value perceive authenticity, though they evaluate it differently. P1 and P3 saw Jones as authentically speaking truths others may be “cancelled” for daring to utter. P6 appreciated Laws for being “straight” even while finding him offensive. P4, with central government experience, recognises that “politicians are the biggest strategists ever” and “using words they know would talk to the audience”.

Digital media fragmentation is reported by all participants. P3’s immersion in far-right YouTube content, P1’s fear of “Facebook jail”, P8’s withdrawal from social media for mental health reasons, and P5’s passive consumption of workplace radio and social media (“I have a very short attention span, so I just, like, scroll”) demonstrate how digital

affordances can fragment audiences, and even overwhelm them into disengagement. Evident in P1, P3, and P5's responses and expressed most succinctly by P5: "we're kind of like the odd one out now" is the suggestion of fantasmatic narratives positioning conservative audiences as marginalised majorities.

Culture wars discourse in the service of extractive capital

This project contributes to an understanding of how apparently contradictory ideologies – neoliberal faith in markets, individualism and regulation in the service of capitalist interests versus the populist celebration of "the people" – can operate in alliance (Frank, 2000), and how the mobilisation of popular resentment through culture wars discourse is a vehicle through which neoliberal and right-wing populist shared objectives may be realised. The stated neoliberal project of removing barriers to capital accumulation – environmental regulations, democratic consultation, indigenous rights frameworks, labour protections – requires mass consent that would struggle to be obtained through open, honest articulation of its objectives. Few New Zealanders would explicitly support allowing mining companies to destroy ecosystems for shareholder profit, or the removal of democratic participation from national infrastructure decisions. Culture wars discourse solves this legitimation crisis by reframing extractive deregulation as liberation from elite "wokery". The apparent contradiction between neoliberalism (market individualism, deregulation) and populism (celebration of "the people," anti-elite rhetoric) dissolves when understood through this lens.

Right-wing populism does not necessarily oppose neoliberal extraction, but it can provide the propaganda vehicle through which extraction can be reframed as populist resistance, providing mutual benefit to both governing interests. The ACT Party brought

one of the world’s leading “anti-woke” campaigners, Dr James Lindsay, to New Zealand to give the keynote address at the ACT Party Rally in July 2025 (ACT New Zealand, 2025c; Poneke Antifascist Coalition, 2025). Lindsay, a self-described free-speech absolutist who helped popularise the “OK groomer” epithet in relation to LGBTQI+ teachers, referred to a Jewish doctor as “Dr Lampshades”, and stoked the critical race theory panic in the US (Fisher, 2022), urged New Zealanders in his speech to start a global trend by rejecting "woke" ideology. (Just three months previously, the Free Speech Union had toured Lindsay around New Zealand).

Jones, deputy leader of populist NZ First, positions the Fast-track Bill as empowering “everyday Kiwis” against bureaucratic elites, obscuring the reality that the Bill primarily benefits corporate developers and extractive industries. The culture wars rhetoric makes this obscuring possible – by linking a variety of opponents in a chain representing equivalent manifestations of woke elite ideology. His performative discourse and that of his media enablers creates antagonistic frontiers that prevent coalition-building among those who might otherwise unite against environmental destruction. I argue that this explains why the coalition Government’s chosen response to Fast-track Bill opposition was not policy engagement but culture wars escalation. When 27,000 submissions and 20,000 marchers protested, Jones did not defend the merits of the Bill – he mocked “munchkins” and “Freddy the blind frog”, Peters ranted about woke cancer, and media allies dismissed conservation as virtue-signalling. This response reveals culture wars discourse as the essential propaganda infrastructure enabling neoliberal extraction: it splinters potential opposition (environmental advocates/ Māori rights activists/ progressive Pākehā), delegitimises expertise (climate science/ ecology), and reframes

democratic participation (for example, Select Committee submission processes) as obstruction. Without culture wars discourse, neoliberal extraction lacks a strategy of mass legitimisation; with it, regulation in capitalist interests appears (at least to political supporters) as common-sense resistance to elite excess.

The media and political texts examined in this project (Chapter 4 and Appendix 1) can be broadly summarised as examples of culture wars rhetoric that strategically serve neoliberal extractive objectives while appearing to lead opposition against elites. Capitalism and democracy are both dependent on fossil fuel and mineral extraction (Dahlberg, 2023). The neoliberal Mont Pelerin Society identified environmentalism as one of three great threats to free-market ideology in the early 1990s. The coalition Government's aggressive culture wars propaganda response to the Fast-track Bill opposition can, through this lens, be understood in the context of protecting extractive capital's access to resources. When 27,000 submissions and 20,000 marchers protested against fast-tracking infrastructure and mining projects, a central counter-strategy from the coalition government was to splinter potential opposition groupings through culture wars discourse.

As Slobodian (2018) observes, any perceived divide between neoliberalism and populism is at most a "family feud" between related descendants of the same ideology. In this context, it is illuminating to re-examine Bishop's and Luxon's vaunting of "disruption" when the Fast-track Bill was first introduced:

Many supposed disruptors of the status quo are less of a backlash against global capitalism than a frontlash within it (Slobodian, 2025, p. 176).

As highlighted in Chapter 6, Ludwig von Mises Institute president Jeff Deist proposed an approach whereby public distrust of politicians would be redirected into distrust of political systems and democratic institutions more broadly (Slobodian, 2025). And as this thesis has demonstrated, culture wars rhetoric serves to undermine democratic institutions, environmental regulation, and collective organisation; precisely the barriers neoliberalism must break down to enable unfettered capital accumulation.

Culture wars denigrating environmental protection are further made possible by the reification of nature – treating ecological systems as discrete, ownable “things” separate from human life. This discursive normalisation enables the capitalist commodification of the natural world. Culture wars discourse accelerates this reification process by making concern for non-commodified nature appear irrational. Mocking rhetoric, for example, “some beetle” (Laws) and “goodbye Freddy” (Jones) does not just reaffirm the existing reification of nature – it actively produces it. Such culture wars rhetoric creates a social reality in which ecological interconnection is sentimental naivety, and the value of the natural world is neither acknowledged nor comprehended beyond economic success metrics.

Jones’ and Laws’ cost-benefit framing of endangered native species protection demonstrates how the reification of nature reduces environmental decisions to economic calculations. Māori concepts like kaitiakitanga (guardianship) challenge this by emphasising interconnection and collective responsibility. This is why Māori rights and environmental protection have been discursively linked as equivalent threats by the coalition government; the Treaty Principles Bill, if passed, would have nullified indigenous stewardship frameworks and established libertarian property rights as

foundational, directly serving extractive interests. The affective charge of right-wing populist discourse – the mockery, outrage and transgressive delight – distracts from the reality that the Fast-track Approvals Act primarily benefits corporate developers and extractive industries.

Theoretical contributions of this project

This research examines how extractive interests, right-wing populism, digital affordances, and environmental crisis converge in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand to produce culture wars propaganda formations. The 2023–2025 period examined in this research exemplifies this convergence. It captures both the coalition Government's response to extractive capital through environmental deregulation – namely the Fast-track Approvals Bill and the Treaty Principles Bill – and the right-wing populist mobilisation of anti-elite resentment through digital affective algorithms. These developments occurred within a rapidly hybridising media system where media and political roles increasingly blur (Chadwick, 2017). The surge of right-wing populism worldwide, the post–COVID backlash against state power and collective responsibility, and the ongoing contestation over Māori rights and environmental guardianship, provide rich material for culture wars messaging. Arising from this specific conjuncture, there are two distinct theoretical observations to be drawn from this research. The first of these is the power of the empty signifier “woke” – whether thundered out repeatedly at a NZ First Convention, or coded more tacitly by other governmental and media figures, including Seymour, Luxon and National Ministers such as Bishop. Secondly, it demonstrates the construction of antagonistic frontiers – typified by Us versus Them distinctions – disseminated rapidly through online channels and the algorithmic amplification of

chains of equivalence, accelerating the timeline of hegemonic contestation. I will examine each of these observations in turn.

The texts examined for this project demonstrate how “woke” has operated in recent years as perhaps the most ubiquitous empty signifier in New Zealand contemporary political discourse. The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that “woke” is apparently capable of expanding to encompass any perceived threat to extractive capitalism while retaining sufficient power to mobilise affective and fantasmatic investment. This successful empty signifier requires only affective consistency; it is effective in triggering an “elite imposition” reaction even when the specific subject matter varies greatly. When Shane Jones links the expense of relocating “Freddy the frog” to “wokery” or when Sean Plunket identifies critical academic research as a target in “the war on woke”, these very different discourses work in a similar way to spark popular resentment. This is because “woke” has been evacuated of meaning while maintaining its capacity to construct antagonistic frontiers. The term performs crucial hegemonic work by making radically diverse targets – indigenous rights, environmental protection, transgender rights, climate science – appear as manifestations of a single, unified threat to “commonsense” and “everyday Kiwis”. This research revealed how participants like P3 could simultaneously acknowledge the signifier’s fluidity (“woke is just a term that is easy to apply”), while still investing in its logic.

Us versus Them distinctions can now be rapidly constructed and amplified through digital affordances, fundamentally reducing the timeframe and increasing the reach of antagonistic frontier construction. Today, contemporary digital platforms enable viral circulation and algorithmic amplification of chains of equivalence that construct

common antagonists. The speed at which Jones' "goodbye Freddy!" moved from an initial Parliamentary speech through NZ First's YouTube channel to social media reshares and sympathetic media allies (and some displeasure on the part of the NZ First membership) reveals how digital affordances can compress the timeline of hegemonic contestation, and how political actors and their allies can hasten the passage and spread of culture wars discourse. This includes the ability to persevere with the messages that take hold and abandoning those that do not; antagonistic frontiers can now effectively be A/B tested⁷ within hours through participatory amplification. P5's observation that "it's, like, bombarded all the time" (of transgender discourse) captures how digital circulation creates artificial urgency around manufactured conflicts. However, the same affordances that allow rapid antagonistic frontier formation can also be their downfall. Short attention spans (such as that admitted by P5), the prioritisation of novelty, and the affective intensity required for sustained online antagonism can be difficult to maintain. This suggests that in digital contexts, hegemonic projects must continuously reconstruct or find new ways to discursively construct the same antagonistic frontiers. This requires a constant flow of fresh, escalating sources of outrage. Such an antagonistic imperative may provide some explanation for the hostile, brutally adversarial discursive environment of social media sites such as Elon Musk's X.com.

Methodological reflections and limitations

The integration of theoretical approaches – at both encoding and decoding stages – resulted in complex and nuanced information. Approaching the media/political and

⁷ A/B testing can be defined (Siroker & Koomen, 2013) as showing different versions of digital content to separate user groups to measure which performs better, and using the results to improve the desired outcome.

interview texts from several perspectives yielded rich and layered insights. Combining critical discourse analysis with discourse theory proved valuable for analysing textual elements and broader contextual dynamics. Fairclough's critical discourse analysis provided tools for examining textual choices in the media/political texts, while Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory enabled examination of the wider context, and how meaning is contested and fixed within it at both construction and reception stages. Hall's encoding/decoding theory provided the theoretical scaffolding for the interview analysis, supplemented with theories that capture unconscious and emotional dimensions. Glynos's (2021) fantasmatic narratives explain why P1 and P3 derive pleasure from transgressive rhetoric even while recognising its performativity. Boler and Davis's (2021) affective politics illuminate how emotion is weaponised online and why P8 describes their oppositional readings as requiring emotional labour. Phillips and Millner's (2021) deep memetic frames reveal how largely unconscious sensemaking mechanisms shape what is visible from different social standpoints. Together, these approaches provide a multidimensional understanding of how culture wars discourse operates simultaneously at linguistic, affective, and unconscious levels.

The limited media/political text selection and eight interviews, while yielding rich data, cannot, and does not, claim to be representative in some strict positivist sense. It is likely, for example, that a larger sample of interviewees would yield a wider range of different subjectivities, particularly among demographics not well-represented in this study (Pacific peoples, Asian New Zealanders, New Zealanders from other areas in the country beyond the Central North Island). Additionally, this project is an examination of culture wars subjectivities in response to a selection of "anti-woke" media and political

texts, which are themselves primarily focused on the bombastic culture wars rhetoric of Resources Minister Shane Jones and closely associated right-wing media figures. This focus on a select range of flamboyant anti-woke, anti-environmentalist voices could be broadened to a wider sampling of voices in future studies. In particular, as one interview participant (P1) suggested, more examples from leftwing politicians and media could have been included in the media clips. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that critiques of "wokeness" and identity politics emerge not only from the right but also from within nominally leftist discourses. The term "wokeness" functions as what Laclau (2005) would call a mobilising empty signifier – one that initially constitutes a particular political constituency by articulating diverse demands around, for example, environmentalism, social justice, and recognition of marginalised identities. However, once this signifier achieves a degree of hegemonic success, its very emptiness enables it to detach from its original moorings and migrate across different ideological terrains. What emerges is a floating signifier sufficiently destabilised from its initial empty articulation that it becomes available for rearticulation within competing – even opposed – political projects. This floating quality explains seemingly paradoxical phenomena such as figures like James Lindsay (discussed in Chapter 6) appropriating "woke" discourse to critique the excesses of what he calls the "woke right" (Economist, 2025; Sunday Star-Times, 2025), alongside left-identified intellectuals who position themselves against "woke" politics and identity politics more broadly (Edwards, 2026; Trotter, 2021).

Including comparative analysis of progressive political rhetoric – such as former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's discursive strategies – could reveal how techniques of fantasmatic investment and performative authenticity operate across the political

spectrum. Analysis of this sort could explore whether the discursive tactics identified in this research represent contemporary political communication in general, or are weighted towards specific tools of neoliberal-populist mobilisation. This approach could explore to what extent the same affective strategies that make Jones' rhetoric compelling – the transgressive enjoyment, the construction of clear antagonists from a myriad of disparate foes, the performance of authenticity and “telling it like it is” – are strategically manifested in progressive environmental discourse. Papacharissi's (2014) argument that political engagement is increasingly structured through affective intensity rather than rational deliberation gives insight into why forms of persuasion that focus on facts and figures are inadequate in a world of affective politics. Analysis of left-wing communication strategies could reveal not only how debates around “wokeness” and “identity politics” can be sites of ideological fracture on the left, but also why measured, policy-focused messaging often fails to counter culture wars rhetoric, and can in fact validate right-wing anti-woke stereotypes.

How the left can animate anti-woke stereotypes: a potential question for further study

While this research has focused primarily on right-wing construction of anti-woke discourse, the empirical findings suggest a significant avenue for future investigation: how progressive movements' own communication patterns can inadvertently provide the material that animates and legitimises the very stereotypes used against them. These patterns include a tendency to label sometimes legitimate concern as bigotry, social media pile-ons, reliance on critical frameworks and academic jargon, and perceived ideological over-extension (Nagle, 2017; Phelan, 2023; Ronson, 2016).

The communication strategies of some representatives of the political left and their responses to opposition can perhaps sometimes reinforce rather than counter the “woke” caricature. This is not to suggest equivalence between cynical manipulation and well-intentioned progressive discourse, but rather to acknowledge that the effectiveness of anti-woke rhetoric emerges partly from how progressive movements communicate, engage with critics, and present their causes to broader publics. It is an unfortunate, often unacknowledged, reality that some groups that present themselves as left-wing – many of whom have a genuine commitment to social justice – can by way of their own passionate discourse animate anti-woke stereotypes and thereby strengthen the opposition they seek to counter (Phelan, 2023). Aotearoa New Zealand has prided itself upon a natural sense of social justice exemplified by historical actions such as creating indigenous parliamentary seats (1857); first to grant women the vote (1893); advocating for an eight-hour working day (1840) and so on. (It must be noted that a counter-narrative, governmental support for an All Blacks rugby tour of apartheid-era South Africa in 1976 leading to a mass boycott of the Montreal Olympics by over 20 African nations, is

rarely alluded to beyond the memoirs of former protesters). Jacinda Ardern's government appeared at first to be intent upon delivering on a broad social mandate that in 2020, soon after the first wave of COVID-19, gave the Labour government an absolute majority after a term in a coalition arrangement with Winston Peter's NZ First. However, the broad socially liberal consensus eroded, arguably hastened by COVID-19's social and economic impacts, and a concurrent right-wing populist turn internationally. This weakening gave voice to a previously (largely) hidden anti-progressive constituency. Detailed examination of the reasons for the Labour Government's fall from popularity, their vote share diminishing by nearly half between 2020 and 2023, is not a question for this thesis; but that descent provides essential background for the uptake of anti-woke discourse in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

Social media pile-ons or deplatforming by sectors of the left can make progressive movements appear authoritarian (Nagle, 2017; Phelan, 2023). This perception was greatly amplified in New Zealand during the constraints of COVID-19 containment, culminating in the ultimately violent occupation of the New Zealand Parliament grounds by anti-vaccine mandate protesters and associated groups (Clark, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and its societal consequences still animate a chain of equivalence which includes "woke", "kindness" and the effects of the policy decisions of the Ardern government during that period: as P1 put it, the lockdowns were "the worst thing that ever happened to this country". P1 likewise reports they felt shut down rather than engaged with, emphasising their alienation with a horrific fantasy image of political opponents: "if you write it down on Facebook they'll put you in Facebook jail for saying it". Overreach and saturation can also turn off audiences. P5, despite describing

themselves as a “woke environmentalist” to save the frogs, expressed fatigue with progressive rhetoric. On hearing “woke” messaging via workplace radio: “It’s everywhere. Gets a little old, you just kind of want to switch it off ... I’m just a little bit over hearing it.” On progressive disapproval, they observed: “they’re offended by everything, and you can’t have a joke these days”, associating “woke” with a moralistic form of politics.

Further research could also pursue the question of how progressive movements can inadvertently validate anti-woke stereotypes through failure to communicate adequately to a wider public, sometimes due to a tendency to reflexively label legitimate concerns as bigotry. In this scenario, opponents are given the opportunity to frame lack of progressive communication as elite dismissal. For example, Ardern’s Labour government pushed ahead with water infrastructure reforms that included co-governance arrangements with Māori as Treaty partner; on the face of it, an entirely rational path of action by a fundamentally modernising government. However, the reasons behind this decision were not well communicated to allay fears and misapprehensions and played into a narrative about progressive intolerance – that Government ministers and their media allies were high-handed, dismissive, and unwilling to engage with the public. This ignited “anti-woke” rhetoric targeting out-of-touch elites (particularly so-called Māori elites), and contributed to a “Stop Three Waters” campaign with massive momentum. The campaign’s messaging tapped into anti-Māori racism as well as fears of governmental authoritarianism, and was communicated widely and effectively by astroturf groups including Groundswell,

purportedly representing the farmer/rural point of view, and their parent organisation, the Taxpayers' Union (Taxpayers' Union, 2024).

The Stop Three Waters campaign's success can at least in part be attributed to the fact that symbolic gestures by a progressive movement, while deeply meaningful to the members of that movement, can validate "virtue signalling" critique (Phelan, 2019, 2023). As Holm (2020) argues, academic jargon, critical frameworks, and progressive cultural politics can signal exclusion and animate populist critiques of "out of touch" elites. Broadly speaking, the new, younger, left questions power and privilege in relation to gender, sexuality and race, understanding that these intersections can profoundly alter life experiences. These intersections might be respected – at the simplest level – by the exchange of pronouns, a waiata at the start of a meeting, or by introducing more Māori words to conversation or signage. This is usually done with the best of inclusive intentions, but a (generally speaking) older, whiter constituency – many of whom never bought into the broadly socially liberal consensus of the New Zealand Clark, Key, and Ardern governments – are hostile to this pluralistic way of thinking. Like P1 and P3, they may see this as hijacking of causes by self-promoting, educated elites – social justice warriors and "green cling-ons".

The consequences of this dynamic can be devastating. As some figures on the left have not yet fully grasped how expressions of a reshaped social liberalism are landing with older, conservative audiences, right-wing politicians and their media allies can readily fan the flames of "anti-woke" sentiment. In the febrile atmosphere of politically expedient culture wars rhetoric, ideas and people not readily understood by a conservative base become targets for legitimised demonisation. Several texts in this

study invoked the spectre of “pronouns” and transgender identity as examples of progressive overreach, and non-binary Green MP Benjamin Doyle became a highly visible casualty of this discourse during 2025. After NZ First leader and Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters posted on X.com “The media needs to start asking questions about Green MP Benjamin Doyle ...” (Peters, 2025a), carefully avoiding direct accusation while legitimising investigation, right-wing media (including The Platform) and social media followers dissected Doyle’s private social media posts for months amidst baseless accusations of paedophilia. The resulting “onslaught of hate, vitriol, and threats”, including death threats, forced Doyle’s resignation from Parliament in September 2025 (Hanly, 2025; McCulloch, 2025c). The torrent of abuse sparked by Peters’ post represents a horrifying endgame of culture wars discourse: the destruction of a career and terrorising of a family through a toxic moral panic campaign amplified by right-wing media and digital algorithms.

The urgent need to strengthen citizen coalitions

The Fast-track Approvals Act is now law. Environmental protections are being steadily dismantled: in October 2025, the coalition government announced their intention to permanently exclude agriculture from the Emissions Trading Scheme, weaken New Zealand’s methane reduction target, and “further streamline [Fast-track Act] planning approval for nationally and regionally significant projects” (Norman, 2025). Understanding how culture wars discourse operates, in both construction and reception, is essential for the urgent work of building, resourcing, and maintaining citizen coalitions capable of protecting Aotearoa New Zealand’s ecosystems. This research has identified several key strategic challenges – the need for alternative, authentic political

performances, alternative media strategies to address digital fragmentation, and better understanding of the dynamics of culture wars discourse by progressive movements. The affective power of performative right-wing populist authenticity must be countered with alternative, progressive authenticity performances, not just facts and figures. An example of work being done to this end is that of YouTube personality Natalie Wynn challenging alt-right ideology as Contrapoints (Maddox & Creech, 2021) – however, illustrating the capacity of the left to turn on itself, they themselves have been accused of transphobia (Soave, 2020).

Progressive politics needs compelling narratives and authentic performances that speak to material concerns while refusing neoliberal individualism. There are a few contemporary left-wing figures exemplifying this approach: arguably, they include Zohran Mamdani, recently elected Mayor of New York City, and Zack Polanski, leader of the Green Party of England and Wales since September 2025. The New Zealand left is yet to produce a politician with the popular appeal of the centre-left Labour Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, and appears to have few effective strategies to counter the culture wars propaganda deployed by the coalition government, other than – as has appeared increasingly possible since the end of 2025 – getting back into government by forming a coalition with NZ First (Sachdeva, 2025), as will be further discussed in the next section.

Progressive responses to culture wars provocations often “take the bait”: defending quinoa, becoming enraged by bathroom arguments, accusing Jones of frog cruelty and mocking his performative rhetoric – without exposing how these culture wars seek to affectively divide possible progressive formations, and thus benefit extractive capital. Making visible the material beneficiaries of anti-environmental rhetoric, and reframing

environmental protection in terms that resonate with conservative principles of heritage and responsibility to future generations, would be first steps towards fracturing an alliance between populist voters and neoliberal elites. To achieve this, new strategies for reaching diverse digital audiences would be required. Alternative media strategies and the use of humour or satire may prove more effective than reactive debunking of culture wars narratives. Right-wing media platforms such as The Platform, Duncan Garner’s online blog, and Reality Check Radio (as mentioned by P3) have sprung up and achieved relatively wide reach. There are few equivalent online spaces for left-wing audiences, and – unsurprisingly – even fewer left-wing rich listers willing to fund such media spaces. P3’s immersion in far-right YouTube content, P1’s Facebook avoidance due to fear of being cancelled, P5’s passive disengagement, and P8’s deliberate avoidance of social media suggest that traditional fact-checking and lucid argument, while admirable, may in themselves be inadequate and unreliable strategies for reaching those most impacted by culture wars narratives.

Conclusion: Looking ahead in the culture wars

Another general election in Aotearoa New Zealand will be held towards the end of 2026, and culture wars are likely to be highly visible during the campaign. Culture wars rhetoric has proven broadly effective for NZ First in particular as they continue to rise in the opinion polls on the back of opposition to diversity and inclusion measures, transgender rights, and Māori language usage. Indeed, Shane Jones has declared the party committed to a “Trumpian” campaign that focuses on “commonsense” and against “wokeism” (Meyer, 2025b). Part of that strategy is NZ First’s frequent announcement of Members’ Bills focused on identity issues; although dependent on a ballot system rather

than introduced as Government Bills, their placement in the ballot is framed as a triumphant strike for commonsense across digital and traditional media platforms. These include the Definitions of Woman and Man Bill, the Public Service (Repeal of Diversity and Inclusiveness Requirements) Amendment Bill, and The New Zealand (Name of State) Bill (New Zealand First, 2025a). However, culture wars rhetoric has not proved as successful in deflecting from the legal and evidence-based effects upon the environment of resurrected infrastructure projects. Jones has declared himself unsatisfied with the Fast-track Approvals process as of the 149 projects initially listed in the Fast-Track Approvals Act, only three had reached in-principle approval stage by mid-September 2025. In response, Chris Bishop, National Party MP and Infrastructure Minister, has proposed “tweaks” to speed up the legislation which the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment warned “would constrain expert panels and expand ministerial influence in ways that could predetermine outcomes” (Meyer, 2025a).

While NZ First Leader Winston Peters publicly decries “woke” and “Marxist” opposition when speaking to party supporters, claiming at the 2025 Convention that opposition parties were obsessed with woke ideology, many of the party remits actually exhibited a distinct left-wing tinge: extensions to discount cards for pensioners, free doctors’ visits, and a vague aversion to neoliberal globalism. Since that convention in September 2025, Peters has criticised coalition partner National’s suggestion that New Zealand : “have a conversation” about asset sales in the next term of government, claiming that National have “failed to run the economy properly” and prompting a public spat between himself and Prime Minister Luxon (McCulloch, 2025a). While some commentators have suggested there may be anti-woke votes in Labour for NZ First (Cooke, 2025) others

suggest Peters is positioning NZ First for possible coalition with Labour in 2026 as National continues to drop in public opinion polls (RNZ, 2025) and speculation rises that the current National/NZ First/ACT coalition may be a one-term government. At Labour's annual conference in November 2025, there was a marked absence of climate change and environmental policies in leader Chris Hipkin's keynote speech. Commentary around the conference suggested this could signal a cautious retreat by Labour from previous championing of environmental protection measures due to the coalition Government's two-year campaign to associate environmental advocates with "wokery" (Murphy, 2025). This serves as a useful illustration of the deadening, repressing logic of anti-woke discourse, ultimately serving extractive, capital interests by framing the need for urgent climate change response as a fringe, elite issue.

The work of building alternative discourses, coalition politics, and democratic environmental protection must continue, even as we may despair at timid centrism acceding to the right's attempted reconstitution of the "sensible centre" (Louw, 2018). As P2 observed: "I would much rather spend a lifetime on a change that's worth it than spend a second listening to this guy talk about [culture wars]." The challenge is how to clearly articulate change "that's worth it" to unify and mobilise genuine grassroots coalitions for people and the environment, call out anti-woke rhetoric as a medium of normalising reactionary politics, and expose culture wars propaganda serving well-resourced, powerful interests.

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Appendix 1: Media and Political Texts

The excerpt shown to interviewee follows each full text.

Text 1: Shane Jones speaks at NZ First Conference

October 12 2024

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq5kmE02L9Y>

MC: So, the last speaker of today needs no introduction but we'll give him one anyway. We've got the Prince of the Provinces, the veteran of vocabulary, the Slayer of Frogs. We're about to invite the Honourable Shane Jones up, someone who's been out in regional New Zealand, spreading the gospel of growth, speaking to absolutely everyone who now sees hope come to their area.

So after so long, he's the only man who's gone out there and actually believed in the ambitions of rural and regional New Zealand and with the likes of the Fast Track Approvals Bill, the RIF and many other initiatives, he's out there spreading the gospel of growth. So welcome to the stage, Honourable Shane Jones.

Jones: You have reached that part of the afternoon where the eyelids are drooping and you're thinking of the bar, especially the further south you come from.

Greetings folks, it's a pleasure to be here and share some thoughts with you. I have to say, first time I have heard our Senator from Australia speak, Winston, initially when I looked at the programme, I was a little too casual. I looked at the name and I said, thank Lord it's spelt with a T and not a bloody D. Obviously that speaker reminded us that we parties like ourselves, we are facing profound forces moving through Western democracies, where facts are now overwhelmed by feelings.

And if you belong to the woke tribe, I'm not allowed to hurt your feelings. And if you don't want to be known as a he or a she, then your feelings trump the foundation influences and values that lie at the heart of a party like ours, I say to them, bugger you. We've also inherited a situation where science, economic rationalism plays second fiddle to ideology and falsehoods and nowhere are we seeing it more frequently in New Zealand than the rhetoric, the shrillness around climate alarmism.

Look, I know I make a few of you uncomfortable when I say the party that I belong to is called New Zealand first, not climate first, but I mean it on your behalf, I really do, folks. We've got problems with the cost of living. We've got problems with infrastructure.

We've got problems with social security, with crime. And the moment that you talk about a host of other problems and somehow you're not showing enough deference or religious obedience to the climate god, then somehow you are to be cancelled, you're to be written out of the script as a denier. Unless your nation is generating an economic dividend every single year, we won't have the money to pay for climate change adaptation.

So the next time we sing the national anthem and the lyric, the line, God save New Zealand, New Zealand first, you, me, your neighbour, let's make sure we've still got a country so God can defend it. Look no further than the ideology that we stand against for

the cancellation of the Marsden Point refinery. I've spoken to people associated with that decision, both the private sector and people in the public sector.

Today they are still astounded that the Labour government and the Green cling-ons willingly, willingly applauded the demise of our refinery, thus leaving us grossly vulnerable as a small open trading nation. Yes, there is a future for Marsden Point refinery. Number one, it should have its own status.

It should, folks, have its own zone because it's important to our military, it's important to our industry and in no way whatsoever should it ever be dominated by foreign owners again, as is the case with the oil companies who sold us out. They promised back seven, five, six years ago that they were going to create additional storage capacity so we didn't have shortages, we didn't have vulnerabilities for things you and I take for granted, i.e. having enough jet fuel in Auckland. Winston knows this, to this day they've done nothing.

They keep blaming each other, which is why on Monday I am announcing we are passing regulations and we will force them to store the fuel in New Zealand. But sadly it's not just about Marsden Point. When Jacinda cancelled the oil and gas industry, and sure, I get made fun of because I was the guy with the kabuki faces going, oh my.

You can imagine what was going on in my head. So I am on your behalf doing a form of penance when we reopen the oil and gas industry in New Zealand to ensure that the lights don't go out and we don't just rely on Indonesian coal. But underlying that ideology was a belief that by cancelling an industry based on an indigenous resource called natural gas, which by the way, we've got inordinate amounts down off the coast of Canterbury.

We have huge amounts off the coast of the east around Gisborne, Wairarapa, and we have residual amounts in Taranaki. But it was driven by a belief that if they cancelled that industry in New Zealand, then we as Kiwis would lead the world and prevent the planet from heating. The conceit and the arrogance of the Labour Party and the Green Party because they continue to believe that whilst at the same time, at the same time they go to all these climate conferences.

How do they get there? I can tell you with that, they're not going on one of the original seven wakas that came from Hawaiiki. And why do they wait until they get to international airports and then put on TikTok or Twitter? How they're lamenting the demise of the planet, that level of hypocrisy, please, fellow New Zealand First members, don't buy into it. Stand against it and send it to the bloody knacker's yard.

Today we had the economists talk to us. Indeed, I think it was our conference in Christchurch, Cameron's father, if I'm not mistaken, Winston was a guest of honour. This one thing that he said, which lies at the heart of the economic narrative that is at the pith of our party.

Before you argue about redistributing wealth or carving up the pie, focus on the generation of the wealth. Make the wealth before you bicker as to how you're going to

divide it or spend it. So what have we done to aid the process of making wealth? The first thing that went into our coalition agreement on your behalf was the fast track legislation.

What lies at the heart of that? It's a sense of deep frustration and quite frankly, cynicism that local government, regional government, Department of Conservation and these other characters have slowed everything down. It's virtually impossible to get large projects in New Zealand completed either in time or within a cost parameters.

Mark my words. This doesn't mean that we're going to trash the environment. I mean, it's a low blow for my combatants in the green movement to say that about me. And look, I know a number of you figuratively kicked me in the shin when I said, if there is a mining opportunity and a blind frog is in the way, hide it out, Freddie. I didn't mean on your behalf we were going to commit species extinction. I just meant that Freddie was in the departure lounge.

And I only say that admittedly with a bit of humour, folks, we've got to have trade-offs. We must have trade-offs and we need to make those trade-offs on the basis of science, economic rationalism and open debate. Not tiny groups able to weaponise the Resource Management Act.

Not tiny groups able to weaponise discussions, debates either around wahi tapu or species, but an open, honest discussion, how are we going to grow ourselves out of the doldrums that this government found ourselves to be in when we took over the benches of Treasury. Because we have huge and dire challenges in front of us. Not the least of which is a \$13 billion deficit which was just referred to the other day and the only way you and I are going to get out of it is not continually cutting.

We have to grow. And we are not going to grow if we continually overstate risks and understate costs. We're not going to grow unless there are politicians and parties with a clear manifesto and a mandate to go for growth.

Why are the roads that we build in New Zealand the most expensive? Why is energy during this winter the most expensive in the Western world? Our energy system is broken. We have allowed the gentailers, the large energy companies to rake in inordinate profits whilst the exporters are going broke. I hope you heard the economist warning us when your energy system has a reputation in tatters no one is going to continue operating in New Zealand or fresh investors come to work with New Zealanders if they cannot enjoy our historic advantage of cheap and affordable energy.

And on your behalf I will soon be announcing that not only are we going to turbocharge the capacity of Marsden Point but we are going to find the money to go to a new frontier of development and use the geothermal energy in our country to ensure that the cost of energy sinks to a low level that you and I can afford as Kiwis. One thing more nauseating than me seeing the green people overseas lecturing me about the death of the planet because of Matua Shane's rhetoric is Debbie Ngarewa-Packer on behalf of the Māori Party trotting off overseas and dissing the nation that we belong to. I don't mind debating ideas as a parliamentarian.

I love the contest of ideologies, of philosophies but the notion that the Māori Party are raising a new generation of young men and women to not feel pride either in our flag, our name or indeed not have confidence about our future means they need to be driven out of Parliament sooner rather than later. You have heard Winston talk about the hypocrisy of that small group distorting the ambitions of all the iwi in the country. As you know I'm the guy who said put the K back in iwi.

And if you have any doubts it's a measure of immense frustration to watch them come into Parliament, swagger, behave in a manner totally inconsistent with the traditions of Parliament, take all the upside but accept none of the obligations. It's not only misleading a new generation but it is selling Māori ambition as a contribution to a greater more prosperous New Zealand dangerously short. But co-leaders have sadly not only misrepresented but they've sold their own people out.

They thought that they would have a clean, unfettered, non-contested journey into some new Hawaiiki future where you can have all the rights and none of the obligations until Winston and I stood up in Parliament. And they know every day they do not get a free pass from us. None of this business of turning up, none of this business of turning up using trash-talking language and then complaining oh you're victimising us when one co-leader is told are you the Lone Ranger or Tonto with that hat on.

And the other leader is told by me on Facebook on your behalf a day or two ago if you want to be an activist and by your own admission you want to take off your pōtai, your hat of being a parliamentarian and fight the Fast Track in a very vicious way then be an activist but for God's sake leave politics permanently because we've had our guts full of you. Thank you. Now look, this is a speech that's got a fair degree of rhetoric in it but underlying this speech when I talk about green ideology or the Māori Party are some cardinal ideas.

One is the idea in terms of the Māori Party of an indivisible citizenship. You cannot dismember, you cannot pull apart the Treaty of Waitangi in some faddish, vogue-like way just to suit an untested ideology and pretend that somehow you have a superior moral view about the future of New Zealand's race relations.

Their new insult to Winston and I [sic] is "maumau tō toto Māori".

That means your Māori blood is wasted. Not only have I shot back at them but know this from me, I know their genealogy better than they do. I know the story of Titokowaru, I know the story of the East Coast and I can hit you with the left hand and the right hand in either language so be careful what you ask for.

The media are here. The media realise that our government is doing tremendously well as we take on some deep challenges. They also realise that we are three parties that have found common ground on your behalf and we've got the maturity to sort out what differences there may be from time to time in a professional manner in such a way it doesn't spill out and become fuel for a media that is always looking for gotcha moments.

This particular government with our Deputy Prime Minister is working extraordinarily well in trying to strike the balance how are we going to grow the economy whilst at the same time trim the sails of the state which you and I have to agree got totally out of control after COVID but that's not the only thing that got out of control. What was really trounced were your liberties, your rights and our protections as citizens under the nation state of New Zealand and I know it may sound a bit pointy headed to use those sorts of words but nothing motivates me more as a politician than ensuring that the autocracy, the spread of the state is constantly challenged which is why I'm solidly on side with the kaupapa, the mission that David Seymour is endeavouring to bring forward in relation to plucking out excessive regulation. We have to be eternally vigilant.

We have to be awkward in what we say because the bureaucracy at the end of the day demonstrated during COVID if it's not controlled or curbed it will cripple us. Tomorrow Winston will be giving his address. Please remember for three years we were given an unwanted sabbatical.

We put a lot of homework not only in what the board said about fundraising but we put a lot of homework into ensuring the ideas we brought forward were capable of being implemented and turned into robust action so we have something to justify the confidence and the trust of our fellow Kiwis who have sent us back to be at the centre of the government. Number one, delivery. Number two, action.

That's right. And the most important thing is sustaining momentum so people continue to believe that New Zealand First not only can curb the excesses of its fellow travellers but is never going to bow down and be cancelled or censored for having feelings, attitudes, objectives, goals, opinions and aims that do not suit the elite media-orientated, woke, green-riddled munchkins. And whether they've got a moko or not they've met their match in Winston and me.

MC: Thank you very much. Okay ladies and gentlemen, that fantastic speech by the Honourable Shane Jones brings the end to day one of our convention. So just another round of applause team.

**Shane Jones speaks at NZ First Conference
October 12 2024**

Excerpt shown to interviewees:

And if you belong to the woke tribe, I'm not allowed to hurt your feelings. And if you don't want to be known as a he or a she, then your feelings trump the foundation influences and values that lie at the heart of a party like ours, I say to them, bugger you.

We've also inherited a situation where science, economic rationalism plays second fiddle to ideology and falsehoods and nowhere are we seeing it more frequently in New Zealand than the rhetoric, the shrillness around climate alarmism.

And the moment that you talk about a host of other problems and somehow you're not showing enough deference or religious obedience to the climate god, then somehow you are to be cancelled, you're to be written out of the script as a denialist.

Look no further than the ideology that we stand against for the cancellation of the Marsden Point refinery.

The Labour government and the Green Klingons willingly, willingly applauded the demise of our refinery, thus leaving us grossly vulnerable as a small open trading nation.

The wokery of environmentalism

June 20, 2024

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ReJ_hQPBXug

Yesterday – no, Tuesday – Conservation Minister Tama Potaka, if you remember him, appeared in front of Parliament’s Environment Committee. He was elected in a by-election in Hamilton East. I think it was East, or maybe Hamilton West, one of the two. He’s a Māori chap, bald-headed guy. You know, for God’s sake, Christopher Luxon has made baldness mandatory in the National Party. I imagine if I ever wanted to be a National MP, I’d have to shave my head now. But anyway, Tama Potaka is the Minister of Conservation, and he’s the MP for Hamilton East. I think it’s East.

He appeared on Tuesday in front of Parliament’s Environment Committee, and there’s been outrage over the last 48 hours from conservation and environmental groups in this country about what Tama Potaka said to that committee. This is what he said, and I quote:

“If we say, hand on heart, we’re going to save every single species in New Zealand and get it out of a space where it’s endangered or at risk, that job is going to take an absolutely, probably superhuman effort,” said Tama Potaka. “That’ll cost – I don’t know, I wouldn’t want to imagine the cost – but that is literally hundreds of billions, maybe trillions of dollars. And I don’t think we’re in that space.”

He went on to say:

“I think we’re in a much more practical space to say, what are the species, what are the areas, what are the ecosystems that we’re going to focus on, focus our attention on, and get to that.”

As you can imagine, that has absolutely set conservationists, Greenies, and others off, with demands for his resignation as the MP for Hamilton East. He’s being accused of not just letting down conservation, the environment, and New Zealand’s basic ethos or spirit – that we are huge Greenies by nature or inclination – but also of letting down the Māori people. They say he should resign instantly as the Minister of Conservation.

Can I just say, congratulations, Tama Potaka, for uttering an enormous truth. The truth is that if we wanted to save everything that can’t adapt to human existence in this country, we wouldn’t have humans here. And can I also say to those who say he has let down his ethnicity and his culture because Māori are the kaitiaki, or guardians, of the environment in New Zealand? Māori did a bloody good job before Europeans arrived at changing the New Zealand landscape and environment. At least 50 – five-oh – breeds of animal or plant were extinguished from New Zealand – made extinct by Māori – before the first European even settled here.

It doesn't matter whether it was the Haast's eagle or the moa. It doesn't matter whether it was various tussock land, birds or the huia, that's another one. It doesn't matter what it is; human interaction with this particular environment of New Zealand has always been destructive of certain types that couldn't adapt to humans. Now, I see value in retaining particular species – of course, I do. But if you're going to stop human activity in New Zealand because there's a beetle down the road that is unique to just this area and doesn't exist anywhere else, well, what do you do? I mean, we've got plenty of beetles. It's not like we need to keep this one just because it's got a particular marking on its back that's unique. Or there's a guppy somewhere that has lived in isolation forever, and you can't possibly go into that area because it's living there – and eventually being killed by trout. But don't even worry about that.

The truth of the matter is, you do have to pick and choose what you're going to save. Is it going to be the kiwi? Is it going to be the tuatara? Is it going to be tūī, bellbirds, fantails, whatever? But you do need to work that out. And if you've got limited resources – and we are a poor country, getting poorer every day, can I say – you don't have the money to be able to save everything and have human activity, provide jobs for people, and a lifestyle for the people who are living here, let alone the ones who are wanting to come flooding into this place from every other country as New Zealanders are heading out the other door.

Tama Potaka talked a truth: you've got to work out what you want, what your priorities are, and then put your resources there. It doesn't matter whether it's public health or conservation, the same principles apply. And he also spoke another truth, and that truth was: Māori, we know this. We've always worked that way. It's just a few of you guys who have gifted us an environmental status that we never really had. Thanks very much, but if you want to deify us and put us into some form of ideological view that we are some sort of just one step descended from the gods, go for your life, white people. Good on you, mate. You're right.

And that is why this government needs to carry on resisting the wokery that somehow a beetle, a Freddy the blind frog, or some small, inanimate object, or animate object, for that matter – some grassland that could only exist there, is somehow got to be protected by literally millions of dollars, hundreds of millions of dollars, and hundreds of conservation staff. When, at the end of the day, we are struggling to provide for our own.

Those are my thoughts this morning. What are yours?

Excerpt shown to interviewees:

The truth is that if we wanted to save everything that can't adapt to human existence in this country, we wouldn't have humans here. And can I also say to those who say he has let down his ethnicity and his culture because Māori are the kaitiaki, or guardians, of the environment in New Zealand? Māori did a bloody good job before Europeans arrived at changing the New Zealand landscape and environment. At least 50 – FIVE OH breeds of animal or plant were extinguished from New Zealand – made extinct by Māori – before the first European actually even settled here.

Now, I see value in retaining particular species – of course I do. But if you're going to stop human activity in New Zealand because there's a beetle down the road that is unique to just this area and doesn't exist anywhere else, well, whoop-de-doo! I mean, we've got plenty of beetles.

And if you've got limited resources – and we are a poor country, getting poorer every day, can I say – you don't have the money to be able to save everything and have human activity, and provide jobs for people, and a lifestyle for the people who are living here, let alone the ones who are wanting to come flooding into this place from every other country as New Zealanders are heading out the other door.

And that is why this government needs to carry on resisting the wokery that somehow a beetle, a Freddy the blind frog, or some small, inanimate object – or animate object, for that matter – some grassland that could only exist there, is somehow got to be protected by literally millions of dollars, hundreds of millions of dollars, and hundreds of conservation staff. When, at the end of the day, we are struggling to provide for our own.

Text 3: Sean Plunket, *The Platform*

Why we wage war on woke

December 5, 2024

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_b7bK9fuzM

I suggest you make sure the cat's nowhere near you in case you kick it. Maybe have a cup of tea on standby. Just be in a safe space somewhere. If you faint in surprise, you'll be okay. Have a soft landing ground somewhere because, for the next half hour, I've got to tell you some stories you wouldn't believe. It's like *Ripley's Believe It or Not* this morning. These are stories that show us why we need to push for change in our society and community, and how out of whack and crazy things have gotten.

I've got three things I want to talk about. Let's start in Wellington—a city that seems to be in terminal decline. Its infrastructure is straining and breaking, property prices are falling (though more slowly than before, according to what I read this morning), and it has problems with homeless people and beggars on the streets. There are stacks of empty shops, and the council is so dysfunctional that the government has sent an observer to oversee it. There's also a “dipsomaniac, possibly autistic” mayor [previous Wellington Mayor Tory Whanau] who doesn't talk to *The Platform* – not that it matters. All this happens in the context of a country that is supposedly more divisive than ever before, with debates about the Treaty of Waitangi and the Māori Party polling at 9%. That's what happens when you take money from taxpayers, wash it through a charitable trust, and use it for political campaigning, all while having the mainstream media and the “wokies” support your cause.

But let's get back to Wellington. No matter what its problems are, one thing you've got to do in the city is keep it clean – literally, just clean the streets. To do that, you have to hire companies to clean the streets, right? You'd want that to be their primary expertise, wouldn't you? I wouldn't want them doing other stuff. How important do you think the Treaty of Waitangi is to cleaning streets? Completely irrelevant, right? Well, I'm going to share with you the kind of request for proposals for street cleaning in Wellington.

The Wellington City Council is dedicated to the obligations of the 2020 Te Upoko o Te Ika a Maui commitment. The guiding principles of this commitment are being written to people who run street cleaning companies. It says:

“You must remove barriers that hinder local Māori, Pasifika, and social enterprises from accessing and winning council contracts. Local supply chain resilience and long-term economic prosperity, advocating for supply diversity and the benefits it creates in communities.”

It then asks:

“How does your organisation define supplier diversity, and what strategies do you have in place to promote diversity within your supply chain? Please share a specific example

of an initiative aimed at increasing the inclusion of diverse suppliers in your work programs, along with the subcontractor's trading name and contact details for reference checking."

So, this is saying if we're going to hire you, you have to show that you've got a diverse supply chain within your business. You have to be woke, is what it's saying.

It continues:

"Can you describe any training or education programs implemented to support the development and growth of diverse suppliers that you work with? What steps does your organization take to identify and assess potential diverse suppliers?"

At this stage, I'm still not quite sure what a "diverse supplier" is. Is that like a Māori person or a Pasifika person?

(Ben interjects: Is this all about people who pick up rubbish from the street?)

Ben, this has been written by very expensive bureaucrats!

The questionnaire goes on:

"In the event of challenges faced by diverse suppliers, can you provide details about any partnerships or collaborations your organisation has with diverse business associations or advocacy groups? How do you communicate your commitment to supplier diversity to stakeholders, and what steps are taken to integrate diversity considerations into your overall corporate strategy?"

That is a questionnaire for people who would bid for the contract to clean the streets in Wellington. Do you think that's reasonable? No, I don't. This exemplifies what happens with Rainbow Tick and stuff like that. They go to councils and say, "Oh, you should really have criteria for this," and then they go to businesses and say, "Get our tick, and then you'll get jobs like this." This is about the obligations of Te Tiriti, the advisory companies, the certifications – it's all connected. They could have saved a lot of time by just asking, "Are you any good at cleaning streets, and how much do you cost?" That would have been an easier way to procure the best service for the money.

How often have you looked at someone cleaning the street and said, "Oh, that street cleaning machine doesn't look very diverse to me. I don't like the white colonialism on that street sweeper." No, I don't see them because they haven't done much of a job. But there we have it – that is just one particularly crazy example of things that are going on. That is "Jaguar rebrand" right there. People inside organisations, as individuals, if you want to maintain your sanity and not live in a lunatic asylum, you should laugh at this. Rip it up. There's got to be a revolution against this kind of nonsense.

That's left me speechless. We're going to have a break, and then I'm going to show you another example of woke gone mad. The text machine is exploding, but I feel better

walking down clean streets that are obviously being cleaned. It's so important to me, as I'm sure it is to all of you.

Example Two: Television New Zealand

TVNZ announced yesterday that Anna Burns-Francis and Hayley Holt are leaving. They took the money offered to them to get out rather than be made redundant. Both are white, blonde women who are feeling the cold winds of diversity. TVNZ News is as woke as you can get these days. A story they published yesterday – which I saw on Twitter, and of course, they turned off the comments – reminded me of the last census, where people wondered why they wanted to know everything about how you identified, your gender, and your sexuality. Well, that's so they could come up with rubbish stories like this.

The headline reads:

“World-first census data highlights housing deprivation in LGBTQI+ community. LGBTQI+ New Zealanders have been experiencing severe housing deprivation at a higher rate than non-LGBTQI+ people, according to world-first census data out today.”

The numbers collected in the 2023 census show that, at the time, 261 per 10,000 LGBTQI+ people (about 2.6%) aged 15 and over – a total of 4,443 people – were estimated (not actually counted, just estimated) to be living in severe housing deprivation. The rate was 212 per 10,000 for non-LGBTQI+ people. So, the difference is minuscule. According to the story, the LGBTQI+ population had higher proportions of people affected across all categories of homelessness: those without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing someone else's private dwelling, and those in uninhabitable housing. (You can't live in an uninhabitable house, by the way, because if you're in it, it's habitable.)

The story should have been about five or six sentences long. The highest deprivation rates were among Pacific peoples, but we're used to that. Pacific peoples don't have a “Pacific Tick” campaign because TVNZ is Rainbow Tick certified. So, the fact that the most housing-deprived people in New Zealand are Pacific Islanders is secondary to the fact that the LGBTQI+ community has found a statistic to feel victimised by. Of course, if you see that story as the absolute woke madness that I do, it's run with a big picture of a rainbow flag. You can't tell TVNZ that because they turned the comments off. They decided there wouldn't be any comments about their crappy journalism and advocacy.

The headline should have been:

“Pacific Islanders most at risk of housing deprivation, according to latest census statistics.”

But no, this is the “Rainbow Tick” agenda. Let's try and get a pen out, Ben. Try and get a hold of this. I'm not sure if it's a man or a woman – it's one of those LGBTQI+ names. University of Otago senior research fellow Brodie Fraser told *One News* it was a big deal for Aotearoa to be the first in the world to have population data on LGBTQI+ homelessness, showing how disproportionately affected the community is. No, we've already established that the most disproportionately affected are Pacific Island people.

Brodie Fraser said it was commonplace for members of the rainbow community to take each other in to prevent people from living on the streets when they were not accepted anywhere else. Victim, victim, victim. It's commonplace for all sorts of people, whether they're LGBTQI+ or not. There's a picture of Brodie – she's a woman. Well, maybe not "pink," but I'm surprised. It can put a big strain on relationships. At this stage, we're just into pure speculation because we're not talking about the statistics and the census anymore. We're just talking about Brodie's woke advocacy and her feelings.

So, there we go. TVNZ, you have outdone yourself in meaningless news advocacy. Thank you so much for turning off the comments. If you want to read the story and comment on it, go to Sean Plunket on Twitter because I haven't turned the comments off. I've highlighted this story, and you can have your say – unlike what TVNZ offers you.

Example Three: The Marsden Fund.

Every day, I read stuff like this. I wonder if LGBTQI+ people are discriminated against in getting street cleaning contracts in Wellington. What's the situation for diverse LGBTQI+ street cleaners in Wellington? That would be a question. But I'll tell you what – that's why we wage the war on woke.

In some ways, I'm a bit angry at Judith Collins for what she did yesterday because she robbed me of a humorous annual opportunity to laugh loudly. Judith Collins announced yesterday that the Marsden Fund – a multi-million-dollar government research fund administered by the aggressively woke people at the New Zealand Royal Society (the people who protected Kate Hannah and the Disinformation Project and practice some of the most exclusionary cancel culture in this country) – will no longer fund certain types of research. Every year, they hand out millions of dollars to researchers, often for things like gay lesbian whales in wheelchairs or my grandmother's menstrual cycle in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi. The research funded by eye-watering amounts of money for completely woke, diverse rubbish over the years has been amazing. Groups like the Taxpayers' Union publish who they've given the money to and what the research is for, just for a laugh.

Well, good on you, Judith Collins, for saying no more. They've taken arts and humanities research funding out of the Marsden Fund and said it's got to be practical, scientific research that has an economic or national benefit. It cannot be stuff like, "The significance of my grandmother's menstrual cycle in relation to the settlement of the Treaty of Waitangi or the Māori calendar." You know the kind of nonsense I'm talking about – like the "decolonising hospital waiting room" project. Good on Judith.

Of course, academia is outraged. The experts are saying this is terrible, and the Green Party says the decision to cut all humanities and social sciences research funding is a massive step backward. Social sciences are critical for shining a light on the injustices and inequalities of society – things this government would prefer to keep in the dark. Science and research spokesperson Scott Willis said social science research is a critical part of the ongoing critique and improvement of society. I say it's a critical part of your

ongoing Marxist political campaigning, and I think New Zealand has had quite enough of paying for it.

The New Zealand Association of Scientists said the announcement was chilling. Co-president Troy Bason said the cuts doubled down on the end of national science challenges, where social science was one of the cost-effective bright spots that emerged. He said, “It appears that we’re defunding our ability to understand and address some of our most important challenges.” No, Troy Bason, we’re defunding your wokeness and your social and political advocacy.

Judith Collins also announced an updated plan for the Catalyst Fund (previously the International Relationships Fund), which invests in international collaboration opportunities across the science sector. They’ve changed some of the criteria there. Let’s get hold of the MacDiarmid Institute for Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology because their woke professor, Nicola Gaston, says she’s horrified by today’s announcements. Well, she clearly scares easily. I am absolutely disgusted by the way that the kind of science I and my colleagues do as physical scientists is being treated. Oh, God, look, I can’t – it’s a cobbled-together mess. But good on you, Judith.

I am going to miss laughing every year at the crap that gets funded through the Marsden Fund. But it is at that level where we can turn back, where we can wage the war on woke. I don’t know if we can do anything about the diversity hires in Wellington street cleaning, and TVNZ – just stop watching it. I’ll read their silly stories for you and tell you how woke they are.

Sean Plunket, The Platform
Why we wage war on woke
December 5, 2024

Excerpt shown to interviewees:

All this happens in the context of a country that is supposedly more divisive than ever before, with debates about the Treaty of Waitangi and the Māori Party polling at 9%. That's what happens when you take money from taxpayer, wash it through a charitable trust, and use it for political campaigning, all while having the mainstream media and the "wokies" support your cause.

The Wellington City Council is dedicated to the obligations of the 2020 Te Upoko o Te Ika a Maui commitment. The guiding principles of this commitment are being written to people who run street cleaning companies. It says:

"You must remove barriers that hinder local Māori, Pasifika, and social enterprises from accessing and winning council contracts. Local supply chain resilience and long-term economic prosperity, advocating for supply diversity and the benefits it creates in communities."

So, this is saying if we're going to hire you, you have to show that you've got a diverse supply chain within your business. You have to be woke, is what it's saying.

At this stage, I'm still not quite sure what a "diverse supplier" is. Is that like a Māori person or a Pasifika person? Is this all about people who pick up rubbish from the street? This has been written by very expensive bureaucrats.

TVNZ announced yesterday that Anna Burns-Francis and Hayley Holt are leaving. They took the money offered to them to get out rather than be made redundant. Both are white, blonde women who are feeling the cold winds of diversity. TVNZ News is as woke as you can get these days. A story they published yesterday – which I saw on Twitter, and of course, they turned off the comments – reminded me of the last census, where people wondered why they wanted to know everything about how you identified, your gender, and your sexuality. Well, that's so they could come up with rubbish stories like this.

The headline reads:

"World-first census data highlights housing deprivation in LGBTQI+ community. LGBTQI+ New Zealanders have been experiencing severe housing deprivation at a higher rate than non-LGBTQI+ people, according to world-first census data out today."

Judith Collins announced yesterday that the Marsden Fund – a multi-million-dollar government research fund administered by the aggressively woke people at the New Zealand Royal Society (the people who protected Kate Hannah and the Disinformation Project and practice some of the most exclusionary cancel culture in this country) –will

no longer fund certain types of research. Every year, they hand out millions of dollars to researchers, often for things like gay lesbian whales in wheelchairs or my grandmother's menstrual cycle in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi. The research funded by eye-watering amounts of money for completely woke, diverse rubbish over the years has been amazing.

Text 4: Duncan Garner Podcast “Editor in Chief”

National Party begins process of replacing Christopher Luxon

March 5 2025

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CI0hPNC3Gkc>

It’s astonishing, isn’t it? The whispering campaign in Wellington about his weak and indecisive and increasingly struggling and unpopular leadership has gone to a new level, with National MPs now talking not if he must be replaced, but when and who takes the job.

His polling and his personal popularity is far too low and going backwards for this stage in the electoral cycle. It’s simply not good enough. MPs concede privately that they can’t enter the next election with him at the helm. If they do, they face being a one-term government and they risk handing power over to an increasingly activist left-wing Coalition including the unpredictable Māori party, who have failed to read the mood of 90% of New Zealand who find their anti-Pākehā approach reprehensible and entirely inappropriate for government.

You see, and Labour’s leader Chris Hipkins has been far too slow to condemn the approach, which only says that he’s got no problem with such divisive language and politics. Put them in and watch the country completely empty out to Australia. You’ll see some immigration then – they’ll be gone.

National needs to hit at least about 40% of the polls next time to be sure of being in government. That’s what they need to get to. Luxon doesn’t stand a chance. He doesn’t even look like he’s getting close. He’s going backwards.

It’s understood that John Key, Steven Joyce (the former prime minister and the former minister), Murray McCully have been discussing how a transfer of power to a new leader might occur. It involves potentially bringing in former Minister Paula Bennett as the president, the new president of the party, to oversee the potentially messy switch and break the news to Luxon that he’s lost the faith and the trust of his MPs and his caucus.

It’s a big deal to unseat a sitting prime minister. The last one was – and I was there, I saw this – Jim Bolger was rolled by Jenny Shipley. The coup run by Tony Ryall and Bob Simcock. They held secret meetings for weeks getting MPs on side. The code name for the people’s diaries was called the “Te Puke bypass,” and Bolger was rolled on his return from an international conference in Britain. The news was broken to him on the tarmac by Doug Graham, one of his ministers, and Jenny Shipley took over the reins of the country effectively. She was the new Prime Minister.

National doesn’t like it – no parties do – but sometimes they simply have to be done, have to happen for the good of the party and the wider public interest of the nation. National at this stage has no idea who would replace Luxon. That’s what’s being worked on at the moment.

So what triggered all this? Certainly the Mike Hosking interview, which went pear-shaped, hasn't helped. But one bad day surely doesn't lead to a prime minister being dumped? And it doesn't. That's right. But Luxon has failed to connect with voters, and that's obvious, isn't it? He stands for nothing. Voters see that. There appears no coherent economic plan. We remain in recession. We all feel that the house system, as you'll find out shortly, is teetering, and we're experiencing that. And he is as indecisive and unsure as he has ever been. That's on show most days. We see it.

But on top of Hosking's train wreck, another issue has come to light. Mainstream media will miss this because they block certain conservative voices like Christian leader Bob McCroskie, who effectively was deplatformed by the media some years ago, so he set up his own way to connect, and he has a decent-size audience, decent-size following. He's used an email to Luxon from an early childhood teacher to expose just how much like Jacinda Ardern Luxon really is, and why he's no strong conservative leader willing to put the radicals and the social activists in their place.

Look at this: a worried preschool teacher contacted Luxon's office asking this. She writes: "What is going on in the education system? It's not okay. Why are you allowing this wokeness and confusion into schools? I've been a childcare reliever for the last 5 years, and I've had several kids below the ages of five, even as young as three and a half, approach me in centres saying they're not male or female and that they are identifying as they/them, he/she. These are vulnerable young children who know no better and are only saying it because of what they've seen and heard from TV or older people around them. What is your plan to change this, Prime Minister? I, for one, know that whatever they say, I will fight against it as a caring woman of God." So that's how the letter ends to the Prime Minister.

His answer will not satisfy established conservative voters on the right at all, or the thousands of parents in the middle. Indeed, it shows how he's miles away from their expectations and their beliefs, I think.

He writes back, or someone in his office writes back. A staff member replies like this: "Kia ora, thank you for your email to the Prime Minister, Right Honourable Christopher Luxon. Christopher is a proud supporter of the LGBTQI+ community and wants New Zealand to be a country that celebrates and supports diversity, including our rainbow community. Ngā mihi nui. " And that's from the PM's office.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Just no. The letter writer had specific concerns about three, four, and five-year-olds becoming trans preschoolers. I find as trans preschoolers, Luxon and his staff needed to write back that he too stands against this and that no one on his watch is going to talk or act in such a way that makes this in any way viable and acceptable. But in saying that, Chris says Prime Minister supports the rainbow community, the wider LGBT+ Community, whatever, to live their lives without discrimination based under New Zealand law. That's what he could have said, but he fails to spot it. They failed to spot it, this failed to see the mistake they just made. The rest is history.

When his office had all the time in the world to respond to a tricky question from a conservative voter, he was unequivocal in his response. He was firm that he supported, that he celebrated the LGBT+ Community. But when he was lobbed a setup by Mike Hosking, he died. He paused and made a meal of it.

It's strange, isn't it? National voters wanted more from Luxon, and in the end, they got way, way less. He promised to rid the country of the Jacinda years, but he's kept much of what she introduced in office. Luxon doesn't have the command or the respect needed to hold the PM's office. And it's over, I think it's over. By the counting and the screaming and the deal-making over this changeover.

As a political journalist for 20 years at Parliament, I saw coups develop early. I saw the lies, the tricks, the denials, and the language used. I saw politicians enter the death spiral. It was just time, and the execution was swift soon after that. Just a matter of time. This is no different. Question him, they'll undermine him. The next polls will be crucial. Watch those next polls. They're really crucial. He's been a first-year flop as prime minister. When you stand for nothing, you'll find it hard to answer anything in your own words or do anything at all that's original, to be honest.

Lifetime National supporters have stood around their barbecues all summer asking, "When is he going to actually do anything?" The answer is: he isn't. The next major announcement from Luxon will be his resignation as prime minister. Luxon is an empty vessel. National's policy agenda has been lacklustre, and it was a nod to the failed and boringly predictable past, really. Tax cuts for those who earned plenty hasn't helped the economy. Welfare sanctions to those that are downtrodden. Landlords got tax breaks. They've forgot to fund the cancer drugs until it was pointed out to them. And Luxon, despite his wealth, stupidly moaned about the massive free house he was given, so he stayed in his own mortgage-free apartment only to claim the \$50,000 a year allowance on top of his 500k salary. Those things resonate with people.

None of this has helped us get out of recession, and the recession we remain in. Even with interest rates low, the flow-through effect is agonisingly slow on this economy. He promised to be better than Jacinda, but in the end, he's proved himself incapable of doing anything at all, to be honest.

It's now just a matter of time, and once they know who replaces him, I think the changeover will be relatively swift. Luxon is now on borrowed time, and the clock, folks, well the clock is ticking.

Duncan Garner podcast “Editor in Chief”

“National Party begins process of replacing Christopher Luxon”

March 5 2025

Excerpt shown to interviewees:

Look at this: a worried preschool teacher contacted Luxon’s office asking this. She writes: “What is going on in the education system? It’s not okay. Why are you allowing this wokeness and confusion into schools? I’ve been a childcare reliever for the last 5 years, and I’ve had several kids below the ages of five, even as young as three and a half, approach me in centres saying they’re not male or female and that they are identifying as they/them, he/she. These are vulnerable young children who know no better and are only saying it because of what they’ve seen and heard from TV or older people around them. What is your plan to change this, Prime Minister? I, for one, know that whatever they say, I will fight against it as a caring woman of God.” So that’s how the letter ends to the Prime Minister.

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None of this has helped us get out of recession, and the recession we remain in. Even with interest rates low, the flow-through effect is agonisingly slow on this economy. He promised to be better than Jacinda, but in the end, he’s proved himself incapable of doing anything at all, to be honest.

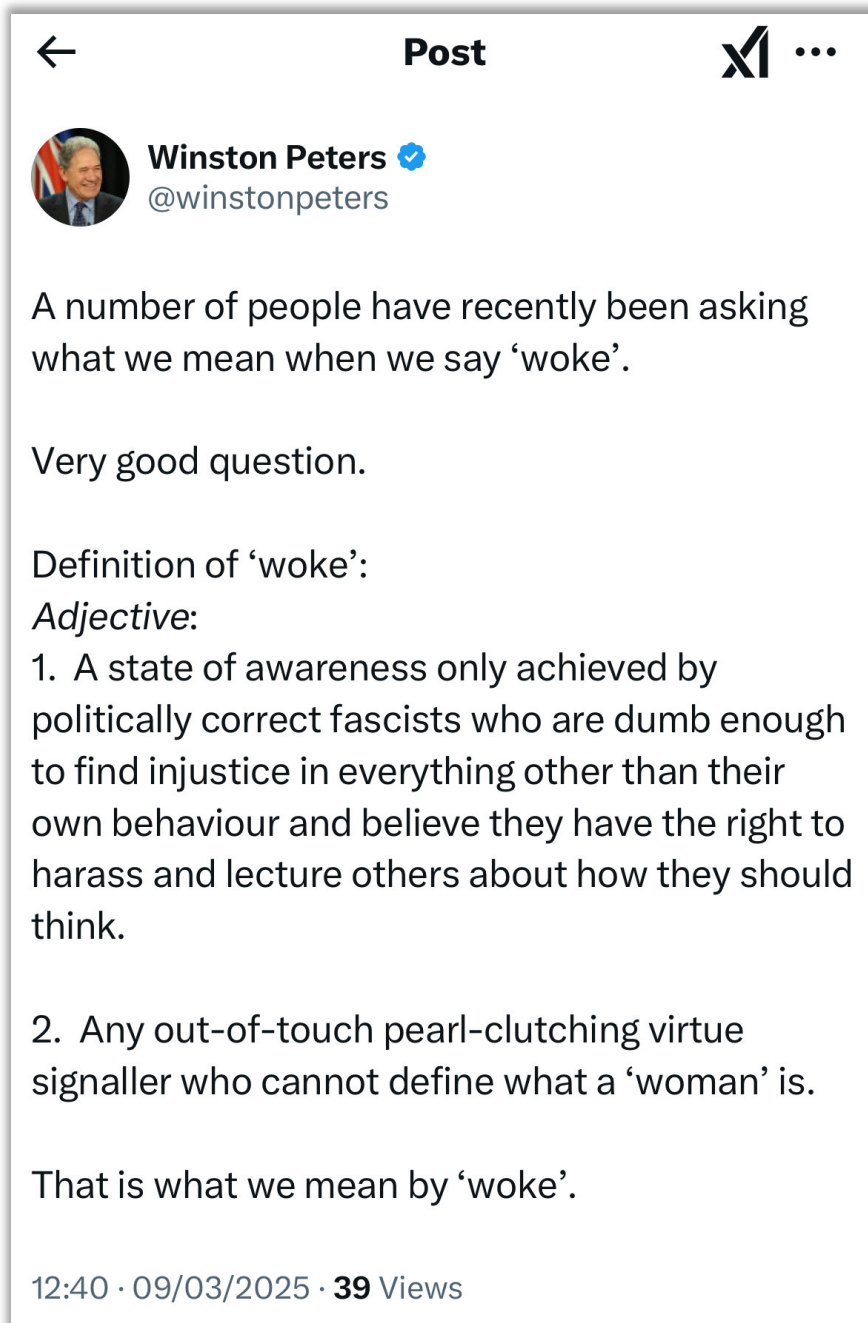
Supplementary text: Winston Peters X.com post shown to interviewees

Winston Peters, @winstonpeters

(At the time Deputy Prime Minister, Foreign Minister of New Zealand)

Post on X.com: Definition of “woke”

12:40, March 9, 2025



The image is a screenshot of a tweet from Winston Peters (@winstonpeters) on X.com. The tweet is titled "Post on X.com: Definition of 'woke'" and is dated 12:40, March 9, 2025. The tweet content is as follows:

A number of people have recently been asking what we mean when we say 'woke'.

Very good question.

Definition of 'woke':

Adjective:

1. A state of awareness only achieved by politically correct fascists who are dumb enough to find injustice in everything other than their own behaviour and believe they have the right to harass and lecture others about how they should think.
2. Any out-of-touch pearl-clutching virtue signaller who cannot define what a 'woman' is.

That is what we mean by 'woke'.

12:40 · 09/03/2025 · 39 Views

Appendix 2: Interview Transcripts

Transcript – Participant 1

Interviewed 3 June 2025

Interviewer: I've started the video and we're just about to watch the first clip, which is Shane Jones.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: You're welcome to watch that again if you would like.

P1: No, yeah, I hadn't seen that one.

Interviewer: Have you not? That's an excerpt from the full speech that he gave to the convention, so it's on YouTube. So, what anything surprised you about that – anything? You said you haven't seen it before.

P1: No, nothing surprised me. I quite agree with his thing and I like his forthright way. He just puts it out there, he says what he thinks and he's not worried about what other people think about it.

Interviewer: And did you find it funny? He is a very skilful speaker.

P1: Yeah, well it's done in a kind of tongue-in-cheek way but it's serious. He seriously says what he believes, which totally aligns with what I feel generally about a lot of stuff.

Interviewer: And how do you mean?

P1: Well, like the gender stuff, the ideologies, the closing of Marsden Point and probably the climate thing. I think it's a bit of – I don't really think it's what they make it out to be. I don't know who started it all, but the media certainly loves to blame everything on climate change.

Interviewer: Right, so there you mentioned several things there that resonated with you. Maybe you could talk more about those things and why they resonate with you?

P1: Well, the gender thing – it seems to be that a lot of the LGBT alphabet thing has been brought to the fore. Yes, everyone should have the right to be how they are and everything, but it's becoming very militant. It's not just like in my day – I had friends who were gay. My best man at my wedding transitioned to be a woman in later life and I've got nothing against that. He's still Mike as far as I'm concerned, but I've called him Michaela because that was what he chose his name to be.

But there wasn't the militancy, the expectation that everyone must agree with it. That's what I feel he's talking about – the whole ideology thing has been forced upon people to

try and encourage them to believe the same as what small minorities are saying or believing.

Interviewer: So was there anything that stood out to you particularly just in that short clip?

P1: Probably not in what he was saying. What stood out to me was that someone who's got some clout is actually able to say it and that they're not frightened of being cancelled or being chucked out of his job or whatever because he's saying what he believes.

Interviewer: You mean Shane?

P1: Yeah, so he's in a position in which he can say these things. Because generally a lot of people that might feel the same and they might say exactly the same words, but you would get cancelled. If you write it down on Facebook they'll put you in Facebook jail for saying it, or you say it within different groups that you might be in and everyone's calling you homophobic or they start calling you names and stuff like that.

But here's a man who's actually got some clout where he can put it out to everyone, because otherwise people are generally not really frightened but they are on that level of being afraid to say what they think because they're scared of what people are going to say about them, what they might do to them and stuff. So yeah, good on him.

Interviewer: That's an interesting insight actually – the factor of having risen to the position he has and that gives him more freedom to speak than the people he represents, you think, or just people in general?

P1: Yeah, he's free to say what he thinks, but we're all free to say what we think. But he's in a position where if they decide to cancel him and they say "Oh you said this and you said that," just like the media tends to do, they would try and make him sound like a bad person and demonise him and everything, but he's not afraid of that. He's got enough age behind him and experience to be able to say "Well this is what I believe in and this is what I stand up for and I'm going to say it no matter how people feel about it."

Interviewer: So you feel like the way he's presenting himself is authentic? This is the real Shane?

P1: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: What did you think about when you heard the term "cling-ons" which came up in this clip? I noticed you having a giggle, so have you heard him use words like that before and what came to mind?

P1: On the spectrum of a bright person to a stupid person, that's down the lower end – the people that he was referring to. The people who just say what the general people are saying without really maybe having any thought, or they are just a bit stupid. That's what he's referring to. It's kind of like I said, tongue-in-cheek, because if you say someone is

stupid then they're going to... It can be used in a joking way but it's got that serious connotation. It gives you a message.

Interviewer: So what did you think about he referred to climatism as almost in a religious obedience, I think is the words that he used? Have you heard that – about climate activism?

P1: Yeah, well usually you're talking about activism as people that are opposed – that's the general thing. If someone's an activist they're opposed to something. But the activism he's talking about, I think, is that whoever it is that's pushing for the climate change thing, they're actually the ones that think they're on the positive side of it. And I don't think it's what's being pushed out.

Interviewer: Your thoughts about climatism as a religious obedience?

P1: Yeah, well I suppose what I think is there's a lot of stuff out there which comes to the same thing that I talked about with LGBT stuff – that people might think something but they're too afraid to say it because they don't want to be called a doubter or whatever. But really, I know heaps and heaps of people who disagree with it and they would talk about it to me, but they wouldn't talk about the doubting of it to other people because then people get angry and call them names and stuff like that.

So it's the same thing where he can stand up and being able to actually say it – “I don't believe there is a climate thing that's being caused by cars or cows farting and stuff like that.” That's just ludicrous.

Interviewer: Okay, that's climate. You'll notice this will be a common thread in the things I show you, but the word “woke” came up a couple of times and I saw that you had a little smile at that too. I was wondering what the term “woke” means to you or have you heard it used to mean? We'll come back to this so you don't have to have a fully fledged answer right now.

P1: Yeah, when it first started coming out I thought this sounds crazy because you're saying that someone is woke, so you think that they think they're being awake, but they're not. It's actually the opposite, that's what it is in my mind.

So it's that thing where people have an idea in their head which has most likely been something that somebody has printed in the newspaper or they've seen it on TV, and so they totally agree with it. And they are people who are unable to think for themselves often and see other people's points of view. So they're just woke because they're not awake – they're not open to listening to other people's points or even when you bring something up. Like you might talk about climate change and the minute you start saying “well okay, what about this and what about this and what about this,” – “I don't want to talk about it.” That's a woke person – someone who refuses to even discuss it.

Interviewer: So like a fake awake? So woke is the opposite of being awake?

P1: Yeah, of being awake.

Interviewer: That’s interesting, thank you, and we’ll come back to that too. I’ll stop that there. Our next clip is Michael Laws on The Platform. Michael Laws has been a central government and local government politician as you know, and he’s now part of the media, but the non-traditional media you might say. This platform, and he’s going to talk about – I think the name of this clip is “woke environmentalism.”

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

Interviewer: So that’s Michael. That’s very firmly focused on the environment, that particular clip. What did it make you think?

P1: Sorry, probably the context of what he’s talking about I can listen to and everything, not really knowing what the whole point is of what he’s talking about.

Interviewer: I’ll give a little bit of context. Tama Potaka, the Minister of Conservation, gave a speech in which he said not every species could be saved, putting it in a nutshell, and that’s what he’s commenting on. So this conservation person had said that.

P1: So he’s agreeing with them?

Interviewer: Yeah, Michael Laws is agreeing with Tama Potaka. So Tama Potaka is a minister in this government, but we don’t hear from him very often admittedly, but he did make a speech in which he said it would be a huge challenge to make sure we could stop all species from going extinct.

P1: Okay, yeah, well I would tend to agree with that – that you can’t stop everything. All you really can do is prevent stuff coming in from other countries that are going to jeopardise species here possibly.

Interviewer: So Laws made a few segues into different things. He talked about the Māori pre-European Māori and extinction of animals and species then, and he mentioned the concept of kaitiaki. And I know that you have mentioned that you whakapapa to Ngai Tahu, so I wondered what was your reaction to that?

P1: I got the impression he was saying – just my general knowledge on the thing is that a lot of the Māori stuff is being used to try and... it’s kind of like saying “well here’s all these people that are on the ground that are trying to do the conservation thing, but hang on a second, the only ones that got any credibility is the Māori people who may be portrayed as the gatekeepers of the whole thing.”

But what he’s saying is that during their total reign before white settlers came here, they got rid of... so their whole concept of being the gatekeepers of the place doesn’t come from their original beliefs. They came in and they got rid of the huia and the moa and everything, so they weren’t really gatekeepers of the place because they were, as he says – I don’t know where we get it from, but fifty... Yeah, I don’t know where he got that from either. He hasn’t given us any citations. You got to be fossils and things around that are not recognisable, but that’s a point.

Interviewer: So how do you know the word kaitiaki, which I always think of as guardian, but you translate as gatekeeper? And there's quite a distinction there and I wondered if that was a deliberate choice.

P1: Until you said it – kaitiaki – I wouldn't know what it was.

Interviewer: Oh sure, fair enough. Now Laws also talked about wokery, so we're seeing new constructions of the word here, and he's connecting woke thinking to conservation measures. So how do you feel about it?

P1: Well that comes to the same thing where you get a bunch of people or someone will come up with some idea, and then they'll have a little bit of power or they'll put it forward, and then everyone will grab it and then suddenly everyone is doing that whether they think it or not. They're just jumping on the bandwagon of it, and it's not really necessarily a practical thing.

In this environmental thing, it's not necessarily so much to save a certain species, it's about everyone jumping on the bandwagon and saying "well we got to do that." And then they start bringing in everything – one person's idea is one thing and then another person's perception of that idea is another thing and it can be totally different.

And that's where that whole woke thing is – that people just jump on the bandwagon. They're not thinking for themselves, they're not researching it themselves, they're just going along with it because they're encouraged to go along with it, partly by being coerced or blackmailed or offered KFC or whatever. And then once they're in it, they're too scared to pull out of it because they're going to lose their friends or whatever.

That's part of the woke thing, I think – that people tend to not feel comfortable thinking for themselves, or they just can't be bothered with it. "I'll just go with the flow, I'll just do whatever." Typical Kiwi thing – "oh we won't make waves, we won't question it." And it's the woke people, the woke majority who do that.

And they've got people who are like Shane and Michael Laws who have got a certain amount of power to where they can actually put out their view. But the woke people would never want to sit down mostly and watch something like that because it goes against what they say, what they might think, or what they're taught – not necessarily what they think. So they won't want to listen to that because probably they're frightened that they might learn something different from what they've already been told.

Interviewer: Did you think that Michael Laws... what did you find different about the way his speaking style and the way he approached things from Shane?

P1: Well I guess Shane was talking – he's a politician wanting to be, so he's putting out what he thinks. Whereas Michael is more like a reporter giving his point of view about what has been said and stuff. Shane is from a personal thing and is probably driven more – he seems to me like a genuine politician who's actually in the political realm.

I grew up around when Norman Kirk was a prime minister and a politician, and he was like a person and he genuinely appeared to want the best for the people. Whereas Michael is just – it's a job.

Interviewer: Okay. Let's go on. So this clip is Sean Plunket on The Platform and it's titled "Why we wage war on woke" and he gives several different examples. So he's moved away a little bit from the environmental focus but he still makes points that intersect with what we've just watched.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform "Why we wage war on woke"]

Interviewer: That was entitled "Why we wage war on woke" and he gave a variety of examples. So I wonder, was there one or more that stood out to you there?

P1: Well, the generalisation that he had at the end there was several examples that I agree with – it's the same thing we talked about before. The wokeism is that they're spending a lot of money on things because they think that they should, and it's wasting money there really. Everyone in New Zealand who's struggling – the government should be accountable, which unfortunately this government got in on the pretext that they were going to sort all that out.

Interviewer: Do you feel they haven't succeeded?

P1: Well, I don't see... I don't follow... I don't watch TV really, I don't watch the news, I can't stand it. So I don't really keep up generally, but you do see on social media you do see snippets of what people have put up. But it appears to me that this whole big thing – I expected something when they got in that they would say "right, let's go, we're going to cut this and we're going to cut that, we're going to get rid of..." Just like President Trump has. He's got in there from day one and said "Right, we're going to find out where all the money's going and we found a trillion dollars that's been wasted and we're going to stop it."

Whereas this government doesn't appear to be doing that. They're just as woke because they say they're going to do something but they're too scared to say "Well sorry, but why are you spending whatever it is – was it 800,000 or something – to play music whale music to the kauri trees and things like that."

Interviewer: So you referenced the final clip and part of that clip did refer to the cutting of the Marsden Research Fund, mainly in the social sciences and arts area and that's what Sean was talking about towards the end there.

P1: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So what other cuts would you like to have seen beyond that?

P1: Well, not so much cuts – you got to have people have got to have transparency and they've got to be responsible. You can't just have... I would say that you would have to cut within the system that gives the money out – people who are not responsible.

To me, if you want someone to manage your money, the first thing I'd be doing is I'd be looking at "well where are they situated? Oh, I'm living in a rented house and I've got a brand new BMW and whatever," and I think "well you don't seem to be managing your money the way I would imagine it would be." You can't tell me how to do it.

So it's the same thing within the system that the people that are giving out all this funding for whale songs and whatever he was talking about – the people giving it out should be accountable and responsible. And if they're going to make cuts, I don't know, in that department there might be 500 people or maybe only 10 of them have got any money sense. You shouldn't be...

Interviewer: So who should decide that do you think?

P1: Well, the Government's supposed to be. If they're a department of the government, well then the government should be controlling that surely. That's what they... It's a bit like the council. The council seemed to be a bit stupid as well really because they... something needs fixing so they go and they get a quote from someone who they've used before and they'll say "Well it's going to cost such and such." And they say "Right yeah, well here we'll just write the cheque out."

And those people go and do it, but I know for a fact that they work out the quote and they figure out everything, take everything into account, and then they add 20% on the top of it as well. So their quote is there so that they can make a good living out of it, and then they chuck another 20% on, and then the council pays it.

It's the same with the government – why are they getting this money and saying "Well, 800,000 for whale songs"? Yeah okay, well we'll give the whale song some money, but they don't need that much and maybe they could do it with \$5,000. Someone who's got a bit of money sense, I think.

And so as I say, that's where I think that they could cut it, and the people that are responsible for managing our money inherently are the government. They're getting the taxpayers' money in, so they should be managing it properly, not just saying "Oh well, this department, you've got X amount to spend, just go and spend it how you want."

People should be made to be accountable in that management. In a normal business you would be – if you were the accountant in a business, you're accountable for everything that comes out. How would the supermarkets go if there was someone up there saying "Oh well, we'll just go and buy all those apples from the orchard out there. Oh but they're all rotten." "Oh doesn't matter."

People have got to be accountable for the jobs they do, and if they can't be, then someone above them needs to make them accountable or they shouldn't be there.

Interviewer: We'll go on to number four. Here we go.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, "Is Luxon National's biggest liability?"]

Interviewer: So isn't that coincidental that you came up with a similar point? So what did you think of that?

P1: Initially when they got in, because I was just so pleased to see Labour be put out at the election, and people had always been saying "two birds, two wings are the same bird, this guy's not going to be any better," and I said "well it doesn't really matter as long as they go. At least if we're in the same boat, well at least we got a different crew on there." So that was my feeling.

And so I was always a little wary when I heard stuff. As I say, I don't particularly watch the news, but I kept on hearing the media was bashing Luxon – it was like no matter what happened, they're always downing him, they're always downing him.

And as it's gone on, it does appear to me that he's just as woke as Jacinda is, because with a thing like that where the reply doesn't say anything, it just says "this... what is there's nothing here, we're not interested in your views, just fall back under your rock." And that's the attitude.

And possibly with Luxon, I'm sort of still out a little bit on it because I have seen a few things come in, whether they're coming from him or from other... just the parties in general that are moving towards... I can't remember what it was, something the other day. But one thing of course is he said right from the start "I'm not going to support Seymour and his bill, I won't support him," and he said it right from the start. So it's good that he's straight up and everything, but that's wokeism because "I'm not even willing to listen to it, I'm not even willing to read it first, I'm just not going to support you" because he doesn't want... he's supporting whatever the opposition is.

And that's the whole thing that I was talking about before about the wokeism thing. The whole thing with his treaties bill was not supported by the current government, and then the media got hold of it and the media really did the dirty on them. They just pushed against Seymour and they supported all the Māori activists, and then the whole thing just grew and all these Māori activists were ones that went along with it just because "oh well, we got to... oh or otherwise oh we're going to get something out of it."

And they just changed the whole thing of what Seymour was actually saying to say that Seymour... they just changed what it was that he was actually saying, and the media just carried on and just printed it all and said that there was this and this, and they fostered it.

So I think with Luxon, he's like Jacinda in the way – he's got his thing and he's not going to listen to anyone else. "You're going to do what I say or otherwise you can write in and you can complain and you can do this, but I'm not going to listen." And that's exactly what they did.

Interviewer: It's fascinating isn't it? The last thing I want to show you is not a clip, it's something that Winston... and Winston hasn't featured yet and he doesn't put out as much social media as Shane does.

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters' X.com post – definition of “woke”]

Interviewer: I see you laugh and nod, so what would you like to say about that?

P1: Well, I like his wit anyway, and it's nice to be the same thing how he puts it across. He can say it all – there's a little bit of wit in there but it's serious. And I do agree that that's the point that we were talking about before where the woke people – they won't listen. They have their ideologies, and my extension of that is they have their ideologies but they're not actually their ideologies. They're the ideologies that someone has told them and they feel like they should really go along with it.

Interviewer: And so who do you think has told them?

P1: Well, mostly because something I want to bring up at the end of it – mostly the television tells them. Media or television, particularly the television and the papers, whatever the media, the mainstream media. Because what I've noticed is everything you've shown me – it's only one-sided. It's from people who are saying about woke, but there isn't a balance in there because there's nothing from mainstream media. It's interesting.

Interviewer: What I wanted to examine was the way in which people use language to talk about the environment, the economy, and also to talk about the way in which to further their own objectives. So what I'm looking at is not so much the political message but the way in which it's conveyed.

P1: But there's still no... the language that the media uses is not in there, because like I would say this person's woke and the media will say you're an anti-vaxxer or a racist or whatever. So the language is whoever uses it, but what we're doing here is only from really one side – the people who are saying “well this, you're talking about the wokeness and what our perception of it is.”

But of course then you'll interview people who are from the other side who have been educated by the TV.

Interviewer: Well, so Winston did use the word fascist in there, so I wonder do you feel...?

P1: I feel like it's probably a word that's chucked in because as a get back at people that have called him names, so it's just a get back at people. Because that's what I think anyway – fascists really are... they're just words and they're all derogatory words to try and invoke some sort of feeling in the people who aren't a fascist or a woke, or even in those who are, they kind of laugh along or perhaps...

Interviewer: Yeah, well that's right and that's true.

P1: Because it's like I saw something the other day – you would know, you would have heard the TDS, Trump Derangement Syndrome?

Interviewer: Oh yes, I've heard of that, yeah.

P1: So that's all these people who no matter what... the woke people generally, they can never ever see any good in the person. All they can do is parrot what they've been saying for the last 10 years on the media, and so they all hate Trump. They don't really know why, but they will parrot all the things that they've read that said "we don't like Trump because..." So they're termed as having Trump derangement syndrome, but you... woke, you can't...

Interviewer: So Trump derangement syndrome is exhibited by people you would call woke, is that right?

P1: They would be woke people, but they would be woke people that exhibit it. But it's only because the woke people are the sort of people who will not think for themselves. They will only be governed by and they're influenced by what comes on TV – they're kind of educated by the TV.

And I've got a friend who's exactly like that. She's an American and she's 80, but at least when Trump got elected she said "I'm not looking at any media and stuff now and I will just wait and see." And she said she hates him, she absolutely does, but she said "I'm going to wait for a year and just see if all this stuff he's talking about whether it happens and whether it does change things."

So she is woke in her views, but she is prepared to... but there's an awful lot of people out there who don't.

But what I was going to say, and I said to Jill last night, because everything's rising up at the moment and I know that you used to work for Jacinda...

Interviewer: I did, yeah.

P1: But I think she's the worst thing that ever happened to the country. And [my spouse] and I, we are from experience – we don't like how she ran the country into the ground, we don't like things about it and everything. But I said, someone said or they were being interviewed on something, they said "maybe these people have got Ardern derangement syndrome" because I would struggle to see anything good about her. And people can say this, this and this, and I just cannot believe them.

So does that make me woke because I refuse to see and I would say no, well I've experienced the wrath of her policies and things like that, so I feel like I'm allowed to greatly dislike her.

Interviewer: What have you experienced?

P1: I've experienced the wrath of her policies. So I feel like I'm allowed to greatly dislike her.

Interviewer: That's probably a very good note for us to finish on. Thank you.

Transcript – Participant 2

Interviewed 9 June 2025

P2: My name is [name], I'm from Dannevirke. I'm 26 years old, lived in New Zealand most of my life, and yeah, that's about a good baseline summary.

Interviewer: Cool, cool. And what are you doing at the moment? Are you working or are you...?

P2: Yeah, I do a bit of everything, kind of in between at the moment. I'm actually trying to do online courses to just sort of upskill a little bit so I can go back into something that is a bit more long-term rather than just filling the shelves or whatever, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah, no, fair enough. So just to make it clear, you don't have to have any knowledge about any of this stuff. I'm not particularly interested in your voting habits. I'm just interested in what you think about the way in which these commentators are speaking. So rather than politics per se, it's the way people talk.

P2: Okay, yeah.

Interviewer: So we're going to start off with one of the most bombastic political speakers. His name is Shane Jones. You know of Shane Jones?

P2: No.

Interviewer: So he's the minister of resources in this coalition government.

P2: Yeah, okay. I've heard great things about the Minister of Resources, I just didn't have the name.

Interviewer: He's a New Zealand First – he's not really their deputy leader but he is in practice. They haven't given him that title and he's here speaking to the New Zealand First Convention. Okay, so I won't give him any more of an intro. I'll just leap right in.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: And that's our first clip.

P2: Interesting, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: So what was your reaction when you saw that?

P2: I find it very easy to imagine what it's like to be the guy at the podium.

Interviewer: Really?

P2: Yeah, I've always – especially with speech making and stuff – I've always been a public speaker. It's very easy for me to jump into a person's shoes when I see them talking like that. So this is a really interesting thing for me to do.

I think the performance first and foremost – you're in like the whole performance aspect. Yeah, well I mean energy, cadence–like inflections on his words, the way that he puts emphasis on the things that support him and the things that don't support him he puts negative inflections on.

I think my main feeling about all of that is it's a very shallow picture of a deep pond, you know? It's like there's a lot going on but it's almost as if... what tends to happen with me with politics in general is that people use conflicting ideas in order to rally people that are more on one side of the fence than the other. And so whatever is confusing or dangerous or weird or strange is put on the far side of the fence, and whatever is familiar and fits with... you know, like he's saying "screw the ideologies" and all of this sort of stuff, but he is one! So it's like there's an irony in that, you know?

And so he's presenting this idea and this ideology and his perspective on how things should go or are meant to be in a room full of people who obviously support those concepts, while using... I don't know, I'd consider it to be nonsense as an opposition to fuel the momentum of their thing. It's like I don't see how any of the things that he's talking about inhibits the things that they're doing.

And personally, as much as I don't want to be somebody who's always like "the environment, we can't live without it," so if it's affecting us or if what they're doing is affecting that and our opportunity to have that baseline, then you know it's a fair thing to challenge. And from where I'm standing, he's a good speaker for the most part. He seems like... I don't know if he's got something specific written down or not, but he used some loaded words and specific words as well throughout that to really make sure he didn't land too far on one side or the other, which is quite impressive.

Interviewer: Yeah, really perceptive. Were there any words in particular that you kind of thought "okay, that's a bit over the top" or...?

P2: I mean "green cling-on" was pretty... that is over the top. I think "woke tribe" – just very... used words that identified and created separation. That's what I felt throughout all of it – like there's two sides of people in this discussion and all you need to know is that you're on the side of the reasonable people if you're on my side, and if you're on that side, wacky–doo–dah crazy land, you know? Like using all of the confusing parts of those human problems or whatever you want to call it that's on that other side in order to just like make people giggle off the fact that obviously whatever his actions are have effects as well, you know?

P2: Yeah, so yeah, those are probably the main ones – "green cling-on" and "woke tribe."

Interviewer: I know for a little while there I wondered: is it Klingons like as in Star Trek, or is it cling, or is he trying to be clever and use it as both? Bit punny.

P2: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: And was there anything that surprised you about this? I mean, have you heard of this guy before? Have you seen him speak before?

P2: No, not really. I mean, I must admit that in terms of politics and stuff I tend to shy away – not because I don't think I'm capable of understanding it, just because it's scary. It's a lot of stuff and a lot of it is to do with listening to people like this talk, which hurts me because I don't understand how you can get in that position being so... I don't know.

I don't personally ... with politics, I just think it's crazy that we can have sides and separation, so it's real hard for me to invest in it because to me the whole point of politics is to serve the people, and it seems as though everybody's purpose in politics is to serve themselves, which is hard for me to invest in. So I don't.

I probably won't know many of the people that speak in these clips and stuff, but I do know my own internal moral compass and I can tell when somebody's talking because they have an agenda. And yeah, I think me and that guy have lived different lives and I wouldn't get up there and talk like that.

Interviewer: Well, you know, to be fair, the New Zealand First Party is generally a party of much older people.

P2: Okay, so that explains why they're clapping. Yeah, they'll be like older than me.

Interviewer: So given that I think you've summed that up really well, I think we might... I'm taking you through a little pathway of anti-woke discourse, and of course as I think I might have mentioned to you, I was looking at it from the point of view of environmentalism, right? So the next clip also talks about woke environmentalism.

P2: I really like doing this. This is interesting.

Interviewer: It is so interesting. I find the whole thing so interesting. Like everybody I talk to has got quite an interesting different perspective. Here's an excerpt of Michael Laws on a fringe radio station called The Platform. I don't know if you're aware of it.

P2: No.

Interviewer: It's very much an anti-woke discourse type radio station. So anyway, Michael Laws – he's a bit before your time as well, but he was a mayor of Whanganui and he's also been a politician in central government, all very much on the right. Okay, here he is – looking great.

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

Interviewer: So that's Michael Laws, all right, talking about beetles and frogs.

P2: Yeah, yeah. He is, he's also talking about money, which I find interesting. It seems as though... I mean, I don't have a great understanding of lefts and rights. It's probably because all the lines are blurred these days, but I think in my brain I typically think of left is quite emotional and right is quite practical, and for whatever reason that's just how it is in my brain.

And I identify him with people that I know that care a lot about money, and it's not that they care about money because they want to be wealthy or because they want to be above anybody in any sort of way. It's typically because that's become their identifier and how they look after themselves and the people that they care about.

So what I got from that listening to him is that he has come to a conclusion in his own mind based on the information that he's been given that we're in a position right now financially – a dire position – that calls for all consideration for anything outside of the budget to be discarded. That's what I got from that.

Interviewer: Did you believe it?

P2: I believed him. He talked, he spoke in a way that was engaging and that had practical points. I believed that he believed it. But for me, all I see is... I just... he just seems scared. And I think that is quite common within not only political communications but just in general. It's like we have a lot of panic culture and a lot of it comes around just acknowledging or expressing to people constantly that there is a shortage or that there's not enough or there's a budget or this and that.

His is the budget, and he's become so concerned about that – and that's his world and that's the way his mind works – that he thinks that... whether or not people understand that or not, I think that he's just got a grip of it in a way that he goes “this is the solution” and he's not willing to let it go or be overrun by something that is taking away from where the money needs to be going, which is what he would consider to be your immediate stuff – the providing for our people like he's saying, or looking after ourselves.

And conservation and all of that is a lot of money going towards looking after things that don't affect him in his day-to-day life in his home, which is of course persuasive and engaging. And I do have sentiment towards that because I think that it's... yeah, it's important to acknowledge where the circle of concern and circle of control are getting separated and you're just wanting to fix these things and keep these things safe because it's the right thing to do, but not acknowledging that people who decide what the right thing to do is are in a tough situation right now.

Interviewer: Do you think he is saying that because it is the right thing to do?

P2: I think he's saying it because I think that's what he believes. I think his belief and his faith in money being directed in the right way to the right sources... I think he believes will allow for, in time, those things to become relevant again. Because I don't think in any part of that, from what I heard – obviously you know, you watch something once – but from what I picked up, it seemed as though he wasn't saying that these things don't matter at

all. He's saying these things don't matter compared to these things, which I think there's a big difference in those two things.

But if you were listening to that as somebody who thinks those things don't matter at all, you're going to support them, you know? But if you have an inkling of or you know you personally lean towards the environmental side, it's a lot easier to just go "this guy just cares about money." But what I saw was that he's in a position where that's his perspective based on the information that he has and trying to do the best to look after people, which is what it sounds like he's doing.

And people and the environment are so separate in his mind that he's like "We can't worry about the bugs," you know? And that's where he goes to. He always used language that made the environmental problem seem small – like a blind frog or a little beetle. "There's lots of beetles when we need there to be when I'm making a point, but as soon as it's like "oh, you know, this one's important," no it's not, there's heaps of them."

Like he really minimised the environmental aspect and the effect of it or the significance, the importance – use a million words there – but really was just trying to bring it back to like "look, you can worry about the bugs in the grass and that, or you can worry about looking after Kiwis and the people," which is... yeah, I can see why you can see.

Interviewer: So he laboured the word "kaitiaki."

P2: Yeah, he said guardian, but it's caregiver, yeah, yeah, that exactly.

Interviewer: He talked about pre-European Māori and how they... and creatures that had become extinct while they were here on this island. Who do you think that would appeal to, that type of rhetoric?

P2: Yeah, well it's definitely leaning down a racist path. I think... I don't know. I mean, just in terms of my interpretation of those things is that everybody wants an explanation for why things are the way that they are, and moreover people need justification for why they believe in what they believe in. And that's where comparison comes in, because it's easier to look at "well, this is this and this is that," and so which one do I choose? But it's always a spectrum. There's always a bit of all of it.

So him referencing that aspect of pre-European Māori on this island was, in my opinion, a very easy thing to grab at that helps solidify his point rather than something that's actually significant to what he's talking about. And I think that it's again, it's that separation thing. He's inviting separation and he's like "Well, just so you know, it's like these people aren't the be-all and end-all perfect people, you know? It's like they've done these things and Europeans have done these things."

I think in a way that sort of comes from that... as like a Pākehā, sometimes you feel as though you're like the bad guy, and so you don't want to be seen as like just this evil entity. And so people like that try to use examples such as Māori creating 50 extinct species as some sort of like comfort or leverage or excuse to be like "well, just reminding people like hey, no, like everything wasn't a perfect paradise when we got here, you know?"

And I can see how that can be... that can definitely be considered persuasive, yeah, and it can lead people down like a pretty negative path. But I think... yeah, that's the thing. Whether that's his intention? I don't know. I'd need to know more about him and hear more about him.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. There was one thing that I picked up before and we talked about it off camera, and that was about the performance aspect because you yourself... you've told me that you're a performer and so that was the first thing you picked up when you looked at Shane Jones. So I wondered if you wanted to talk about that a little bit more.

P2: Yeah, well I mean, I think because I rap and I sing and I do my own podcast and on camera here and there... and we brought it up originally because you're asking about my comfort with it and just making sure I'd be okay for you to share it and all of that. And it's... you know, it's not a bother for me because I have that experience.

Interviewer: Well, I won't be sharing it. I'll only be sharing it with you, right? Only with you, and then once you've approved it I delete it.

P2: Cool, yeah. But anyway, it... like watching somebody else put on a performance, it's pretty obvious to me. But it's not necessarily a lie. I mean, that's... but I guess part of a performance is, so it's sort of both and both. But I guess the main word there is probably preparation. Like I can tell that there's been time put into avoiding certain words and using other ones. And yeah, what was his name? Shane? Yeah, Shane – that's why Shane is using some words specifically. He uses some words, that guy.

Interviewer: We're going to go on to the next clip. This is my longest clip. It's about three minutes long. It's a guy called Sean Plunket. He's an ex-journalist. He's now also on The Platform, which is like a fringe radio station. Now we're going to have "anti-woke" discourse. So this is Sean Plunket who is talking about "why we wage war on woke."

Okay, okay. So see what you think of this.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform “Why we wage war on woke”]

Interviewer: So now he ran through a few different things there. He talked about street cleaning and then he went on to TVNZ, and then he went on to academic research funding. So and that the title of this is “why we wage war on woke.” So did you have any thoughts? I noticed you laughed at one point.

P2: Yeah, well because it's funny. It's like when somebody talks about a disabled whale in a wheelchair, it's like you're going to giggle. I'm a big fan of comedy, in terms of people taking it to the extreme and like being able to do that. He did that quite well.

He didn't seem like... he seemed pretty genuine. Like he didn't seem like he had a script or anything. He was just sort of in his honesty to say “I don't actually know what that is.” I appreciate that. I think that... and yeah, he... I don't know, he didn't seem like a bagger for me anyway. He just seemed like somebody who was kind of looking at it all going “This

stuff's crazy, you know?" Like, and putting millions of dollars towards it is pretty questionable, and I think he's got a point in some of those places from my perspective.

But in terms of like... he's talking about funding and there not being any restrictions for Māori if they want to get funding from councils and stuff like that, and then saying that that had something to do with now making it so that everybody has to have some sort of diversity within it. And I think that that trait, that line of thought is quite scary because it's actually... it's counterintuitive to focus solely on trying to create diversity because that's not what diversity is.

It's like if you force it, then it's enforced and therefore it's not diverse. It's chosen specifically to be diverse, but that's not what diversity is. It's like who's good at the job? They get it, you know? But people are imperfect and it's a confusing world.

But yeah, in terms of his language and the way he spoke and stuff, it seemed as though he obviously is pretty... he's pretty sure about it being confusing, he's pretty sure that he doesn't understand it, and he's pretty sure that there's a lot of money being wasted on stuff that he doesn't think matters in terms of relative significance. That's kind of what I got.

Interviewer: So he came across to you as this is something he genuinely felt rather than something he's saying because I don't know, he's got an ideological basis for it or his radio station is being funded by someone who... or something like that. But he came across as genuine to you?

P2: Yeah, yeah. And I think what it... the genuine aspect, it wasn't so much like he doesn't have an agenda or he doesn't have an ideology. It's not that. It's just that I didn't feel a lot of like restriction in terms of what he was saying. I didn't feel that performance-based aspect that we talked about with Shane. He just seemed like he was way more just being like "Here's the information in front of me and I'm now translating this through this medium that I have in order to speak about it."

Yes, it's definitely on that writer's side of the fence in terms of his... he's not very woke or PC in any way. But I don't know how to word this right, but I'll try. I feel as though there's people who will come across as rude or arrogant or anti-woke merely because they don't understand or don't... they can't justify the significance that we put on the importance of those people feeling good about where they're at.

And I don't agree or disagree. It's a very confusing topic. But it's like more so as if he's just like "look, I'm not saying that these people don't deserve to be people or whatever. He's just like making everybody else have to be that way is wrong," you know? Because the whole foundation of being a part of a community like LGBTQI+ whatever is all about being who you are. So in order to force what you are onto other people and like say that they have to conform to you now is only becoming the problem you're trying to solve.

So I think he's way more coming from a position of just like "you shouldn't... like if I have a company and I'm going for funding, I should be able to do it without having to change

what I have going on because it doesn't fit diversity expectations." It's a strange piece of law to write in or a strange expectation to have on people. Not saying it doesn't come from an understandable place, but yeah, I don't think it's the answer.

But yeah, he seemed real genuine. He seemed casual. He talked well. He was like... I could tell that when he talked to Ben, the other guy, and he's like "We still talking about street clean?" He's like "Just wait man." Like I could tell he was just trying to get it across to this kid who looked a little bit younger, and the kid's like "this is such a big topic" and like there's no... I don't know, maybe young people are just a little bit more tired in terms of talking about it and trying to figure it out.

Interviewer: I mean, how do you think... because these are mainly older guys I'm showing you.

P2: Yeah, yeah. So yeah, I think that there's... you gain a certain level of acceptance from a certain age generation that I'm not saying isn't present in older generations, but is more common in younger generations because we're so confronted with so much stuff that confuses us beyond explanation that there's only so many of those things we can commit our time and energy into fully understanding. And the safest option when you don't fully understand something is to not have an opinion or to just stand back or be agreeable, which is I personally think the worst option.

But like, to a degree, saying that you don't disagree is a good way to, you know, just get your space from it. And it's not because you might not have life... yeah, well I mean, it's I think more just not make somebody else feel as though theirs is wrong because you don't understand it. I think that's a better way to put it.

It's like being grown up in the time and stuff that we have been and continuing to... and kids that are younger than us now as well. I see it like... I barbered full-time for a few years and you get kids coming into the barber chair and they're quite young and they chat away, but it's very fascinating to see the changes in the way that they carry themselves. And a lot of it has to do with how much information they have and how much they're being stimulated.

Interviewer: And so, where do you think all that information is coming from?

P2: Yeah, definitely the internet. And I think the thing is that to kind of bring it around full circle is that a guy like this and older guys like this that... they have a practical mind and they're very focused on trying to figure things out one step at a time, which is obviously how you do everything and it's great to watch. But I get tired and it's tiresome to watch people talk about things in a light that isn't productive or isn't actually focused on the real source of the things. And I think that's where younger people find their exhaustion is that they're watching older people or just watching people in general discuss ideas that don't come to a conclusion, that don't fix anything, that don't change anything.

Interviewer: Does that fall into that category?

P2: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He's just talking about like something that he doesn't understand. Yeah, he's like "Here's a problem and it's weird and I don't know what to do about it, but now it's your problem." It's like "Well, thanks man, but I'm not going to listen to that." You know? I don't care. It's like "I got enough, I got enough problems. I need yours."

Interviewer: That's awesome. This one is shorter. This is an interesting one in which a guy called Duncan Garner, who you probably... who's kind of a similar age to the last two guys. He's also has chops as a journalist and was in the parliamentary press gallery for years and so on. Anyway, he's recorded this clip about Luxon, our current prime minister, asserting he's too woke.

P2: He's saying Luxon's too woke?

Interviewer: See what you think.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

P2: So I think it's easy to be a radio broadcaster and pick one thing and make a buzz story. That's what I think about that. I mean, to represent Christopher Luxon based on a message that was sent that probably wasn't even typed by him is pretty ridiculous. And to use that as like a point of his character is just outrageous. It's like...

Interviewer: Why do you think he did it?

P2: I think it's because he believes in that and just wanted to... I mean, I... okay, to rewind. Honestly, I think he's just on a radio show and they just need to fill time. Who listens to the radio anymore, you know? Not as many people. And so they got to do something, and if it's not going to engage people, it's not going to happen, which means it needs to be something that hits home. And nobody perks ears up like Luxon. And so it's like "Luxon being woke" – attention, you know?

So no, none of that had meaning, worth, or value to me whatsoever. I don't buy it. No, not even a little bit. It was rubbish. And it's like I'm not saying that what he's talking about doesn't have significance and there's not, you know, a lot of stuff that could be discussed or talked about there, but that's not productive whatsoever. It's like... yeah, strange, very strange.

Interviewer: What interest do you think that the right-wing media would have in declaring Luxon to be too woke?

P2: Seems... yeah, attention grabbing. That's it, yeah. For me anyway. Like I don't... I don't know, maybe my head's not as deep in it, but I just... yeah, it's just dribble.

Interviewer: Do you think that Luxon is as bad as Jacinda?

P2: I've never met him. I know this sounds real silly, but like that's how I weigh up most of my people that I, you know, like... yeah, I don't know that guy, you know? I've never met him before. It's like... and I'm not saying that you can't, you know, give a good public

personality and whatever, and people can create opinions based on that, and that people's actions are often reflect their personality. But like I said, I don't pay enough attention to politics.

Everything I've heard about him, he's a dick. Excuse my French. I don't know if I can say that, but...

Interviewer: No, totally fine.

P2: Yeah, I mean, I haven't heard good things. And I think it's not... I mean, I'm not saying that it's not him, but I think that a lot of it has to do with... it's just my opinion, but politics in general are very much just a reminder to everybody constantly that there are people that are doing something, supposed to be doing a job, and getting paid a lot of money to do it. And you, who isn't doing that job and isn't getting paid a lot of money or whatever the case may be, are reminded that you need change.

And whenever there's a new leader, it's like "this person better do it" or "this person" or "this person." And, you know, I'm not saying that he's doing a good job. I'm not saying he's doing a bad job. I'm just saying that the job itself is kind of... it's not really a job, is it? Like they don't do a lot. Like in the last however many years, like it's all damage control management.

And from my perspective, politics is just like "the last guy screwed up, so I'm going to do this." And then three years later it's like "sorry, I didn't do that." They're like "we'll get a new guy." That's not productive or anything. It's like that guy's radio interview. It's just words and dribble and stuff to keep you coasting by to make you feel like somebody's on your side or supports you in some sort of way, which is... yeah, it's not productive to a society. I think people deserve better.

Interviewer: So do you find woke as a term... do you find it negative or pejorative? Do you find it an insult? Or if someone said to you "oh, [P2] is woke," what would you think?

P2: I'd say "yeah, yeah, I'm pretty woke, yeah, for sure." I mean, I think that it depends on how you define it. I think woke... like you're saying, if you're using it in the context of somebody who's talking about people that are very unrealistic and detached from reality and think that they're cats... yeah, oh yeah, I don't think that that's what I would describe as woke. I wouldn't. I'd say that that's, you know, in again my opinion, I think that's borderline a sickness, you know?

It's like people are a collection of the experiences that they have, and everybody over the last 50 to 100 years have been having experiences, and those experiences have affected people. And the constant restraint of life and money and all of those things add up to people having lifetimes that are just terrible. And then those people have children, and then those children grow up with the only thing that they can do is stay quiet, eat food, sit in the corner and... "poke, it's like I'm a cat, you know? I need to be patted, I need to be looked after, but I need to stay quiet, I need to stay out of the way. It's like dad loves the

cat but he beats me.” It’s like very confusing things that could turn into a kid thinking they’re a cat.

And it’s a lot more than Christopher Luxon in a message from a reliever early childhood teacher is going to achieve. So I think that when it comes to being woke, the best thing that anyone can do is just take it back to the basics, you know? Be kind, sharing is caring, and look after one another. Anything beyond that is just like a byproduct of mistakes we’ve made in the past that we think we need to fix based on the surface level problems and not actually rewind and just be like “well, you know, why is it that people feel as though too much money is being spent over here? Or why is it that people feel like we shouldn’t care about other people’s, you know, sexual proclivities?”

It’s because a lot of people are in a position where they’re just struggling to get by, and so they need something to be mad at other people spending energy on because it’s not being spent on them. Yeah, I don’t know. I just hope... I really hope that with stuff like that and people on those radio shows and the guys that talk in those sorts of ways, I hope that they don’t... I hope they’re aware of what they’re doing, you know? Because like you said...

Interviewer: Do you think they might be?

P2: I think that they’re... I don’t think anybody truly understands the effect that they have on everybody else a lot of the time. But I... yeah, it’s like I said, the guy on the radio show, it’s not his fault. It’s his job. He’s got to talk about what he’s got to talk about. The politician, you could argue it’s not his fault either. He’s just trying to fit the mould to make sure he stays on the right side of the fence so he can keep his pay check. But yeah, when it comes to politics, I think it’s more to do with the people than the politicians.

Interviewer: Awesome. The final thing I’d like you to look at, and it’s only quick... and it’s great, we’re still well within time. So I’m going to get you to look at a graphic that Winston Peters put up on his Facebook page.

P2: I know that guy. You know that guy?

Interviewer: Yeah, okay. How do you know Winston?

P2: Who doesn’t know Winston, man? I don’t know. Something about it, he’s just always been a name, you know? He’s been around since Uncle Helen.

Interviewer: He’s been around, he’s been around a long time, that’s for sure.

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters’ X.com post – definition of “woke”]

P2: Yeah, yeah. Obviously it’s taking the piss in a lot of ways. Like it’s... yeah, I see that as comedy. Like I don’t see that as a statement from a politician. That’s comedian with a great joke, you know? And it’s not funny in terms of the real world, you know, things. But when I detach myself from it and I just go “here’s a dude who’s like a politician spending his time on Twitter writing out a false definition of a word to try agitate people,” it’s like

that's a joke. That's not... what is that? But okay, if we're talking about the words he's using, I'm just...

Interviewer: No, I'm most interested in your reaction. I don't need you to... you don't need to go and analyse it. I'm really interested in what your reaction was.

P2: No, that's a joke. That's funny. I look at that and I laugh and I go "Jesus" and I keep going, you know? Like that's... and I think when it comes to the words and stuff that he's using in terms of all of that makes me feel like he's... it's like I said before about how people that are on that sort of side of that practical side will always take the extreme version of the other side in order to like justify why it's ridiculous to be anywhere near that side, you know?

And his version of it is people that... like he says like "fascist, dumb enough to find injustice in everything except their own behaviour." It's like there's validity to some of that to some degree in some people, and especially the virtue signallers. Like there's truth in that – people will virtue signal in order to make themselves look like they're the good guy when they don't even know what the person that they're supporting is actually talking about. And that's dangerous.

So I understand that, but it makes me laugh because it's like at the same time, a lot of those people do have good points. Not all of them are extremists and some of them aren't virtue signalling. It's just what they genuinely support.

Interviewer: So what kind of reaction do you think he would have been looking for? And from whom?

P2: I think based on this being one of the only people out of all of this that I've noticed, I think he's very good at saying stuff that makes people look his way. And I think that's what he wanted and he's achieved it because that's funny. People will be like "Wah!" And you're either going to you're either going to laugh or be pissed off, but either way you're giving it attention. And so Winston Peters... he's good at what he does, absolutely. That is funny.

Interviewer: Just to finish off because we're just... I'm keeping all my interviews to under an hour, which you'll be relieved about. I was interested if there's anything else that you wanted to add... I mean, which is not connected with these interviews we've just looked at. Anything you might have observed recently, anything that made you feel annoyed recently that might be aligned to this type of thing, particularly as you have an environmental bent, right? And particularly as you're interested in that side of things.

P2: No, you're good. I got something. I think food, water, and shelter should be free. That's what I think. Yeah, that's what my podcast is about.

Whenever I look at politicians, that exhaustion sets in, and the reason is because like I mentioned, there's always a surface level version of the problem and that seems to be all anyone focuses on. But for me, the biggest problem and the only problem really with

all of this is that some people don't have access continually without stress to food, water, and shelter.

If we can provide those things for people, I think that all of this nonsense is just... it becomes fun and games past that point because the only reason that any of this has significance, in my opinion, is because it affects people's livelihoods. But if you can create infrastructure that supplies people with that livelihood – not in a way of just giving the money like... I mean genuinely just providing food for people, open markets, you know, government funded that supply everybody with the means in order to be alive – I think that's when all of this becomes a joke for everybody. They go "I can't believe Winston's still talking about gay people. It's like 'that's funny'," you know?

And then it changes all of these discussions and the effect of politicians and the constant fear-mongering just disappears because what are you afraid of? You have a home, you have food, and you have water. It's like if you have those things, then the effect of this on people and the amount of manipulation that people within those positions of power are capable of is minimized by a lot. And that's just... that's my opinion on the world and I'll keep it to myself, but I'm going to keep talking to people about it and see what happens.

It's obviously oversimplified. It feels like a boy solution to a man's world, but I think that, you know...

Interviewer: What's your podcast called?

P2: It's called The Conversation Concept. I've done 15 episodes so far. I've actually been in a bit of a cold spell last few weeks because I just... yeah, life gets a lot sometimes. And it's a pretty heavy topic to talk about because as soon as you bring it up, everybody wants to go to this stuff. Everyone wants to talk about the things that are scary and the things that are confusing and the reasons why stuff won't work.

And I don't know whether that's just how we're wired. If it's a survival mechanism, but honestly, it's really hard when you are having that conversation all the time with people to keep your feet on the ground and be happy with where things are at. That's probably the hardest part in general about wanting change.

Whenever people want change, we tend to create an expectation which we tie to our belief, and we are let down whenever the change doesn't happen or doesn't happen fast enough for us. And so I guess the lesson I'm trying to learn through it all is to be okay with how things are and realize that change is gradual and that I would much rather spend a lifetime on a change that's worth it than spend a second listening to this guy talk about this shit.

Interviewer: Thank you [P2].

P2: You're a good interviewer, so thank you for having me.

Transcript – Participant 3

Interviewed 11 June 2025

Interviewer: Thanks for being part of the study. We’re going to leap right in, but if you can just pick up a thread of what you were just talking about.

P3: We’ve been talking about how two things are happening in the world right now. One is the bastardisation of language. So words no longer mean what they really mean – they have become inflated terms. And the other one is that if we can actually stop people from understanding language, if we can dumb down the language and make it meaningless, wipe out the language –then people will become more compliant. They’ll buy into the BS, and that’s exactly what we’re seeing happening from so many of the radicals, so many of the groups that are out there pushing agendas for their power.

Interviewer: And that’s a perfect spot at which to look at our first clip. Shane Jones is speaking to the New Zealand First Convention which was last October.

P3: I believe I probably heard this speech.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: So that of course is just an excerpt from what was a –

P3: Oh yeah, it was a much longer – yeah, 12 to 15 minutes long. It was brilliant, yeah.

Interviewer: So you’re familiar with the speech, so I was about to ask what’s your first reaction?

P3: But of course – oh, it’s just absolute delight. I mean total enjoyment of what I like about the current Shane Jones as opposed to the Shane Jones of last century is that he’s not mincing –and again I think that’s it, he doesn’t mince words anymore. He calls out what he sees to be the woke bullshit, the twisting of – he’s not afraid to say that just because this expert says this doesn’t mean I have to buy into it because it doesn’t make sense to me and I have a life and – I think he’s approaching 70.

Interviewer: I’m not sure, I think so.

P3: Yes. He’s: “I’ve got a lifetime of experience, I’ve lived in areas with abject poverty. I don’t have to buy into any of the crap that you’re putting out, and all I see is the destructive harm that’s coming from every single solitary decision that Labour made in the last six years, that National made in the six years before that. I’ve had enough and I’m gonna call it as I see it.” And he is just totally and completely – there’s probably half a dozen politicians in the world that are saying exactly the same things that Shane is: that climate change is a rort, that transgenderism is a rort, that identity politics is a rort –yeah, and he is calling it out wherever he sees it. And the whole racist thing. I mean I would love

to have seen back in the '70s when the whole critical race theory started to infiltrate the universities how he would have reacted, because at that stage of the game I think he would have bought into it, but he's woken up.

We didn't know for a long time – and I mean again I've always recycled, God, even before I came to this country I've always watched the amount of garbage, I've tried to limit my waste –but I can't buy into the fact that it's fossil fuels and what you and I necessarily are doing that's causing the climate change because I watch right now as the Pacific Ocean has lots of volcanoes blowing up under the sea, and you cannot tell me that's the result of mankind burning fossil fuels because it ain't got nothing to do with it. It's mother nature going [*gives the fingers*].

Interviewer: So you mentioned that there are a number of politicians, you said five or six, who are saying the things that...

P3: And like it or not, Trump is one of them.

Interviewer: And so who are they?

P3: Trump, Nigel Farage, Orbán –oh yeah –what's the Polish new Polish prime minister? Oh, the new one that's just been elected. Yeah, yes, I can't remember his name.

Interviewer: And Poilievre?

P3: No, Poilievre is in a different class. He's – I don't believe half of what comes out of Poilievre's mouth. He is a typical Canadian politician of the conservative nature, and let me tell you I grew up with them. You know, my mom was an avid – well I actually sometimes wonder whether my mother was a liberal or what not, but I grew up in Justin Trudeau's father's lifetime. I grew up with bombs in our mailboxes and I lived in Ottawa, so you know I lived in a world that was very different. I can't see a Canadian politician outside of Danielle Smith, and Danielle Smith, she concerns me a little bit, but boy what she's willing to stand up and fight a lot of this – so Danielle Smith, she's the Alberta premier.

Interviewer: Okay, and so that's four – Trump, Farage, Orbán, Danielle Smith. Was there another one?

P3: Well, the Polish one and the Argentine one –what's his name, the one that's just taken a chainsaw to everything else? Oh yes, of course, the hair! I see him, I can see his face. Yeah, I can see –Milei –yeah. And I mean when he stood up at the UN and said “You're a bunch of bastards who are causing all of these problems, and if you continue with this stupidity” –so he's another one.

The other one who I kind of –well there's two women who I kind of like. One is the current president of Italy, and don't ask me her name.

Interviewer: Meloni.

P3: Yeah. And the other one – and again I don’t know enough about them, but you get a sense that they’re going “What’s going on?” And I’m sorry, I’ve got to put Netanyahu in this – okay – while he’s not calling out a lot of that stuff, he is very firm in “I see where the problem is, I’m going to address the problem, and I don’t really care what anybody else thinks about it. This problem needs to be addressed: Hamas needs to go!”

And the other one is the French one that they’ve just banned for five years from running for politics –

Interviewer: Yes, Marine Le Pen.

P3: Right, oh yeah. So it’s only the Polish one that we... Well, I’ll look him up.

Interviewer: That’s great. So now we’re going to go into a media clip. I don’t know if you heard of this. This is fringe media – so these are the kind of people who are repeating the same messages as the kind of message you just heard from Shane.

P3: Okay, so which one is this?

Interviewer: The Platform.

P3: Oh, love! I’m a member of the YouTube channel, so I watch everything that Shane and Michael put out.

Interviewer: So this is Michael Laws.

P3: Oh okay, which one? You’ll have seen – God, he’s put out so many good ones. He is just brilliant.

Interviewer: So here’s him on woke environment.

P3: Oh yes, okay.

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

Interviewer: Familiar?

P3: No, I’ve seen that. I’ve seen that.

Interviewer: So let’s start with the word he uses – the word “wokery” – what’s that mean to you?

P3: It’s PC gone stupid. So you remember political correctness back at the end of last century? Well out of that came wokeness, and it’s just – it’s the way people who have no confidence in themselves beat up on everybody else and call them out and will not defend their arguments. But it’s a way of getting people together who are so insecure, inadequate, uncertain, and just bashing everybody else over their head who is confident. I don’t know if you’ve ever read *The Fountainhead*?

Interviewer: Sorry?

P3: Ayn Rand, have you ever read any of her books?

Interviewer: I haven't read any Ayn Rand, no, but I am aware of her work.

P3: Okay, so in *Atlas Shrugged* there's a whole section where what's happening is "Oh, but this person needs this and we need to pay people according to their needs," and you know – that whole kindness trope of Jacinda – and needless to say I don't like Jacinda – that whole trope of "Oh, but we've got to be kind, oh we can't hurt anybody's feelings, oh we can't" –it's all the "can'ts." And I'm a very firm believer in anytime you have a word that you have to put "not" after or the apostrophe "t" after, you're actually embedding in your mind that there's – that's what it has to be, so...

Interviewer: What's that, sorry?

P3: Because the brain does not recognize "nots." Okay, it doesn't recognize a negative – it only recognizes a positive, which is why they shout so loud. It's because it's all negative and they're trying to enforce the negative, but you can't enforce a negative because the brain doesn't live in that space. And so you've got this whole wokeness which is all about trying to get people to see the world other than – and again there's a section of them that want to obliterate mankind, that only want a certain segment of mankind. There's another segment that literally –the only thing they care about, and again come back to *Animal Farm* and the bloody pigs –"Oh, we're all equal, but some of us are more equal" – and we see that, you know, happening in Russia and with the oligarchs and whatnot. So yeah, the whole thing: "woke" is just a term that is easy to apply, but what it really means is people fighting for control of their environment by making everybody kowtow to their needs.

Interviewer: Right.

P3: And it's a weird – I mean I've been watching Andrew Doyle with his new book *The End of Woke* and I don't believe for a minute woke has ended. And he actually says at the end of one of his interviews, "Well yeah, we're talking about the end of woke, but the question is – what's coming next? And how lethal will that be?" And I got to agree with him because I watch the PC movement – hey, I am a flower child, so I watch the – you know, we suddenly became what we were protesting back in the '60s. And so in the '70s we got married, we had kids, we protest – we still had a little element of it, but by and large we became the system. And that's when PC started, and we started to go "Oh, but you have to do this and you have to do that, and this is what" – and roles got more defined and whatnot.

Then in the '80s we started to go "Oh, I don't want to be a housewife, I want to be more." And then suddenly "Oh well, you need to go out to work." It's like "Oh really?" So what happens to my kids? "Oh well, they can be the product of the –" And we started to look and we started to blame, and as we've gotten more "it's his fault," forgetting that there's three pointing back at us, the worse we've actually become. And so we now live in a world

where –and I had to laugh, one of Jacinda’s interviews was “Oh, but you have to take responsibility for yourself.” And I’m sitting there going – and I think she was talking to Oprah or Colbert – and I’m sitting there and it was on Family First with Bob, and Bob’s going “You have to take responsibility for yourself, shit happens! When is she going to...?”

Interviewer: So this is Bob McCoskrie of Family First?

P3: [*nods*] And well, the video was only released yesterday, so you may not have had a chance, but he literally looks at certain of the interviews and on *Straight Talk* last night he played the clip where she’s “Oh, but you have to take responsibility and you have to not blame anybody,” and she’s going –and then he plays the speech where she’s standing up during one of the COVID things and going “But if you go out, you’re going to kill somebody.” And it’s like “Okay.”

Interviewer: That’s interesting. Wow, you certainly are across your media, that’s for sure.

P3: Oh, I live on YouTube. I spend more hours on YouTube than is sensible.

Interviewer: Okay, so YouTube would be the main –

P3: YouTube is – I don’t watch TV. Every once in a while the TV goes on, but very rarely. Yeah, but no, I live on YouTube and I concentrate very much on – like as I said, I follow The Platform, I follow Family First, I’m subscribed to New Zealand First, I’m subscribed to ACT, I’m subscribed to four Canadian networks, I’m subscribed to about four British networks. I pick and choose what I listen to from the States, but I go across those countries. Every once in a while something comes up about Scotland because my husband was born in Scotland, so every once something comes up about Scotland – and I’ll watch that. Oh, and I’ve got a Scottish person I follow as well.

Interviewer: Do you engage with Reality Check Radio at all?

P3: I have a challenge with Reality Check Radio in that often times it doesn’t come across on my YouTube channels, so – and I don’t really listen to radio. I mean the TV goes on in the morning and it goes off at night and when I’m out obviously, but yeah, I have listened to Reality Check Radio. Every once in a while something comes up from Reality Check Radio and I’ll pay attention to it, but it’s not something that I follow.

I try and look at the opposite views. So I have a grandchild – my eldest grandchild declared 10 years ago that he was a she. Very much an incel. But I needed to understand what was going on and how it moved, so I’m a very big follower of Genspect and everything that’s come out from Genspect, Alliance for Responsible Citizenship. So I follow causes, and I probably always have. I mean I even as a kid I followed causes, but yeah, that’s kind of the space I live in. So I look at – and again climate change – I will listen to the antis, the pros, the cons. I sometimes have great difficulty listening to the pros because they are so full of BS, but I try and balance so I get a little bit. I try and follow a couple of trans people, but they say they’re transsexual, they’re not trans women or transmen, they’re transsexual, and some of them are absolutely brilliant. And they see

that what's happening, particularly what's happening to kids, is so wrong, and they sit in that space.

But I've lost contact basically with that grandchild because 10 years ago that grandchild said "Oh, you know why I'm not talking to you anymore?" I was like "Well actually I don't." I don't care how you dress, how you act, you will never be a woman, you will always be a man. I don't care whether you get your dick cut off, you'll be – and you're now a medical patient for the rest of your life. I want two things: I want you to be happy and I want you to be doing something that you love, and if you can't do that –but they couldn't cope with that. And as a result of me coming out and supporting Genspect and the Women's Rights Party and a whole bunch of other things, my elder son has decided I can't meet my youngest grandchild because I am "too full of hate."

His problem. My grandson loses out on some wonderful loving grandparents, but that's sad. Yeah.

Interviewer: I'm sorry about that.

P3: Oh well, that's just – that's life. I mean that's been going on now for two years nearly.

Interviewer: So why do you prefer Michael to Sean Plunket?

P3: I guess because I had a major argument with Sean back in 1989. I've never gotten over his – he only wants to see sometimes what he wants to see, whereas Michael tends to be a little more open-minded.

P3: So in '89 I was the New Zealand representative for an organization called Multilevel Marketing International, and Sean was working for –what was it called, the programme – *Morning Report*? No, no, no, *Fair Go*.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

P3: And they were making out that every multi-level marketing company was a pyramid scheme. Well, okay, so I have a little bit of bias again. I listen to Sean every broadcast I can.

Interviewer: So this is my longest clip and it's only 3 minutes long, but he's talking about why we wage war on woke, and you've probably heard it.

P3: I have, yeah.

Interviewer: He takes three examples – I have cut it down, it was quite a long interview.

P3: Yeah, it was 20-some odd minutes, yeah.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform “Why we wage war on woke”]

Interviewer: So I hasten to add that I am not funded by the Marsden fund; I am entirely self-funded.

P3: Well, for a Masters you would be. It's the PhDs that sometimes – and again I'm Massey is my alumni, it's also my granddaughter's alumni. And when we went to [name]'s graduation two years ago – three years ago now, oh jeez – and we were listening to the PhD papers. This is in science, so this is STEM because she's an engineer – and well, she's actually a robotics engineer.

Interviewer: Wow.

P3: But listening to the PhDs that were from the science departments, I'm sitting there going "What? And you're giving a PhD for that piece of research?" What kind of thing – oh, I can't – there were everything from – I mean there were two that were absolutely brilliant, one was in a medical vein, but so many of them were just – I honestly can't, but I sat there and I was just stunned that you would get a PhD for studying something quite insignificant. And you know, again I've seen some of the – well, I mean one of the reasons I asked you what you were studying is because I've seen some of the papers that are now the thesis and whatnot that are now being handed out to Masters students. And I watch what happened to both my daughter-in-law and my eldest when they were doing their Masters, and the fact that neither one of them graduated with their Masters. I didn't graduate with my Masters because I fired Massey University for the programme that they put me through for being utter and complete bullshit.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were doing a marketing degree?

P3: So I was doing a Masters in marketing, and I fired them for incompetence because I was working 10 years in marketing at that stage of the game, and I just fired them for absolute crap. And I actually wrote the Dean and said "I hereby resign because what you're teaching is nonsense," and this was back in the '80s.

Interviewer: Oh yes, of course, because that's when marketing degrees first started, didn't they?

P3: The end of the '70s, beginning of the '80s, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I actually held back at my granddaughter's 21st because they were all Massey students that she was friends with were in the kitchen, and I said "Well, I'm Massey alumni and I have a Bachelors in bullshit." And they looked at me and said "What?" I said "Yeah, I've got a Bachelors in business studies. So it's a Bachelor in bullshit", and they went "Pardon?" because these are all scientists, you know. I mean they were doing health or they were doing the nutrient thing that I'm trying to think of what she was actually studying – she now works for Fonterra – but they were doing science-related, engineering-related studies because these were all out of some form of STEM. And because they'd all gone through high school together, they kind of stayed together in university and were in the engineering department and biomedical engineering.

Interviewer: Oh, okay. So Plunket touched on three topics there – we’ve just covered the academic side of things – so he also talked about the street cleaning contracts and diversity requirements.

P3: Well, and again I know you’re laughing because – I remember that. And again there’s been four or five of them that he’s pulled out since, and there’s the one for Christchurch was absolutely ridiculous, Christchurch medical doctor, but none of it was around what your experience as a resident or anything else. It was all “You understand Te Tiriti? You understand the importance of the Māori culture? You understand –” None of it was around “Can you freaking do osteopathy?” I think it was “Can you actually fix bones?” No, it was all about “Do you know what Māori and the treaty are all about, and do you know how to fix that?”

It’s like so what they’ve done is they’ve taken and they’ve looked at – it’s not “Are you competent at doing the job?” but “Are you socially aware?”

A while ago I was – I volunteered to go on a local board, and one of the requirements of being on this board was watching a video that was done in 2001. Now I’ve been in education for 40 years, off and on between managing businesses and doing marketing, but a lot of marketing is education because you’re educating people to buy your product. So I’m watching this video which is now 20-some odd years old – only brown people in the video, all about – and it’s about how you treat people. Only brown people in the video, everything slanted towards Māoris. I went “I’m not watching this. I refuse to participate in something that is so blatantly indoctrination, so badly done as a piece of development.” We’ve developed videos for online, we’ve been there, done that, give that one away. I’ve worked with some of the best videographers and educators in the world. As far as I’m concerned, prejudiced – not personally, but you know, just studied their habits – and this is the piece of shit that they want me to watch as a volunteer? Nine hours of it. I went “No, no.”

So when you miss the boat on what matters for somebody to come into a job, sorry, I agree with Sean. It’s the most ridiculous thing in the world.

Interviewer: I’m just keeping an eye on the time because I do have to – it’s important that I keep the interviews of a consistent length so that everyone gets an equal go.

P3: I don’t watch a lot of Duncan – again have had some personal experience with Duncan.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National’s biggest liability?]

P3: Yes, I remember this. Don’t agree with that last statement, but –

Interviewer: And what do you not agree with?

P3: It’s that – that he’s done nothing. I think he’s done an awful lot. The problem is he hasn’t solved a lot of the social structure problems that Jacinda started, and I’m sorry, so did John Key. I mean John Key signed the bloody Indigenous Rights thing [*United*

Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples], why? Because he wanted to appease the Māori Party, which was what it was at the time that John Key signed the Indigenous People's Rights.

But yeah, I don't know if you've ever watched Julian Batchelor and Stop Co-Governance?

Interviewer: I have seen excerpts.

P3: My daughter-in-law, married to my eldest son, thinks he's a racist. All he's doing is telling a story of what's happened to him and what his reading is, and I find him very educational. I don't agree with him on a lot of things, and I think he's too radical, but I do agree with him that Luxon and Potaka are literally covert Māori supporters and are doing everything in their power to continue what John Key started, what actually started with David Lange back in 1975 when the freaking Treaty was done. And yeah, so he's picked another issue here.

Interviewer: But you're saying – correct me if I'm wrong – that Luxon, you're saying he's woke?

P3: Luxon's a wimp, okay? He's a wimp. And in terms of Māori, he's a wimp. In terms of doing what he promised at the election – that we were going to be one people, that Māori weren't going to have any special rights – and I'm sorry, Māori, you have always had special rights since we came to this country. He's a wimp because he will not stand up and stop trans children doing anything – puberty blockers, anything. He's got freaking Mark Doocey who worked for – I can't think of the name of the bloody place in Britain, okay? So he didn't work on the trans kids, but I'm sorry, you don't cut breasts off little girls and you don't invert penises and you don't give puberty blockers to kids. Keep away from the kids, “let kids be kids” as Penny Marie says. He has abrogated on that.

And more importantly, if you look at the changes in the relationship education, I wrote to Erica Stanford I guess three weeks after she came into office, and she was saying something about the education. I said “Stop paying the contracts to Inside Out. Just stop, don't pay them another dime. You'll stop a lot of the problem because the teachers aren't teaching it – they've got Inside Out coming into the schools teaching about all this crap, indoctrinating the teachers.” No, they still pay them. They pay them millions of dollars. Penny in *Let Kids Be Kids* has the documents that prove that.

Okay, so yeah, Luxon's not done anything to really stop that. He still sits on the fence about “What is a woman?” Oh yeah, he says “Oh yeah, a woman is biologically female.” It's like, but then in the next breath – and you watch him at the Pride parade last – you know, you kind of go “You're a two-faced shit.” Same thing with Erica Stanford, same thing with a number of the other [politicians] – they are just absolutely two-faced.

Interviewer: Actually, funny you should mention “what is a woman” because this is the last thing I'd like you to look at.

P3: Who's this one?

Interviewer: This one's Winston.

P3: Oh good.

Interviewer: But it's not a video. It's a Twitter/X.com post.

P3: Okay.

Interviewer: So if you read it through?

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters' X.com post – definition of “woke”]

Interviewer: Do you think that covers it at all?

P3: Probably not all, but it's very succinct, okay? And I love the pearl-clutching, because it's amazing how many of them are women. How many are women, yep. But if you looked at the PC movement, they were all women too. I got cancelled three times by women who were politically correct and claimed I wasn't.

Interviewer: That's an interesting observation.

P3: So but you look – I mean you listen to Chloe, you listen to Debbie, you listen to – you know, Debbie is far more pearl-clutching than Rawiri is. You listen to Kapa-Kingi – far more radical than Rawiri is. I mean, “You should be grateful that you can come to this country, that we allow you to live here” – yeah, okay. But every one of the really nasty – and again that whole thing with the use of the C word, and I don't know about you, but I don't have a problem with the word “cunt.” I mean it's a word. It means about the same as fuck. And “fuck” is used constantly, and they're making a whole big deal out of the fact that Brooke [van Velden, ACT MP] stood up and used it in parliament. It's like big deal. You give words power when you take and make them whatever, and that's the whole thing behind the word. You give certain words power: “genocide” – I can't think of any of the others right now, but I mean there's just so many. The race-based, the gender-based has a power that can be filled – “you're woke,” yeah, yeah, “I'm gonna cancel you.”

Interviewer: So do you think that in the five things we've looked at, do you think that there are words there that are presented so people can fill them with the way they want, with certain ways in which they respond? Because each person I've talked to has approached, for instance, the “woke” word in a different way.

P3: Oh, and again because we have not agreed on definitions for what anything is, everybody has interpreted things in their own way. I mean Winston gives two definitions of woke there – very kind of different definitions of woke. But woke is just somebody trying to exercise their power over somebody else to say and think what they say and think – which is what the Free Speech Union is fighting against, right?

Interviewer: Okay, so you follow them as well.

P3: Oh yeah, Free Speech Union, Taxpayers Union. I said I live in YouTube.

Interviewer: Wow, you certainly do.

P3: And that pretty much takes us to the end of our interview, so thank you.

P3: It was my pleasure. It was fun.

Transcript – Participant 4

Interviewed 11 June 2025

P4: I am originally from South Africa, born in the 1960s, so born with apartheid in my DNA. I came over with a very young family in 2000, so I'm here almost 26 years. I came as a nurse and then did my midwifery recognition – so my midwifery wasn't recognized, so I did my midwifery papers.

Initially we lived in Auckland. Actually, just to wind back a bit, it was not my decision to come to New Zealand – it was my ex-husband's, but he only lasted six years here and he went back to South Africa. We initially lived in Auckland for about two and a half years and then moved down to Hastings in 2002. So I brought my children up here mostly as a single mum, and then in probably 2008, 9, 10, I married my neighbour. So yeah, my husband is Kiwi.

Interviewer: You're very politically – you're very active in the community, aren't you?

P4: Yes, I wouldn't call it politically active. I would call it active in the community, and I do – I mean across the board, a lot of the work that I do revolves around migrant communities, you know, service and advocacy. But I'm involved in the environment like – so I sit on the Environment Centre board, or Sustainable Hawke's Bay as it's called now. Yeah, but I'm a strong advocate for reaching our sustainability goals as much as we can, and I firmly believe that it doesn't happen up here [*points at head*], it happens from ground up, you know. We will achieve results if everybody is involved.

Interviewer: Awesome. Well that's a really good point at which to start with the first clip. And just for the video, Participant 4 is cooking while we're speaking, which is why we're filming her at the kitchen bench.

P4: Well, cooking is my language of love, and yeah, when somebody is sick and somebody passes, I can't make lasagna, so I cook other stuff.

Interviewer: Now the first clip – and as I've explained to you, I'd just like you to watch it. It's quite short and it's an excerpt from Shane Jones' speech to the New Zealand First Conference last October. And you can make whatever expression you like.

P4: I'm sorry, just a word of warning – I don't have a poker face. I try as much as I can to have a poker face, and – (laughs)

Interviewer: That's great actually, that's perfect for this research.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

[P4 starts watching warily. At mention of climate alarmism: P4's eyes widen. Small bemused smile, continues cooking and watching. Climate god / obeys: expression of concern and incredulity. Green "cling-ons" — stops working, rolls eyes]

P4: God, I heard about this, but to be honest I didn't listen to it.

Interviewer: So how did you hear about it?

P4: Social media, and you know, news, and yeah, a couple of groups that I belong to and things like that. But this is so extreme.

For me, climate change and the effects is not something that we are preparing for – it's here. So instead of preparation, we need to be talking response, you know. I mean even with the councils as well, you know, whether it's from central to local government, we need to be talking response. We cannot – and New Zealand has never been a country to put your head in the sand and pretend that nothing's happening.

Interviewer: So why do you think he is?

P4: Well, because he's appealing to a certain demographic that think that this is a conspiracy theory. And I worked at the vaccine rollout at DPMC – I worked right in the heart of COVID and vaccine at DPMC, and I have heard every theory under the sun. I was working in a team where we were advising the policy and you know, the vaccine rollout and COVID response. I started there in 2021. In yeah, beginning of 2021, I was working with people who did not themselves think that COVID was real, because at that time not many people had COVID in New Zealand. Our deaths were sort of in the single digits, and I was working on a daily basis in this environment. And every day, I promise you, I heard of somebody that I knew elsewhere in the world – South Africa, you know, and my friends elsewhere – somebody dying of COVID. Personally, I had three brothers that died of COVID.

Interviewer: Oh no.

P4: And that was my family, because my parents passed away when I was very young. My sister passed away from an asthma attack in 2009, so I only had three brothers left, and they all died within 18 months.

Interviewer: Oh no, that's awful.

P4: And all of them of COVID. I was living two lives where in New Zealand there was huge theories about COVID not being real, and I'm meant to be talking about environment –

Interviewer: No, no, you're not at all. No, as I say, you're free to whatever this brings to mind. Yeah, I want to hear your response to it and what you think when you hear –

P4: It's people in power using language, using words that they know would talk to the audience. And we know that as strategists – we know that politicians are the biggest strategists ever, you know. They strategise on how they're going to win this election, how

they're going to use votes. And you know, I mean people there would be anti-Labour, anti-mandates, and have and think that the climate incidents is not happening because it's not happening in New Zealand – it's not affecting them personally. If things don't affect people personally, they don't worry about it.

Interviewer: And he brought in the whole trans debate – you know, if you don't want to be known as a he or a she – and to great applause from the audience.

P4: So yeah, I mean they would all be – I'm sorry to say this – probably of Christian faith, you know, believe in gender diversity. But – and I have the same argument for the Quran as well – which century was the Bible and the Quran written? Which era was the Bible and the Quran and most other religious books written? Right, the world has changed. We've had the scientific revolution, we've had an industrial revolution, we have got an AI revolution. That time it was written for that era. We've changed. And in every religious book you will find that foreseeing the future and changing with whatever we have. I mean if they were following the Bible or the Quran, then they can't be embracing what you call – have a cell phone. I don't – you know, simple things like TV, investing. Yeah, oh, so for me the language we use is strategic.

Interviewer: This is another – this is actually a fringe media platform called – The Platform. And this is a man called Michael Laws, who you may be familiar with. Yeah, he was Mayor of Whanganui and he was in central government as well before that. Now he's a host on this fringe online media station.

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

[Listens warily. Eyebrows raise at mention of immigration — mouth opens and eyes widen. Rueful twisted smile and sidelong glance as clip ends]

Interviewer: So what did you think of that?

P4: Oh, number one, he's being very disrespectful to Māori, right, comparing them to a beetle.

Interviewer: Well, he kind of conflated it all so quickly. I think if that's what you heard, that's interesting.

P4: He was kind of letting Europeans off the hook by saying “Oh, it's okay, it justifies what you all did to Māori because they got rid of 50 species, so it's okay, you could – you know, you're justified in what you're doing.” So if Māori didn't worry about the environment, so why are we supposed to be worried about the environment if they are kaitiaki of the environment?

Interviewer: Did you notice the way in which he said “kaitiaki”?

P4: Yes, said – yeah, so quite disdainfully. That's the word I would use – disdain. He used the word, you know, like – and I find a lot of – sorry – white people do that, and they butcher the pronunciation, yeah, you know. I mean some people have been through Te

Reo courses and still it's like a tick box for them, and they say "Oh, I can't pronounce that word." That word or whatever, you know. Yeah, that word – you used – I get it all the time. And you know, yeah, it's just the disdain that people have.

I'm not sure whether you know that I did a very public submission for the Treaty Principles Bill. And yeah, they asked me some really weird questions.

Interviewer: Oh, did you go and give an oral submission?

P4: I did it on behalf of the Tangata Tiriti Group, you know, local. Yeah, so I'm a very active member of that group.

Interviewer: So much like Shane did in the first clip, he conflates several issues – he's talking about conservation measures obviously, but he manages to include racism...

P4: But people do that all the time. Yeah, people do that all the time – they go off on a tangent, they start talking about something – like me, that's human nature. But what he's doing is strategising.

Interviewer: One last thing on Michael Laws – I noticed at the end he introduced a swipe at immigrants.

P4: Oh yeah, yeah. And as I would ask them – and I have gone publicly and asked that man from Destiny Church – "Who will look after you when you have your heart attack or stroke? Not if, when you do. That's all I ask these people." And there was a guy that stood for ACT in Napier. I can't remember what his name was. He spoke about sorting out our health system and the issue of nurses. And he said "Oh, you know, we can introduce enrolled nurses who take only one year to train up, and you know, it will help our nursing shortage." And I think I was bold enough to ask him this: "When you have your heart attack, would you want one of those enrolled nurses to be resuscitating you?"

Interviewer: So now we're moving a little bit away from environmental talk. This clip is entitled "Why we wage war on woke". Now, so Sean Plunket has been a broadcaster and journalist for many, many years. He's done quite prestigious shows like Morning Report, and he's been on Fair Go, he was on the Parliamentary Press Gallery. He's now on The Platform, a fringe radio station. Here he gives three examples of "woke" things.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform "Why we wage war on woke"]

[Puzzled expression, shakes head, mouth twists with annoyance in parts. Eyes widen frequently, smiles ruefully and shakes head dismissively frequently throughout. "Both blonde, white women" elicits a roll of the eyes and the head. Laughs at loud at "aggressively woke", perplexed and annoyed by "gay lesbian whales" and "menstrual cycle/Treaty of Waitangi" jibe rather than amused.]

P4: You've noticed all my crinkles in my roti because of my angry rolling!

Interviewer: No, it's good that I can see your expressions as he's speaking. Plunket's ripped through three really quite different examples of what he terms wokeism. And so one is the street cleaning contracts. Two is the TVNZ story about LGBTQ communities suffering mental health problems. And number three, of course, was the Marsden Fund for research, particularly social sciences and arts research, which has been cut. So what do you think he's trying to achieve here?

P4: I think he is trying to say that we are spending money frivolously, but again, it's strategising and the audience is probably people that are straight and a lot of white people are in the closet, you know, and don't want to acknowledge. But the way, the language that he uses, okay, and attacking TVNZ, he has got no idea why those two blonde-haired white women took the package, you know? I mean, did they? I see a lot of white women in TVNZ, you know? Did they take the package because they thought that? I don't know. But he is, so people like this in the position of power is putting this out into, they're planting seeds, you know, with the language that they use and the angle that they take on things. And then somebody else may say, oh yeah, yeah, yeah, so-and-so said that, you know, that they took the package because they were blonde, they were white, you know? So, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think there's an element of trying to create a wedge there, so it's like Māori and Pasifika people are coming for your jobs type of thing?

P4: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, we hear the same thing with the migrant communities. "They are trying to take our jobs. They are taking our jobs. They are taking our houses." And I'm sorry, this is the privileged white person that had everything given on a platter to them that are now feeling the pinch of having to work for what they have to do or what they achieve. They don't get handed things, you know? Yeah, sorry, I feel a bit uncomfortable talking [like this] to a white person.

Interviewer: No, no, I've encountered similar conclusions.

P4: Some of those woke white people, you know, oh yeah, but everything should be equal now. We can't right the wrong by doing another wrong. I've had a few of my in-laws give me that.

Interviewer: Oh, really?

P4: My husband's Kiwi, comes from Christchurch. Need I say any more? Need I say any more? (laughs)

Interviewer: We've been hearing a lot about woke and wokesters and wokery and "wokies" and all the manner of...

P4: The word just annoys me.

Interviewer: No, so tell me what do you think when you hear the word woke? What do you think they're getting at?

P4: Well, they're trying to say that these are people that... I'm trying to think for how I should word this now: "These are not people like us, you know. These are people that want to think of themselves as very modern and forward thinking and things, but they're not normal people like us". That's what I get when I hear the word woke. So it's a way of separating, a way of dividing.

Yeah, they talk about racial divide. Oh no, we don't want services based on race, but they are dividing themselves. They're using that word.

Interviewer: Duncan Garner has his own podcast. Again, it's kind of fringe. He also talks about "woke". He's here asserting that Christopher Luxon is too woke. Towards the end of last year, I think Luxon did a colossally bad interview with Mike Hosking, and he flubbed it terribly, and at which point there was quite open calls for him to stand down. This is a very short one.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

P4: Oh, my God. How did the preschoolers come now to promising to be like Jacinda and not to be like Jacinda and now being like Jacinda? Yeah. You know, how a parent chooses to bring up their child, because I know a lot of parents are moving away from the gender identity, and they are referring to their children as they and them, because they do believe that. And, yeah, how parents do that, it's their right.

And if she doesn't agree with it, she doesn't agree with it. But she will be, if the parent says, oh, I don't want my child to be wearing this in kindy, you will, you know, comply with that.

But, yeah, I am supportive of the rainbow community, despite what my religious peers think. So I signed a petition for a rainbow crossing, and an elder from the mosque came to talk to me because he was very concerned about my afterlife. That is true. (Lightly punches the roti). To distribute the heat evenly. But I, you know. It's not frustration. It is. (Laughs). Because it's meant to be done like sort of gently. Note.

[A visitor arrives and the interview was cut short at this point, with just the Winston Peters Facebook graphic unaddressed.]

Transcript – Participant 5

Interviewed 17 June 2025

Interviewer: Do you need me to run through anything that was on all the material I sent you?

P5: I don't think so. I think I'm just going to be confused anyway.

Interviewer: Don't worry. That will make two of us, believe me. So what I'm going to do is just run through four clips, and they're really, really short. They're two to three minutes each at the most.

And then I'm going to see whether I can get your face up on the screen, because I want to see also how you react to those clips as I play them. There are no right answers. There's no wrong answers. I'm just interested in the way you feel about them, how you react to them, what they make you think of. If you find them funny, if you find them infuriating, or whatever, and it doesn't matter what way you do feel about it.

Do you want to – should we just give the first one a go?

P5: Yeah, sure, let's do it.

P5: Okay.

P5: Oh, yeah, now I can see him. Yep.

Interviewer: Okay, good.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: That was Shane. So I'm going to stop sharing.

P5: He's...

Interviewer: Well. What did you think when you saw that? Have you seen it before? Bits of that.

P5: I haven't. I try to avoid watching anything like that.

Interviewer: And why is that?

P5: Because it bores me. I'm just not interested.

Interviewer: Right, you know. Fair enough, fair enough. What kind of people do you think he is trying to appeal to?

P5: I don't know because he lost me halfway through, but the first bit probably people like... dare I say it? The older generation.

I think we've gone a little bit to the woke side.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

P5: You know, when it's the woke – we kind of pander to them, like you have to not offend them. Like I got that bit, because that's what I'm like. I feel a little bit like that – that we do go a little bit... I don't even know what the words are. Sorry.

Interviewer: Just use whatever words come to mind, and that's OK.

P5: That will get me into trouble.

Interviewer: No, no, as I say...

P5: I think we cater a lot to them. We're going so far that I don't know – we're kind of like the odd one out now.

Interviewer: So you're talking about woke people. Is that right?

P5: Yeah.

Interviewer: And so what kind of people would you describe as woke?

P5: That, like, you know, like push their agendas all the time. I'm just not into it.

Interviewer: Fair enough. And what kind of agendas do you see them, or hear them pushing?

P5: Well, like the transgenders – all that. It's everywhere. Gets a little bit old, you just kind of want to switch it off.

Interviewer: So is that your usual reaction? Do you usually just switch off?

P5: Yeah, pretty much. It's just so much, and it's just – it's like bombarded all the time that I'm just a little bit over hearing it.

Interviewer: So you know, where are you hearing it? Because are you hearing on social media, or on the news?

P5: Social media, radio.

Interviewer: Okay, so radio, that's interesting. What? What are you listening on the radio – which stations?

P5: I don't know. It's just on the background in the office. But I don't think it matters what one you're on. They were all on there. I think ours is the old one, you know, like Coast. Maybe. So maybe he's talking to them like about those agendas to mainstream people. Maybe I don't know.

Interviewer: That's interesting, because you're the first person I've talked to who's mentioned listening to commercial radio

P5: Well, I don't purposely listen to the radio. It's just on in the background at work.

Interviewer: And social media. You use that.

P5: I do. I have a very short attention span, so I just like scroll. And so I see quite a few reels about that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

P5: From like America, I must say, mostly.

Interviewer: Sure, sure. And so that's served up to you. I wonder why is it? Is it stuff you've clicked on before?

P5: Oh, you mean why! I would like to know the same question.

Interviewer: Okay. Okay.

P5: I have no idea.

Interviewer: So back to old Shane Jones.

P5: Yep.

Interviewer: So Shane Jones is speaking there to a New Zealand First convention. So it's a certain kind of audience – that's party faithful. It's people who've come to listen to him, and they like his the way he talks, apparently, from the way they're clapping and laughing. And did you find anything in that speech amusing?

P5: Not really. I actually found it confusing. I just find, when they talk that they use a whole lot of big words or words that confusing to me.

I'm sorry. This is why I'm the worst person for this.

Interviewer: It is so fascinating because Shane Jones prides himself on his long words, on his flowery rhetoric. So it's interesting to hear that it can actually turn people off as well as build an audience.

P5: I mean, once we got halfway through there I had no idea what he was saying. He's just saying big words.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fascinating. And of course, to be fair, I have only shown you an excerpt, but I don't think you would have thanked me for showing you the entire speech.

P5: My attention span was lagging at the end of that, so...

Interviewer: The other three clips are a similar size. There is one that's a little bit longer, but it's only three minutes long. But even if you tell me that your attention has lagged, and you couldn't watch to the end, that also tells me something, so you know, don't feel that you have to listen carefully and then report back. Your natural reaction is what I'm interested in.

P5: Oh I probably listened to about the first 30 seconds of his one.

Interviewer: Yep, fair enough.

P5: And then I had no idea what he said after that, so bad. I'm sorry.

Interviewer: No, don't apologise. This is fascinating for me. I'm going to share ..

P5: This is anonymous, right?

Interviewer: You're going to be completely anonymised. So as soon as you've approved your – as I've mentioned to you – as soon as you've approved this transcript your responses get folded into the research, and I only refer to you as participant 5 or something else, if you would prefer. And then my supervisor deletes the original video. So it's only he and I will ever know who actually sat through this interview.

Okey doke. I'm going to try sharing the next one. So bear with me.

Interviewer: Okay, now, this is a guy called Michael Laws. Now, are you familiar with Michael also?

P5: I am.

Interviewer: Okay, okay. Have you lived in Whanganui in the past, or something like that?

P5: No, I just remember seeing him on TV.

Interviewer: Okay. So he's been a politician. He's now in the media. This is a fringe media platform called The Platform.

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

P5: Oh, he's getting older isn't he.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, it's not a flattering angle!

P5: No.

Interviewer: Because a lot of what I'm looking at is the way people talk about environmental matters, that's partly why I chose this clip so...

But he ranged across a lot of different topics there. It wasn't just beetles. He also talked about Māori. He also talked about immigration, and he fitted all that into a very short monologue. So how did you feel about it?

P5: I mean, I don't know where he got his numbers from about 50 species, but I mean... some were made extinct, weren't they? It's not like it was a lie. But I don't know where his numbers from.

I think I missed the immigration part.

Interviewer: Oh, that's just he said, people are flooding into this country, and we're a poor country, and so on.

P5: But otherwise I'm for the beetle like, go somewhere else. Yeah.

Interviewer: You were for the beetle, or...

P5: For the beetle, save the beetle.

Interviewer: Save the beetle?

P5: I'm very much an animal person. So... if it's the only place that beetle is – go somewhere else.

Interviewer: Disagreeing with Michael Laws.

P5: Some parts. Yeah, I guess.

P5: I don't really know who he was talking about, either, so...

Interviewer: So is all about a bill like a law that was intended to make it easier for people to build stuff and mine and so on, and endangered species that have previously been protected by conservation laws will become more vulnerable as a result. And so that's why I'm looking at the kind of language around that environmental versus economic development argument.

Freddy the Blind frog is one of Shane Jones' "jokes". And because he says, Well, do we need to? If Freddy the Blind Frog is in the way of the bulldozer. Well, too bad, Freddie, he has actually said in the past, and here's Michael Laws picking up the theme with the beetles.

P5: Oh, yeah, no, I definitely disagree. I mean, I just tried – I was doing the fire this morning, and I saved a spider on the piece of wood. So no, yeah. So if I saw Freddie, the blind frog in front of the thing, I would stop it. Yeah, and save him.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

P5: So, yeah, I guess I am disagreeing.

Interviewer: So if Shane Jones called you a woke environmentalist, then how would you react to that?

P5: I'd just laugh. I wouldn't care.

Interviewer: And do you belong to any environmental groups? Or is it just an interest that you have?

P5: Oh, I wouldn't even call it an interest. I just love animals. I don't belong to any groups at all.

Interviewer: Yeah, no fair enough.

Interviewer: Do you think Shane Jones and Michael Laws are trying to put you in the same "woke environmentalist" basket as the one Michael Laws – because you care for animals?

P5: Call me a woke environmentalist then!

Interviewer: Talking of woke – the next one is Sean Plunket. Have you heard of Sean Plunket? He used to be a broadcaster. He was on Fair Go, Morning Report. He's been around for absolute years now. He's a host on The Platform now too, and you're going to have the joy of watching Sean Plunket talk about "the war on woke". He's not talking about environmentalists in this clip. He talks about three examples of what he terms wokery.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform "Why we wage war on woke"]

P5: Did he say gay lesbian whale?

Interviewer: He said gay lesbian whales. It's a bit of a redundancy, isn't it? But yeah.

Interviewer: He also said my grandmother's menstrual cycle in relation to the Treaty ...

P5: But it was gay lesbian whale that made me laugh.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's like you don't need both those words.

P5: Don't need any of them, do you?

Interviewer: Yeah. So why do you think? And we'll start with that third one, then? So why do you think that he was using words like that?

P5: Try and get his point across. I guess.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P5: He honestly just sounded like a bitter old man, and that's what I could hear of him. He was quite mumbly.

Interviewer: Yes, yes, he traversed three really different topics. One was about diversity hiring street cleaning. The other one was about a TVNZ article about rainbow community and housing. And the other one, of course, was this academic funding which has already been cut so...

Interviewer: and the name of this clip is "why we wage war on woke". Do you think he gave enough reasons to wage war on woke there?

P5: He did.

Interviewer: You think he did?

P5: Not sure wage war, but maybe question. I mean the diversity thing I do like. I do agree. I think it should be the best person, not because you're a female, or Pasifika, or whatever like it should be the best person.

What were the other ones you mentioned? Sorry.

Interviewer: The second one was the TVNZ, running an article about rainbow community finding it difficult to find housing, and then turning the comments off on their social media.

P5: Oh!

Interviewer: Yeah.

P5: They find .. because of LGBT. That's why they find it hard?

Interviewer: Yeah, I think so.

P5: Was it more about the comments?

Interviewer: It was more about turning off the comments, and he used the phrase "TVNZ is as woke as they come".

P5: Oh! Well, cause I watch a lot of reels on-screen. I think a lot of those companies turn their comments off anyway. So I'm not sure that had to do with... A lot of them turn them off because it turns into a big...

Interviewer: Shitfight.

P5: Pretty much.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P5: Or putting people down all the time, and...

Interviewer: Yes, and did you notice the way in which he said “LGBTQI, plus”.

P5: No, I didn’t.

Interviewer: LGBTQI+ in a laboured way, as if as if mocking the long line of initials.

P5: Oh, I did not. I noticed how he emphasised his mispronunciation of...

Interviewer: Of the Māori name of the DEI initiative.

P5: Whatever he was trying to say, because I couldn’t work it out. But yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think he did that deliberately?

P5: I do just because of the way he changed his voice. I don’t think he maybe deliberately mispronounced it, but I think he deliberately kind of like the way he raised his voice, and kind of in a mocking kind of tone. It was definitely in a mocking tone.

Interviewer: Yes. We’re doing really, really well, let’s go...

P5: Are my answers terrible, because I really have no idea how to explain...

Interviewer: Like I say, you’ve actually given me insights that I haven’t got from anybody else. It’s really interesting to hear, and I’ll tell you what one of those is – is that the way you react to woke stuff? But at the same time you then said, well, actually, I’m a woke environmentalist. I find that really interesting.

P5: I react to the woke stuff. I just think it’s very in your face and everywhere now and it’s getting really old. And it’s like, Oh, here we go again. Like, it’s that more than the topic itself.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay, so it’s it’s ... I mean, it’s not just the transgender issue. There are other woke topics as well. Do you think, or is that...

P5: Yeah, yeah. It’s like they’re offended by everything, and you can’t have a joke these days, like, it’s all of that stuff that comes up, and it’s like, Oh, no! Here we go again. I mean, I don’t know if that’s what you consider woke. But I just yeah.

Interviewer: What kind of what kind of joke would you be thinking of that? The ones you can’t say anymore.

P5: I don't know. Just like you watch something, and you're like, Oh, that's funny. But then everyone's offended by it in the comments. I don't know what's offensive about it – but because one person's offended, you can't have that joke.

Interviewer: Right, yeah.

Interviewer: I saw one of them talked about cancellation twice. I think it might have been the very first one Shane Jones brought up. You're cancelled. And you're cancelled. And if you, if you and they call you a climate denier.

So is cancellation the kind of thing that you're thinking of when you talk about people, you know, people pile on in the comments when there's a joke. They don't like.

P5: Yeah. And then it like gets removed because everyone's offended by it, or something like that.

Interviewer: We're going to move on to the fourth and final clip. And after that there's just going to be one thing I need to show you.

P5: Oh, good!

Interviewer: So let's I'll just go and set it up.

Interviewer: At one point there was a bit of grumbling about Christopher Luxon, the Prime Minister. This is about at the end of last year he made a few stumbles, and his voting base didn't like it. So this is a guy called Duncan Garner. Who has a yeah, he was a... He also has been a very prominent broadcaster and journalist. Now, also more fringe. He's got his own podcast.

Okay. So here he goes. And this is around November last year.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

Interviewer: Okay.

P5: Oh, he's getting older isn't he.

Interviewer: So that's Duncan Garner on Luxon being too woke because of his response to a preschool teacher. Do you think her concerns are valid?

P5: Yeah, this is the thing. Yes, but I also don't understand why 3, 4, and 5 year olds. I think that's more to lie with the parents and like society rather than like what's around them? Why is it the Government's problem to fix?

Interviewer: Good point.

P5: I don't know why that's his problem to fix 3 and 4 year olds like they're not watching Christopher Luxon, are they?

Interviewer: Hope not.

P5: They were watching the people around them, listening to the people around them, so I don't know.

Interviewer: So accusing Luxon of being just like Jacinda. Do you think he is?

P5: Not to me... And I personally liked Jacinda, so...

Interviewer: Yeah.

P5: I haven't really paid much attention to Luxon, to be honest.

Interviewer: Sure.

P5: To be fair if it wasn't for Covid, I probably wouldn't have paid much attention to her either.

Interviewer: Because that one PM press briefing that everybody watched every day we did get to see quite a lot of her, and of course Luxon doesn't have the same kind of exposure.

Interviewer: But I guess as you don't see a lot of them, you probably don't or do have an opinion about...

P5: Not really.

Interviewer: Wokeness or otherwise.

P5: Really not at all.

Interviewer: Why do you think Duncan Garner might have been trying to do that?

P5: Maybe they have beef. I don't know.

Interviewer: It's... You know, they could well have had.

P5: Yeah, or maybe he didn't really answer the question like he wanted him to.

Interviewer: True.

Interviewer: Hey? Last thing I want to show you, and this is something from Winston Peters.

P5: He's always a good listen!

Interviewer: Well, unfortunately, he's not on video. This is just an image. This is something he put up on his Facebook page.

P5: All right.

Interviewer: Yeah, so you like listening to Winston.

P5: Oh, no, I don't really listen to him. I just hear stuff when people get angry with him and they replay his things.

Interviewer: Oh, okay, so...

P5: What's going on here?

Interviewer: There it is.

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters' X.com post – definition of “woke”]

P5: You what?

Interviewer: What do you think of that?

P5: Well, point one's got too many words for me to even understand. Is he having a dig at – what's his name, Hipkins? Is that what it was?

Interviewer: Yeah. So why do you think Winston at the venerable age of 80, having been in Parliament since forever, is now trying to define what a woman is?

P5: I think it's just a running joke, isn't it?

Interviewer: It could also be linked to the transgender debate.

P5: Yeah, I mean, they're not the only ones. I've seen some things on my reels asking the same questions in America.

P5: It doesn't matter what you say. Someone's going to have an argument for it. So...

Interviewer: Absolutely and... So that is that something you just you avoid that kind of. You see it on the reels, but you don't express any kind of opinion.

P5: Oh, no, I see what their answers are sometimes. But I'm really not that interested.

Interviewer: Do you think that woke people are fascists?

P5: I don't even know what that word means.

Interviewer: Why do you think he used it?

P5: Because they all like using big words then.

Interviewer: Yeah, you know, that's a perfectly valid reason. Is it a word that just evokes a response? Where most people don't know what fascist means. It's but it's used by a lot of people to mean a lot of different things.

P5: Yeah, I like simple words. So I mean... That whole sentence to me was confusing!

Interviewer: Oh, thank you. You have been a magnificent interviewee. I just wanted to check on demographics before I leave you. I know you're Ngāpuhi, and also just your age range. You don't need to give me your exact age.

P5: 40. I'm 41 next week.

Interviewer: Very nice to chat to you. Thank you.

P5: All right. Thank you.

Transcript – Participant 6

Date: 21 June 2025

Date: 21 June 2025

Interviewer: Thank you again for agreeing to be part of this project. Did you get a chance to look at the stuff that I sent through?

P6: We've been flat out.

Interviewer: No, that's all good. So I'll tell you a little bit about what I'm doing, and then I'll ask you to do a little bit of an introduction. Basically, I'm studying the way people use language and the way people hear language being used in political contexts, particularly in relation to what we call culture wars.

I don't know if you've heard the word "woke," but the way in which people use the word "woke," and the context in which politicians and media use it, and why they use it that way. So that's a very basic rundown of what I'm looking at. I'm interviewing about 8 to 10 people, all very different people, because I'm aiming to gather feedback from a kind of slice of Aotearoa.

So maybe just before we start, could you introduce yourself so I know a little bit about you – just the basics, your age range, iwi, and so on. That would be helpful.

P6: Yeah, so I'm 41. I guess my iwi is Te Whānau-ā-Apanui, which is in the Bay of Plenty. I don't really associate myself with the area. I'd say I'm more Ngāti Kahungunu, which is here – born and raised here. So yeah, I sort of associate myself in this region.

Interviewer: And you work in the painting and decorating trade?

P6: I'm a builder. So sort of an adult apprentice.

Interviewer: So what I'm going to do – the way that we're going to run this interview is I'm going to play you 4 clips. They're really short. I'm not going to steer you into any particular direction. I'm going to ask you a few questions, but I just want to know whether you find these things amusing, annoying, infuriating, or remind you of something else. All of these responses are totally valid. Which is why I said there are no wrong answers, so shall we leap in?

Do you see our friend Shane?

P6: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay, right. Here we go.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: So that was Shane Jones talking to the New Zealand First convention last October. Any of that you've heard before?

P6: I haven't heard. I keep up with the news a lot. Kids dominate the TV. I didn't totally disagree with the first part. I don't know enough on the last part to sort of say whether he's right or wrong on it.

Interviewer: So which parts did you not totally disagree with?

P6: It's sort of like you can't say stuff about people and hurt their feelings. That's what it – yeah, I feel like everything's a bit too sensitive sometimes. And yeah, I don't think it leaves much room for personal opinions.

Interviewer: So he mentioned, he talked about the green “cling-ons.” Do you associate that kind of thing with a particular type of people?

P6: Green cling-ons? What's he referring to there like?

Interviewer: I think he's referring to the Green Party, who “cling on” to the Labour Party when they're in coalition. I think he could also be making a Star Trek reference. It's not entirely clear.

P6: Like I think – and there's probably just, I don't follow the Green Party enough, but they do like the core value makes sense. They just don't – I mean, from my point of view, I don't think they follow through with it. They just are happy to chop and change depending on – I guess the bigger parties, from what they'll give them.

Interviewer: Okay. So you think maybe – I'm summarising this, but feel free to disagree with me – that their willingness to go into coalition means that they compromise on some of their core principles, sometimes?

P6: Oh yeah, definitely. And I think that with any coalition there's always that compromise on something. Then yeah, whether they follow through with what they're trying to do – that's a bit of that's a different story in itself.

Interviewer: Yeah. He talked about a few ways in which he did use the word “woke” right at the beginning, but he used a few – he talked about if you want to be a he or a she. And then he talked about environment, and then he talked about oil and gas, so he ranged across quite a lot of different, quite different topics. But he gathered them up into one big criticism from the sound of it, even from that small clip there. Would you agree with that?

P6: Yeah, it's sort of when he's sort of touching on like facts, and then bringing in people's religion or culture or other aspects? Yeah, I'd rather go with the facts side.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

P6: Whether that – and that doesn't like, yeah, I think there's you can have talks around the cultural or the religious part of it. But yeah, I mean, that's still – facts outweigh that, I think.

Interviewer: So you're for evidence-based...

P6: Yeah.

Interviewer: ...rather than this, what we might call culture wars.

P6: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And whatever studies say, well, I guess going with the Green Party and say, like environmental issues, you know, I guess impacts like I get that as well. But it shouldn't hold up progress in terms of other ways around life.

Say, if you build a dam or something, and then you can still make that environmentally friendly as well. And they can have that input on that as well. And so that you could still get the progress in it. It can outweigh a lot of the just leaving it as is, and not benefiting from it at all.

Interviewer: So that's quite relevant right now. I mean, it's relevant for all of us. But for you, particularly at the moment. There's quite a debate simmering here about [a local dam project recently revived under the Fast-track legislation]

P6: Oh, I just use that as an example.

Interviewer: It's interesting you should choose it, though, because it is one of the projects on the Fast-track legislation, which kicked off this research. It's interesting to see how culture wars debates have been brought into these discussions, and why and how.

Well, after Shane, we're going to go on to another environmentalist – it's also short. I don't know if you've heard of Michael Laws?

P6: I do remember when he had the midday talk show on – might have been talk, I can't remember what radio. He was on – oh, it's one of those yeah, just radio talk or something like that. He had a – he was quite funny, because he's quite offensive to people, but he's straight.

Interviewer: Okay, so you'll see he's probably not veered too far from that path. Maybe you'll have to tell me, because here he is.

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

Interviewer: There you go! So has he changed from the last time you heard him?

P6: No, no, he's still the same.

Interviewer: I noticed you smiled a little bit at the mention of the beetle.

P6: Yeah. Oh, it's just the way he says that, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P6: The humour behind how he's presenting himself.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah. And he also mentioned – he said “wokery,” which was also amusing.

P6: Yeah, it's just how he's saying it. It is quite funny. But I totally – I don't totally disagree with him, and the majority of what he's saying, it's like sort of human nature to come in and make the area our own. Take over. And this is like, say, this part here is our land. This is where we're building our house.

You'd sort of tend to not think too much about, I guess, the insects where you're sort of going with the beetles and all that. We will keep certain trees and certain plants. And yeah, it's doing our best. But yeah, you know, you have to sacrifice something really. And for progress, I guess, yeah.

Interviewer: Did you recognize Freddy the blind frog?

P6: I don't. I don't know that one. Yeah.

Interviewer: So that's something that Shane Jones has spoken about. He's if there's some precious mineral to be mined, and there's a Freddy, the blind frog. We do have some native frogs here in this country, of course, native to very small areas. And then he said, “Well, goodbye, Freddy,” and it became a kind of a running joke which I think Laws has picked up on. I think Shane had to wind it back a wee bit, because some of his supporters didn't like him celebrating the sacrifice of Freddy the blind frog.

P6: And I guess that comes down to people would rather be naive about certain things than someone actually say, “Oh, if you do that now, you're gonna lose all your sheep or something.” And that if people would just say, “Okay, you got that land. Well, do whatever you know, cut down the trees.”

Getting rid of a heartbeat, I guess, is a bit more unnerving for people than...

Interviewer: Yeah, so to actually kill another living thing.

P6: Yeah. People don't wanna know.

Interviewer: Yeah, they don't want to know. Right? So do they prefer that? Do you think people prefer that to happen out of their sight and not...

P6: Oh yeah, definitely. Yeah. Oh yeah, you don't like – most people don't want to see a sheep being killed. You still go to the butcher, though, to get it.

Interviewer: True, true. So they want the sausage, but they don't want to see the sausage being made kind of thing. Yeah.

P6: You don't. They don't want to know the name of it. Yeah, that one. And how it's been called Lambchop or whatever.

Interviewer: Right.

P6: And I agree, too, because we – we've had lambs and that and they're meant for the freezer and...

Interviewer: Yeah.

P6: It's a little bit difficult when it's got a name.

Interviewer: You mean you've actually raised them and had them...

P6: Yeah, to go in the freezer. But naming it and becoming a pet is a bit different. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, of course, of course. So of course, he talked about beetles. So beetles fall somewhere between lambs and trees. Do you think?

P6: Oh yeah, definitely. So they have their purpose.

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

P6: But I mean...

Interviewer: If they're endangered beetles.

P6: Exactly. Yeah. I think that's where you sort of come into how can you be sustainable about whether they will be able to be moved, or whatnot – sort of different in itself. Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, I noticed that you startled a little bit. I could be wrong. You can correct me when he pronounced kaitiaki so very deliberately.

P6: Sorry. I thought I didn't hear him say it.

Interviewer: It's interesting, because he mentioned the word kaitiaki very, very deliberately, as if it was a word that was unfamiliar to him.

P6: Yeah. Probably learned that – that is sort of the guardian term. And just throwing it in there. I mean, I'm not against like English sentences, with a Māori word being put in. It's all part and parcel of how you can learn the language as well, so...

Interviewer: So this next guy is called Sean Plunket. Again, he was a broadcaster for very many years, very mainstream broadcaster. He is also now on the more fringe media. This Platform, which is independent, is funded by a private backer.

P6: Yep.

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform “Why we wage war on woke”]

Interviewer: Well, okay. He went across 3 different examples of what he terms “wokery.” And one is the diversity hiring for street cleaning. One is TVNZ and their LGBTQI reportage, and the third one was academic funding. So, and he gathered all of that under the heading of “woke.” Any thoughts?

P6: I guess the way I’d say – I don’t think race or gender should come into it. Should just be by quality qualification base. Really, if you’re the right person for the job.

P6: I know I did the police studies before I switched to building and got all the way through, and they were pretty open and honest that it’s – they pick on whatever gender, race they need at the time. And I sort of understand, depending on the region you’re going to and whatnot.

Interviewer: Mm.

P6: So I think that makes sense. But I guess when you’re doing a job, even building, so to speak, it shouldn’t matter on what ethnicity or gender you are – just basically, if you’re keen and able to do the job and willing to learn, then that should be where you go like, yeah. And I don’t think you need to pick on a certain race or gender.

Interviewer: Sure. So I guess you will have heard his woeful attempt to pronounce the name of the iwi.

P6: Yeah. And to be fair, I think especially, probably for a lot of people, pronunciation is a hard thing. If you’re not actually learning it, you’re just given a word, and you try to say it. I mean, my partner has a good attempt, and she’s a lot more educated than I am, but you know it’s just the way you are taught in English, and then Māori is a lot different on the pronunciation.

I mean, my daughter was a prime example, saying, like “Wh,” and Māori is an “F,” and said, “But there’s no F in there.” So, and I was like, “Well, it’s just how it’s pronounced.” Yeah, so yeah, you’re gonna get it wrong, so to speak.

Interviewer: So you’ll give him a pass, which is, you know, it’s really generous of you, because he’s been a broadcaster who’s been around for I don’t know, 35 years, and I would have thought personally, I would have thought the bare minimum for a broadcaster in this country should be to be able to pronounce one of our actual official languages correctly.

P6: Like I’ve got – I don’t know him, and so I don’t know his background. But I do understand that it does get thrown out there with people are just not able to pronounce, or not willing to learn how to pronounce it so...

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah, true. True. Yes. And of course languages come more easily to some than they do to others.

P6: Oh yeah, definitely.

Interviewer: So I had another note to ask you here, too. So he went on after the diversity hiring. He talked about TVNZ – I know you don't get a lot of chances to watch TV, but he referred to it as "as woke as you can get." Has TVNZ ever appeared to you to be extremely woke?

P6: Because I think so – like I just think that they across the board they're quite all quite similar in how they present themselves. I guess.

Interviewer: And he also talked about the "aggressively woke" Royal Society. Then he referred to "gay lesbian whales and wheelchairs", and my "grandmother's menstrual cycle in relation to the Treaty of Waitangi". He said these are the kind of studies that are being funded with this money, this public money.

So what would be your reaction to that?

P6: I guess I don't quite understand what that all implies. Like. Sorry. Yeah.

Interviewer: It's fine. He's simplifying it, obviously for an audience who may not necessarily be aware of what academic funding applications would entail. So he's boiled it down to a couple of jokes. Really. So did I mean was that amusing? Did you find that amusing?

P6: Well, no, I didn't find it amusing. I was just sort of trying to follow what he's – where he's going. And yeah, I kind of didn't get where he was going with it all. And yeah, I'm not across it, really. So that's fine, because that one that's the most. That's me, really – yeah, the whole he was talking about.

Interviewer: The title of that piece was "Why We Wage War on Woke." Or "Here's a whole lot of different examples, and I'm going to gather them all up into this big basket I'm calling woke."

But the one that resonated most with you was the diversity hiring. Would you say?

P6: Yeah, it did like, I sort of understood that a bit.

Interviewer: Yeah, totally. That's all good. So this one, this guy is also these old broadcasters. His name is Duncan Garner.

Now this one's an interesting one, because this last year there were some murmurings about Christopher Luxon being rolled – about getting rid of him because he wasn't fulfilling the expectations of some of his supporters, and around that time Duncan Garner recorded this piece about Luxon being "too woke."

So yeah, this again, this is a really short one.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

Interviewer: Here we go, so as you know Christopher Luxon is still Prime Minister, so they didn't follow through on that one. But any thoughts when you were watching that?

P6: Yeah. Like, I mean all for supporting all the different causes.

Interviewer: Hmm.

P6: I guess it's a hard one, because kids don't know so. But you can't tell other little kids to treat that person differently from what they can see.

Interviewer: Hmm, from the outside inside. Yeah.

P6: I think it's a lot of pressure on everyone all around really to yeah, be he, she, they, them. But well, confusing for us that – even for I guess for the kid that is identifying in that way. But I don't know how a 5-year-old can identify in that way.

Interviewer: Do you think it's the letter that was written was from a person, one person. So it's anecdotal, do you? I mean, you guys have got really young kids that have just been through preschool. So and you'll have a better idea of this than I do now. How realistic do you think that might be?

P6: Well, like, I guess, with our kids, they just are who they are, like you. And that's all kids. I mean, you get – we're at sport today. And [my son] is a rough boy. It's just his nature. We had other boys are, you know, a bit shy, but more timid. I don't see them identifying in anything other than a shy boy.

Interviewer: Yeah.

P6: Oh, quiet boy, yeah. And well, they have. And parents haven't said they're identifying as anything other than, yeah, what they are showing themselves.

Interviewer: So should we take that kind of letter to a broadcaster? Should we take it at face value, or should we wonder why was it – why was that kind of letter read out on air?

P6: Probably more. Why it was read out on air more so like the – that. I think there are a lot of kids that probably in that situation where like, maybe the parent is either identify them in that way. And the kid possibly is that way. But I think it's a lot of pressure for everyone at the time when you could just let the kid be a kid instead of labelling them different to the others.

Interviewer: And so why do you think this woman chose to write to the Prime Minister? And what did she expect the Prime Minister was going to do there?

P6: I'm not sure, on the expectation, on her expectations, that she was expecting something from the Prime Minister. So ... I'm a little bit forgetting what she wrote. But the last bit of what she said. I'm trying to remember.

Interviewer: She said, "As a caring woman of God, I am writing to you, Prime Minister, to let you know that this is happening in our preschool."

P6: Yeah, I think it's more her religious belief coming through there. More than her teacher side, so to speak. Educating side. Because I mean as an educator, I think she could guide those children to be the best they can be at, whoever they want to identify – the issue there. I think she's just looking at more of a – I tell you. Well, the last one and I might be just stereotyping now, because she put the religious part at the end. But she could just be like "this is just hard work and confusing as an educator to have all these different boxes now to tick."

Interviewer: So what you know of Christopher Luxon. Do you think he's too woke?

P6: I think he just tries – trying to be right. It's more a bit more. I don't think he is woke. I think he's trying to be.

Interviewer: Have you seen any examples?

P6: There's only no, I can't remember, but just only from how he presents himself on TV. And you know, and I guess, using certain words different times when most – I think most of them are doing that actually.

Interviewer: Most of ..?

P6: That most of politicians are using those words to get to their younger generation as well. Now, you're still gonna get votes somehow. And if you can identify with the different groups, you know, I think, yeah.

Interviewer: Do you ever see him on social media?

P6: yeah, no, he doesn't. Yeah. He doesn't pop up in any of my timelines. I don't follow any politicians.

Interviewer: I'm going to finish by showing you a post by Winston Peters. But before I do that I just want to ask you. Is there was there anything that you've – has come to mind while we've been talking that we haven't covered yet?

P6: No, I'm not sure. No.

Interviewer: And if you do think of anything later and you go, "Hey, I've had this great thought," don't hesitate to send it through. Okay. But before we do that, I'm just going to bring up this image. This is a post from Winston Peters on X.com, formerly Twitter.

Can you see that?

P6: Yep.

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters' post – definition of “woke”]

Interviewer: So the first definition is quite different from the second.

P6: It is.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. So anything there that resonated with you that made you think? “Oh, yep, he’s on the money there”?

P6: Oh, I guess it actually made me realize I don’t fully understand “woke” like it was like, “Okay, it’s quite broad.” It’s a little bit, too broad. Probably. Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you think it’s a word that means what people want it to mean?

P6: Probably not, really. Because I think, like, yeah, it’s just too broad. It can be anything. And it’s just a – it must. I guess it’s an. And the most part it’s just like I thought woke was sort of yeah, just a free thinking, free, believing type of like word where everyone as a bit more open minded. But yeah, so yeah, I guess I didn’t fully understand the word the term woke.

Interviewer: Actually, I think it used to mean that. I think your understanding of it is the way that woke started. But and the way certainly, in the clips we’ve just been watching, it’s taken on a different meaning. But the free thinking, free, believing, open-minded definition is very positive.

P6: Yeah.

Interviewer: But the way we’ve just been watching, the things we’ve just been watching have been...

P6: It’s negative now. And well, and I guess that might come down to the overuse.

Interviewer: Yeah, okay.

P6: And yeah, I think it’s just from me, not really understanding. It might just be there that people using it for everything now like anything to do with maybe the new way or a new cultural way of life. I guess and how we all see ourselves. And we’re using it more negatively, because we don’t like what other people are doing or saying. But yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, that’s entirely valid, actually. So would you consider yourself woke?

P6: Well, I guess originally, when I thought like, “Oh yeah, I’m open minded. I don’t.” But, to be honest, I don’t care what other people do or say. I’m not easily offended or like. I guess my partner says I’m the hardest person to have an argument with, because I won’t get fired up and give you back, so to speak, like, yeah. She learned that quite quickly. She

was not gonna get a good argument out of me if she wanted a row. So I just let her win, because it's just...

Yeah, I don't. I don't do the confrontation. All that I will do – I will, if I have to, and I'm quite, if I'm firm on what I believe, but most of the time I would am open to hear what other people will say and take it on board, and I leave it there.

Interviewer: Right cool. Well, that's probably is a good point to leave it there. You've been really interesting, as I thought you would be because everyone's perspectives are so different. And yours again, interesting and different and surprising.

P6: Okay. No worries.

Interviewer: All right. All right. Have a good afternoon.

P6: You, too. Thanks a lot.

Transcript – Participant 7

Interview date: 25 July 2025

Interviewer: I'm going to first ask you to introduce yourself and tell us a few details about your background.

P7: Cool. I'm 51. I'm based here in Havelock North in Hawke's Bay. British by birth, been here 26 years and I run my own business.

Interviewer: Thank you. As we've discussed, we're going to look at a few clips today, and we've talked a bit about the study and the research. As I've mentioned to you, all I want you to do is just give me your genuine reactions. And if you have no reactions, that's fine. And you're free to segue off into whatever these clips may make you think of or if you've heard something similar like this elsewhere.

P7: Sure. Okay.

Interviewer: So, our first clip is our friend Shane Jones. And Shane is here speaking to the New Zealand First Convention 2024. And he's doing a speech at the end of a very long tiring day.

[CLIP 1 – Shane Jones speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: Okay. So, what did you think while you were watching that?

P7: If anything, peacocking, grandstanding. He's a great orator. Well, I wouldn't say he's great, but he loves the sound of his own voice. And I've seen this guy before. I've seen him on some of those TV shows. He's lazy. I saw him when he was trying to be on a fisherman documentary and he never got up on time. So, I don't have any respect for him. Goes too far. Not believable, not credible because he just pontificates and he just is in love with his own voice. He doesn't care about anyone else but himself.

Interviewer: It's interesting you should say that. Some people feel that he displays everyman authenticity.

P7: Look, I think he's trying to – I don't think he's being genuine though. And I mean I struggle with politicians anyway because they wear a persona and a persona is a mask in Latin, right? And so it's basically a covering of something. I think he's trying to appeal to the everyman and the wokeism and all that kind of stuff, but I think the way he articulates it is a little bit grandiose and yeah, a bit showboaty. Sort of filibustery, sort of just like that doesn't convince me. His argument is not convincing to me.

Interviewer: So he talked about climate change. What did you think about his points on climate change?

P7: I think he's a bit dismissive of it. I would say he's pushing his own agenda. Also, there's inherent bias in what he's saying because he's the Northland electorate and Marsden Point is in Northland. So, naturally, of course, he's going to have a crack at it. And so, you know, he ran the primary growth fund. His voice really annoys me. Like it really grates me. Always has because he thinks he's a great orator, but he doesn't have rhythm and tonality. So, he's quite monotonous. Yeah. And he doesn't change his pitch or his tone, which makes it very different. What's that Ralph Emerson quote? You speak so loudly, I can't hear what you say.

Interviewer: Oh, nice.

P7: I think that's what they said. I think that's Emerson quote. Yeah, I think I probably dodged it, but that's a classic case of it. He speaks so loudly I can't hear myself. So, yeah. No, I find him very, well it's funny for Māoridom, he's very puffed up, isn't he? And you know, I mean, I just lost so much respect when I watched that documentary where they go and have a day in the life of a normal person and maybe a worker. And he was like hungover. He was late and then he wouldn't go out with a fishing boat.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't see that one.

P7: Yeah. Anyway, you'll find it if you Google it. Yeah. I told what like the BBC, you know, the TV does, but I was like, I think he's trying to be Trump and he's really poor. A really poor version. And I don't like Trump either.

Interviewer: So, why don't you like Trump?

P7: Because there's a lot of things I don't like about him. He's untrustworthy. He's self-centered. I think he shorts the market to financially gain for his own family. He's building his own brand to get out of debt. His treatment of women is disgusting. And he shouldn't be trusted as far as he can be thrown. But what he's done, he's very good at manipulating uneducated people much like Brexit with Nigel Farage because I'm sort of close – not that close to that because I haven't lived in the UK for a long time – but they're just pushing an agenda and yeah I just think if you're a bit more intelligent there's no depth to it.

Interviewer: He referred to the Greens as greens "cling-ons". What did you hear in that?

P7: He was just dismissing them. I mean, I do believe climate change is a thing. I don't get ridiculous about it, but I think we've all got a part to play. And I think he's not allowing for another voice. He's just interested in his own. And so, he's just shouting down. He, you know, like everyone wants a villain. Like, if you want to unify people, find a villain. He's trying to find a villain. He's trying to villainise climate or greenies because you know war is a national unifier, right? So if you want to motivate someone, find a common enemy and find a villain and they all do it and this is the story. This is the framework. I mean it's like the hero's journey, right? You know so they all have a – you know the hero's journey. Star Wars – every movie – is based on it. You know, someone downtrodden, finding difficulty in hard circumstances, finds a mentor, slays the dragon, comes home

to the homecoming, newfound person. I know that's a bit of a stretch, but like, yeah, this villainisation. Yeah, it's no good.

Interviewer: This next clip is Michael Laws. If you remember Michael Laws, I'm sure. Also formerly a National MP. Then he jumped ship to New Zealand First. Then he was kicked out of parliament for a corruption scandal. He's now a host, one of the hosts on The Platform, which is a fringe media station funded by a rich-lister called Wayne Wright Jr. with stated right-wing views.

P7: Okay.

Interviewer: And this is the title of this clip is "woke environmentalism".

[CLIP 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

Interviewer: So, what did you think of it?

P7: He's really funny. They're using, you know, like he's basically been kicked out of mainstream. He's on a fringe media channel. I don't even know. Probably a few people with tin aluminium foil hats listen to him in the middle of the wops or something. I'm being generalized, but like again sort of different from Shane in the – well similar actually – similar themes like they're just, there's no engagement with the other side, and it's all just one-sided and the theme is, and again I'm not trying to appeal or be cute here. I'm 51. These guys are like probably late 50s, early 60s, one generation from me. And they themselves are a threatened species. They themselves, sorry, are threatened species. And this is why you're seeing so much anger from these guys because I see it in my business world where these men, white men had a lot of power and now they are really under threat. And when an animal is under threat, they usually attack. And so they're very angry and they'll do anything.

Yeah, like Michael Laws like maybe he – I respect what he did in Whanganui with the gangs and stuff. Thought that was very worthwhile because safety and civic safety is a really massive thing. But like he's sort of like they're just so one-sided and there's an inability to absorb another point of view. And so there's no balance in the reporting. It's all one way. It's like why isn't there another person that can have a debate with them? It's all monosyllabic if that's the right word. So I find I don't listen to that. It's just a rant again. They talk so loud I can't hear them. So I just tune out. I just tune out. There's nothing lands for me there. There's not one thing that makes me think, oh yeah, yeah.

I understand there's a balance of the environmental and the commercial and you have to be pragmatic about that. But it's not one way or the other. There has to be some compromise and there has to be some trade-off. But the way he operates, it doesn't appeal to me because I mean, you know, my political views have changed as I've got older. You know, I come from a Telegraph-reading family who are very conservative, true, and blue. My wife is Labour, and I've softened as I've aged and been more empathetic, but I wouldn't say I'm a lefty, but I also wouldn't say I'm a righty either. So, I kind of sit down the middle. I am commercial. And I do worry that sometimes we've gone too far,

but the problem with that pendulum, sometimes there's an extremism and it goes too far. And I think what's happened, we went too far this way and now we've gone too far that way and we need to come back. That's how I feel.

Interviewer: Do you think that we saw that pendulum swing after the Ardern government and the pandemic?

P7: Very much so. A lot of it, I think – Jacinda Ardern did a fantastic job on the first one. Yeah. The second one I felt for me personally because you're asking my opinion overreached, and really upset a lot of people and polarised a lot of people and I think since then New Zealand feels very ruthless. I work in Australia a lot. I've literally got back from Australia yesterday. I do a lot of work over there. Different system. You know, they had the "yes" vote, only Victoria voted yes, the rest of it didn't go through. And what I'm saying is like it wouldn't have cared which party it was or which gender someone was going to get beaten up and scapegoat and it was a very difficult job and I'm not sure any other governments would have done particularly better. So it doesn't matter if it's blue or it's green or it's yellow or it's red or whatever else. I think it was exceptional times.

But I think that pendulum is a good question. I think what's happened is it got too far. I think it's also threatened a certain genre of white male, and they don't know how to handle it and so therefore this is the way that they respond and they are desperately trying to cling to some sort of status and power and you're seeing it come through in those kind of videos. Well, they're a dying breed. And this is what they're fighting because they're actually fighting for their status, their significance, their social standing. And so, they're a wounded animal and they're a threatened species. And this is why you're getting this kind of stuff going out. So, it's not hate speech. It's just more no one's – they're almost being extreme and they need to come back and sort of say actually there is other views here that we need to take into consideration. Can we have a conversation about that?

Interviewer: Thank you. So this is Sean Plunket on The Platform, with "Why we wage war on woke".

[CLIP 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform "Why we wage war on woke"]

Interviewer: So, you've just seen Sean run through street cleaning contracts, the LGBTQ housing story on TVNZ, and then academic funding and gather them all into the basket of woke. Were there any of those that resonated with you that you thought, "Yep, fair enough"?

P7: First of all, I think the fact the media took a lot of money from the government really shook up a lot of people. For me, it felt that the fourth estate no longer becomes independent and that they've lost their voice or lost their teeth.

Interviewer: So, you mean the Public Interest Journalism Fund?

P7: Yeah. I think it was about 350 million from memory. Yeah. And it went across because the media really struggling for obvious commercial reasons because of digital and you're seeing these platforms on the periphery pop up because they can't see balanced

journalism. I think mainstream media's definitely lost a lot of respect. And when your media take money from a government, you lose your independence. You can't be independent. You can't say you're independent.

And I know there's D-Notices. I have no evidence of this, but I imagine there's some things they're allowed to talk about. There's some things they're not. There would have been some conditions on that deal. No one hands over that kind of money without some conditions. I would assume. I don't have evidence. I'm making an educated guess, of course. So I think why we're seeing this is because the government of the day went way too much that way and the media took that and I imagine there are a lot of fish hooks and conditions on that and I think therefore these guys but again it's gone way too far and I think all people of all races and all genders should have access to getting contracts, including indigenous. I think it shouldn't matter. I think that about LGBT – their people – as well. Like there shouldn't be any favouritism.

I think it's a question of balanced reporting in mainstream media and problem is the media isn't balanced anymore. What they're saying is he's having a crack at TVNZ, saying they're the most woke media. It doesn't matter if the lady's blonde or Māori with a – what do they call them? The lady that's got the – moko. Oh yes. It shouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter. I don't care where that is delivered from. But the reporting needs to be balanced. And I think what's happening is you're seeing all these Michael Laws and Sean Plunket and stuff popping up because they've probably been muzzled. And I think this is why you've got this Wright guy, right? Whatever his name, I've never heard of him before. Bankrolling this. So I think amongst my peer group we all agree that we think the mainstream media has been muzzled and therefore that's a dangerous proposition because the media should be independent but as soon as you take money from someone I believe that independence and integrity is called into question. So business should be a media should be able to make its money and it's like Radio National is called Radio Labour.

Interviewer: Radio New Zealand?

P7: Radio New Zealand. Yeah. So, you know, it's often known as Radio Labour. Yeah. Amongst my circles, right? And they're like, this media just is not offering balanced reporting. And so then men, not necessarily me because I don't listen to this stuff, go down little rabbit holes and send me little Facebook messages of angry little white men talking about being on the periphery. Yeah. So yeah, I think they're trying to get attention and like any news platform, hijack amygdalas to get attention eyeballs and what they're saying because if they say everything their honest is saying, the brain doesn't detect the brain only detects difference. So they're trying to be different and I just – it's just swayed too much. I think that's what a lot of men of my gender and my age and stage feel that we just lost the plot a bit and the media should be there to keep the government accountable and as soon as the government the money they muzzled them and then we lost that accountability so then we don't watch the news anymore and this is probably why these things spring up and this is probably why this platform has more followers than I even thought. That's just my view.

Interviewer: Yeah. Surprisingly popular. Still fringe but yeah surprisingly high viewership according to their own figures. So did you have any strong feelings about the diversity hires for street sweeping?

P7: Like I said before it should be balanced should be valued very well and just be really clear on the best person for the best job. Yeah, 100% should be a general race or anything else. Just put the best proposal forward and I don't care if your business is run as Māori, Pasifika or Pākehā or combination hybrid of or an Indian cleaner. I don't care. Yeah. Like just back the business what it is, you know? I think there's this word tokenism.

Interviewer: Mm.

P7: So I think we need to be careful. It's a fair stage for everyone.

Interviewer: Yeah. And finally the Marsden Fund. So Plunket came up with some droll characterizations of funded studies. Did you find this...

P7: Yeah, he was pretty disparaging of them. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. There's some probably some pretty bloody clever people in there and some pretty clever scientists. I remember walking past there. I think the theme so far is it's like give everyone a good go. And yeah, I just feel – I feel men of this [type] ... because you can see they're all white and they're all of a certain age. Yes, they are. We are hypersensitised to loss, you know, and we feel like we're being shut out. And I'm talking about these guys are probably about 10 years older than me, roughly. Yes, they are. So they're in their twilight years, they're in their sunset years. Yeah. And they're trying to go out with a bang and they're trying to, you know, create some kind of paradigm shift along the way. And I think this is why Trump has appealed to so many because he's anti-woke as well. Yeah. You know, and then obviously Albanese in Australia, Dutton looked very severe and the Australian people said, "We don't want another Trump." And Albanese played it like a fiddle.

Interviewer: Yeah. Timing was all.

P7: Yeah, it was clever. Very clever campaign. Yeah. And lucky as well. Very lucky. Because I didn't think he was going to get in. Sorry. I didn't think Albo was going to get in because he's not business friendly. No, he wasn't polling well. No, he wasn't polling at all. And then Trump turned up and he said, "Well, if you're Trump, look at that guy." Yeah. And yeah, they just took him down. Took him out.

Interviewer: I wonder what would have happened had we had a Trump election and seen some of the fallout before our last election.

P7: Probably the same thing actually. But it's interesting. It's interesting. Well, interesting because I mean a lot of my mates are National. Yeah. But they're actually really disillusioned with Luxon.

Interviewer: Really?

P7: They think he's really average. Yeah. And we think he probably was a good businessman. Yeah. But that hasn't translated into running a country. And there's something unrelatable about him. I don't know what it is, but he just does not warm. I don't know if it's EQ or his religion or the fact he's being disingenuous. Something that people intuitively, subconsciously can't pin on him. And he doesn't poll well as a result. You see?

Interviewer: So yeah, it's interesting with Luxon. It's interesting because the next clip I'm going to show you in a way addresses that sentiment – a “Luxon is too woke” sentiment. So here, as you've just been discussing, a clip from Duncan Garner, also previous press gallery leader and so on, very respected broadcaster.

P7: He's been fighting some demons lately though, isn't he?

Interviewer: He sure has. And he's also now kind of on the fringe. He's not on The Platform. He's got his own podcast type show and called Slam Dunc, and the title of this clip is “Is Luxon National's biggest liability?”. This is last year.

[CLIP 4: Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

Interviewer: So that's a different perspective. That's one that he's taken an email from obviously a Christian woman who works in childcare centre used the transgender debate and leapfrogged off that to criticize Luxon.

P7: I think his reply from his office was completely disingenuous.

Interviewer: You thought that was disingenuous?

P7: Yeah, totally. He's not. He's a religious. We know he has very strong religious views which they have to temper down and spin in PR all the time. That is bullshit. He didn't mean that at all. There wasn't one word of truth in that.

He hasn't been able to suppress his highly religious views. Obviously that lady was a Christian lady. He's a Christian or whatever extreme he is because I think he's pretty extreme from my understanding. They kept the lid on that. Yeah. Like no, that's completely inauthentic. Don't believe it. Don't believe it from the office. Spin. It's just a spin. It just it's not. He wouldn't – he can't politically say that he's not because if he does, it's a vote killer.

Interviewer: Right. Right. So, has the Luxon Christianity angle been a point of criticism in your business community or is it just his general incompetence or inability to transfer his business skills to politics?

P7: Good, really good question. The latter. The latter wouldn't care if he's a Christian or Mormon or, you know, Brethren or whatever. Get the economy going. And this conversation had with my wife, the country, regardless of the government, regardless of your political belief, it would have been a shitshow. All governments were in a shitshow. We had to protect our health system because all governments of all colours have

woefully under-invested in our health system. So, we had to protect our health system. So, it was going to be overrun and a lot of people would die. So they did a great job there, but it's obviously come at quite a cost and I think the Reserve Bank was very badly run by Adrian Orr, and it's very easy to throw the boot in with hindsight or John Key or anything else. But Luxon it's like it's like Sam Cane following Richie McCaw. It's really hard to follow someone of that calibre that good. Yes. Because John Key did a lot well he was personality politics but he had a charm. He managed to do it and but he was a smiling assassin on foreign exchange and we all know his background as well. He pumped it up but it wouldn't matter if National was in or Labour was in. They would have all got – they were all thrown money at the government. I think it was a bit of a lolly scramble, the second wave, and I think that caused a lot of problems. I think we had a lot of zombie businesses that were propped up and those businesses have now gone to the wall but it meant all that money went to the wall as well and that money could have gone to – I think we in the second round I think we should have been more selective obviously. As a business I took the first one I didn't take the second one because I was in the agriculture sector and I wasn't affected and you know there wasn't any justification to do so and I also wanted that money going to people that deserved it so –

Yeah, your question is a really good one. It's just he just doesn't seem to have a believability about him or warmth about him or so I think people are pretty disillusioned with politics. Almost to the, you know, local government elections here in Hawke's Bay. We're disillusioned as you know, you're closer than anyone else. Completely disillusioned. The turnout will be what 30%, 27% if we're lucky, 25. Like only a quarter of people vote because they don't give a shit because they're apathetic because they just don't care. And for those that do run, know how to work the system because they're narcissistic. You know, they've got the confidence. You've got someone like [local politician] who is a narcissist. I mean she's just in my view I know her but she's all about [her]. It's never been about politics. I know her husband. I think he's slightly better, but you know, they're in it for themselves and I think that's why people were so apathetic about politicians. So, yeah, Luxon to me, he's just been ineffective. And I think we're all looking and this is why David Seymour has had such a voice. If anything, David Seymour has become more stronger because of Luxon's weakness. And in my circles, David Seymour is quite well respected from a business point of view because he's saying it how it is. I'm not a big fan of him, but I don't know what – there's nothing better out there.

Interviewer: Does he seem more authentic?

P7: I think he does. Yeah, I think he does. I think he's just more articulate. He just says it how it is and he seems to relate and a lot better than that plonker Shane Jones. So that's why he doesn't get much airtime. It's why David Seymour is.

Interviewer: So would you agree with Garner who's trying to frame Luxon as too woke?

P7: Well, that's a woke response. But he's got no – he can't not – he has to because it's a vote killer. So it's a performative woke response than a real one. It's manufactured. Manufactured. Yeah. Yeah.

So we're all apathetic because we don't know actually what they think and what they stand for. And this is why so many people are just not voting anymore or you know like we have a leadership crisis. We have a leadership deficit in this country. Same in Australia, same in the UK, same in US. And it's almost coming down to you have to lead yourselves and your own family and you have to take responsibility for your own self-efficacy and your family or your community or church or whatever you're into. So I think you know that political power just people just they're not buying into anymore.

Interviewer: This is the final thing we're going to look at and we're going back to the politicians now. This is Winston Peters New Zealand's original populist. He's got quite interested in woke stuff lately. And so here's a post from X.com:

[TEXT 5: Winston Peters' post – definition of “woke”]

P7: Yeah, but that's his own definition. Yeah, that's his own definition. So, for me, he's pretending that's an Oxford English dictionary definition. That's his own.

Yeah, like, I can't articulate any better. They're just going too far. It's going to come back.

Interviewer: You know, this constantly trying to tie “woke” back to this transgender issue too. It is a prevalent theme and we've just seen it recently too just in the last couple of days with transgender athletes being banned from community sport. So “woke” can encompass so many different things apparently, including this and the defining of a woman which seems to be done mainly by older men.

P7: Yeah well they need to take a look at themselves. Yeah. Yeah. You know, like I won't cast aspersions until – It's not like they're God's gift, you know, like these blokes are not exactly in terrific nick themselves, aren't they?

Interviewer: Yes. So why is it that they feel they need to champion what they term “real women”?

P7: Why they champion them? Yeah. Because the traditional is seen as no threat, I suppose. I just feel it's really funny. I've spotted a pattern in my own life again because I've got guys that are older than me. Have guys that are older than me are like 58, 59. They've got about 5 years of retirement to go. Yeah. And they've been made redundant and they cannot get another job. And they think they got 20 years of experience, but they've actually only got two years of experience done 10 times and they work defined their self-worth and they never kept their skills up and they thought their power base was being white and male and then it wasn't enough and they haven't adapted with the times now therefore irrelevant and it's really hard for them, right? Really hard for them. So I don't know if that even answers your question

Interviewer: It's an interesting insight.

P7: Well it is because they're just literally now going to be the invisible generation. There are more millennials in the workforce now than ever. It's the biggest demographic.

Interviewer: Oh, really? Yeah.

P7: Millennials are by a country mile now. You can do your research, but the millennials dominate. Not even Gen X or Boomers because the Boomers have gone out now. Like Boomers are one year, one generation above me and I'm a Gen X. But like they are a very threatened species and you're seeing this kind of behaviour from them and they're just trying to cling on the last bits of power that they possibly can because traditionally in society had a lot of power. Yeah. And I see them doing that and I've got one Aussie mate who is a redneck you know he'll send me clips like this and he is very threatened very threatened by losing all status and significance because no one wants to feel insignificant, lack status, because it's a survival mechanism. And so if he was to lose his job and couldn't get – you know some of these guys are actually unemployable now, because they haven't kept up with the programme. They're not adapting. You've seen them – you see them in Council. Yeah. But I've seen them literally they phone me and go do you know anyone and I'm like I wouldn't recommend you if you're the last person on earth because you're not you haven't got it. Yeah. You haven't got the skill. You It was called the Peter principle which you get – you know the Peter principle?

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. When you're promoted beyond your point of competence.

P7: Yeah. Exactly. And they're so they're sort of unconsciously incompetent. So you're seeing this behaviour. I think this is why you're seeing this behaviour from these men.

Interviewer: Awesome. Thank you.

Transcript – Participant 8

Interview date: 26 July 2025

Interviewer: So we'll start this by asking you just to say a little bit about yourself before we leap into the clips.

P8: Sure. I am a female in my late 20s and my political views are more left-leaning, but I believe that we need some of the structure that the right side brings to be able to function and to be able to afford those left-wing policies.

My political background in terms of where I was raised – my mother's side of the family is very traditional right-leaning rural New Zealand and my father's side of the family is very left-leaning education-based. I would probably sit in a comfortable but still relatively low income bracket. I myself consider myself a rural individual who's both worked and continues to live rurally.

Interviewer: So you moved to Hawke's Bay reasonably recently, you're here with your partner and you're moving house in a week.

P8: Yes, that's right. And I'm a musician. I have a passion for anything creative, whether it be music or any form of creative expression such as crafting and painting and bits and pieces. I also love to skateboard and I am training in pole fitness at the moment as a fitness activity. I'm not looking to make a career out of it. I really enjoy reading a lot of fiction, or if I do read non-fiction, it tends to be biographies of musicians more often than not.

Interviewer: So you said something interesting about your social media habits.

P8: Yes, as of approximately a year or so ago, I removed myself from social media for my mental health. I don't think that my use of social media caused my mental health issues, but they certainly exacerbated them. I definitely feel a benefit from not being on social media. I also do feel very removed from what's going on nationally, globally, etc. But I think that in order to be able to help my community and those around me, I first have to be able to help myself. That's where that stems from.

Interviewer: Well, so as we discussed, I'm going to show you a few clips. They're very short. Going to start off with a politician who is called Shane Jones. You know Shane Jones?

P8: Yes, I know Shane Jones.

[Clip 1 – Shane Jones Speech to NZ First Convention]

Interviewer: Okay. So, he went from whether you're a he or a she to climate politics to the green cling-ons and lots in between.

P8: I think in terms of my first thoughts around his comments – obviously on whether you’re a he or a she or anything in between – that sort of conversation when spoken about in such a negative way is denying each person’s individuality. That’s where we first find our purpose, when we have our own expression of individuality. I don’t think personally that whether someone chooses to express their gender or sexuality or anything related affects anyone else unless they are proactively harming someone with that information, which very often is not the case. The majority of people just want to live a life that they feel comfortable in. If someone who was born what we identify as a female and then they choose to identify as a male, that doesn’t harm anyone unless they have some sort of action as an individual that obviously harms someone. But their choice to express themselves doesn’t tend to do that.

Interviewer: Why do you think he’s saying that kind of stuff?

P8: I think that opinion is very much something that is shared amongst older, more conservative generations. Well, not necessarily generations – there’s still younger conservative people. I think I grew up around a lot of that and that’s why someone like Shane Jones making comments like that, it’s just a way to try and grab the agreement of those people.

Interviewer: It’s familiar, is it?

P8: Yeah, definitely. And also in regards to the refinery, what he said about the green cling-ons. I think we have this idea in terms of our industries – I say we, I’m not sure who I’m referring to as we – “the right” I guess have an idea in terms of industry and production of products that a certain way is the best way when we’ve been shown the facts that our earth’s temperature is rising. That I can understand can be argued to a point because the earth temperature has fluctuated on and off for thousands, hundreds of thousands of years. But what we can’t argue is the fact that we have got oceans that are full of rubbish. Oil, for instance, is a finite resource. These are things that we cannot reverse the action of easily. Oil definitely, but obviously plastics or rubbish in the oceans, it would take a lot, but these are things that – I lost my train of thought there.

Interviewer: If you’d happened to encounter this speech somehow, would you have found it amusing or bewildering or annoying or how would you describe it?

P8: I find it amusing. Throughout him making statements, I was smirking. I find it amusing. I think that it’s very difficult to relate to anything he says in any way. I think it’s because of where I sit and the communities and the people that I choose to surround myself with do not share these opinions nearly ever. So it is just quite comical because I feel like someone like Shane Jones doesn’t necessarily have views beyond what is good for the country in terms of anything other than economically.

Whereas running a country, running the earth, running any sort of group of people, I look at it like looking after your own body and that the concept of hau ora, the Māori concept of hau ora, like you have to have all the different things – the fuel, the shelter, the home,

the friends, the purpose. But I feel like this is just about processing, producing and it doesn't really look at the social issues as much holistically.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's not holistic.

P8: Yeah, that's a good word for it.

Interviewer: So your laughter was due to the fact that it's so different from the life realities of your own social group?

P8: So he represents quite a different social group most definitely. I think in regards to where anyone sits politically – those who are far right – to me Shane Jones seems like a caricature of a politician. Whereas I think I had a conversation with my mom one day where we got into a discussion about politics at the dinner table and she sort of slammed her fist down, not aggressively but just in outburst, and said “You know Charlie, the whole world can't be Chlöe Swarbricks!” So I feel like to my mom, Chlöe Swarbrick is a caricature of what the left is.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

P8: So I think just wherever you sit in politics, the opposing side always seems like a joke in some way, comical in some way because of their views.

Interviewer: So you won't have heard of this broadcaster. It's called The Platform. It was set up in 2021. It's a right-wing fringe privately funded platform. But a lot of older guys who were “cancelled” for various reasons, Michael Laws, Sean Plunket, Martin Devlin ended up on The Platform.

P8: I feel like I may have heard of it. It's obviously not something that I follow along with, but I feel like I've definitely – I can see Michael Laws with headphones on and if it's what I'm thinking of.

Interviewer: Yeah. You're about to see that again. So my second clip is indeed Michael, and because my project has an environmental focus and it's also looking at the whole concept of “woke” this brings both those concepts together in a clip called “woke environmentalism”.

P8: Oh yes. I have seen this. I don't know if it's this clip, but I'm aware of the existence of this.

[Clip 2 – Michael Laws, The Platform, Woke Environmentalism]

P8: I grew up in Whanganui. I know who Michael Laws is. My mum's best friend was actually his nanny for his children years ago, which was – I would have been seven or eight at the time, but I've had a few experiences with Michael Laws. As a young girl, it didn't bear any weight or impact on me at the time, but yeah.

Interviewer: So he talked about the extinction of species and he justified how – how did that land?

P8: The one thing that sticks out for me from that clip was the way that he – it was almost like a Freudian slip the way he said “inanimate objects” and then he went “actually no they are animate” like it’s almost as if his view of the environment is that it’s just here for us to take from and anything to get in our way is a hindrance of progress almost.

I think – I’m not sure. Obviously, like I said, I’m quite removed from social media and the news and things like that. The way that he said “inanimate” – I think he just let slip about how he feels, that he’s actually saying what he’s thinking and obviously humans cannot exist without other species. It’s cause and effect, right? Bumblebees to pollinate. I’m sure Michael Laws drinks milk.

Interviewer: Yeah. We need healthy ecosystems.

P8: Yeah, we do. It’s the idea of the butterfly effect, I guess. You remove one thing and it affects all these other things that we may not even have knowledge of that it’s going to affect. He also talked about how the Māori people prior to colonization caused extinction amongst species. I think that is an invalid argument because the way that the Māori people lived their lives in that day and age, they didn’t have access to a broad network of knowledge beyond face-to-face communication.

Whereas we now can – I can send a message to someone in Stewart Island and say, “Hey, we’re running out of this sort of bird here. You guys got heaps down there? We’re good with these. We’ve got plenty of them.” Whereas they were just hunting for their survival. I’m sure they would be aware that they were seeing less and less of them, but we’ve got other means to be able to solve these issues and we know what we’re doing. We’ve got evidence that we’re getting rid of these creatures.

I feel like my understanding is that the very right leaning – it’s always an us and them. Even in this discussion of woke environmentalism he’s talking about creating infrastructure and facilities and jobs for those of us that live here in Aotearoa and not wanting to hinder the progress of creating jobs for these so-called immigrants that want to come in. But I feel like in him saying that, it’s still him hinting at people leaving in droves and people immigrants wanting to come in in droves. To me, it still feels like he’s going “This is our New Zealand and we need it to run at this rate.”

But I bet you if we didn’t have any beautiful species and stuff, it’d be less of a draw for people to want to come here. I think part of New Zealand is that we are such a beautiful country. I mean, you can say that about any country. Lots of countries are beautiful, but it’s our climate, it’s our animals, it’s our unique wildlife. Like I said, butterfly effect. You pull that beetle out of the equation, who knows what else drops because of it.

Interviewer: So, here’s Sean Plunket on The Platform and he’s going to give three examples of what he calls “wokery”.

[Clip 3 – Sean Plunket on The Platform “Why we wage war on woke”]

P8: Where do you begin? The first thing that sticks out to me is the fact that someone such as himself who thinks he deserves this platform, The Platform, if you will, to be able to discuss issues that he either agrees or disagrees with, doesn't even have the respect to be able to pronounce te reo correctly – its correct pronunciation. He completely and almost blatantly, I felt like he butchered it. It was really – and if you can't have respect for the opposing – well, it's not even opposing because that wasn't – it was really a side comment to what – it was talking about diversity amongst council, those who are council contractors and who they employ. But it was a blatant disrespect of Māori amongst that.

I think diversity doesn't just obviously say you've got to hire more Māori people. It also means you've got to hire more people who are Muslim, more people who are non-binary, more people who – it's everything. It's called considering everyone and taking off those blinkers of unconscious bias like "I'm not going to hire people who just look like me and sound like me. I'm going to consider all the CVs that come across my desk."

Interviewer: So maybe there is a wilful reframing of that, presenting it as if diversity measures mean you must hire certain people?

P8: I feel like that's exactly where he's looking at it from. But without considering what the word diversity actually means because that's then again not diverse if you're just hiring Māori people because there's so many other cultures, genders, everything.

I think I read – someone actually on Facebook, a friend of mine put up a Facebook status recently that said something along the lines of "Why are we not talking about the fact that more female musicians aren't booked in New Zealand?" – I think it was artists not just musicians, I can't recall – but the discussion that got brought to that post was really interesting. Someone commented that I didn't know about the fact that a lot of orchestras have now started blind auditions because for the longest time it was stated that there's more men because men play better and then they start these blind auditions and all of a sudden there's a lot more women in the orchestra.

I guess it's the same with employing someone. If you're employing contractors based on their diversity, it's a good thing, but not just hiring for diversity. But I don't think that just hiring for diversity will cause contractors to not be as successful in their businesses. But we should just be hiring people for the sake of having the skills. Full stop.

Interviewer: The mocking way in which he pronounces the Māori term. And why is he saying it in that way? Why is he approaching it in that way? Who's it for?

P8: Oh yeah. Well, exactly. It's for those that are similar people to him. I think that since moving to Hawke's Bay – and I think it would have happened anywhere that I moved within Aotearoa – but I've taken on a retail role and a retail role now means that I am public facing whereas the rest of my working career has been spent by myself alone on a farm each day with my motorbike and my six dogs. So my experience was only dealing with people who I chose to be around and even some of those environments that I was involved in are still very right leaning and often racist and sexist.

But since coming to a public facing role where I can't choose who I interact with each day – unless obviously there was an issue and I didn't want to deal with someone, I have that option – I wasn't aware of just how deep the racism runs in Aotearoa. I've always known that a lot of people don't speak te reo Māori, be that people of Māori background or of other descent. Standing at the counter at [retail outlet] and greeting someone with “Mōrena!” or “Kia ora!” or any sort of Māori word that I use – I have now got farmers who will actively avoid me in the store because they have said to me, “Don't you dare say that to me.” And I continue to. I did not realize just the breadth – the distance people would go to, sorry, to try and squash what is such a huge part of our nation.

People such as Sean Plunket who proactively try to extinguish the native culture of New Zealand and by misusing, mispronouncing Māori words when he certainly very easily could – it really angers me and it's not necessarily my anger, but I empathise with it.

Interviewer: It's very brave of you to keep doing it.

P8: Well, it is the most – it's the minimum of brave that I could be. I think there's a lot more that I could be doing, I would like to do. But for the little girl that's come in and had basic interactions with me in Māori and you can see it light up her face, that's worth so much more to me than any “don't you dare speak that shit to me.” Oh my god. It's been very confronting. But I'm grateful that I'm who I am and that I'm able to just say – not quite literally say “fuck off” but with my polite actions that's what I'm doing.

But [Sean Plunket] is the same person that's telling me that at the retail counter. He is empowering his listeners to keep coming into [my retail store] and saying that. It's not even me that it hurts though. So it's bizarre that they think that even trying to squash it amongst someone like myself who's just trying to encourage the language is...

Interviewer: Yes. And so he went on then after that he went to LGBT housing.

P8: He didn't talk about the article at all.

Interviewer: No, he just talked about a rainbow flag and said TVNZ was as woke as it could be and he wasn't allowed to comment on their article.

P8: I can certainly understand that people within the rainbow community will have had difficulties arise in any situation coming up against people who don't understand what life is like for them, especially of the older whiter masculine generation who find anything other than their own existence different difficult to comprehend sometimes. But I didn't realize that it was something that was brought up in the media and discussed. Was this recent?

Interviewer: Yeah, reasonably recently. It was just at the end of last year. So it must have been a brief article on TVNZ and it probably popped up on their Facebook page.

P8: I'm not quite sure what to make of that one. I guess he's commenting on the fact that they've blocked the comments though too, isn't he? Because he's like, “We can't ridicule” – like for him reading his newspaper in the morning, The Dominion Post or

whatever, probably all of them, he can't jump on. I mean, actually, he's an outlier because he's got his own platform where he can get on and discuss it. But what's the difference to there being a newspaper article about it and you not being able to respond to that in a public platform?

Sometimes the discourse that ensues is so polarizing that having those channels open doesn't do anyone any benefit because we often see people talking online as if they're not talking to a person. They're talking to an idea. They don't see the other person on the side of the screen. It's just the words that anger them. It's like the stereotype again and they can't – I mean anger doesn't allow you to think clearly and so you're just getting angry at an idea.

Interviewer: So here's Duncan Garner asserting that Luxon might be a little bit woke. This is a very short clip.

[Clip 4 – Duncan Garner, Is Luxon National's biggest liability?]

P8: My first thoughts after watching the clip are we are becoming more comfortable I feel with being able to express ourselves as a people as a whole. So once upon a time even considering being a homosexual was almost – you were putting your life on the line. And now we're in a space where we're willing to accept more and more ideas and more and more ways of living. Like I said in an earlier clip, if it doesn't harm anyone else, so be it. Just let people exist.

Children are a fountain for imagination and creativity. If a child says I identify as the opposite gender, another gender or anything – I mean, a child could identify as a toilet seat and you'd go, "That's funny. This week Jimmy thinks he's a toilet seat." Like it's a child is just learning to express how they can imagine themselves and be and also they're always taking in how we respond to that. So we're in a more accepting space right now but I feel that the response to this is very copy and paste – like that could have been sent to any issue that had arisen involving any sort of gender or sexuality statement.

Interviewer: So they're disappointed that Luxon as a fundamentalist Christian didn't respond to a caring woman of God.

P8: I think that in terms of being compared to Jacinda, I feel that especially politically, if Christopher Luxon was to say anything against anyone in the LGBTQIA+ community, it would be extremely damning because of just how broad that community encompasses so many variations of so many different things and it would be damning. So to then say he supports that, that's what is then compared to Jacinda as being woke, but he's not – in terms of a political leader, he's not going to come out because he would lose I think so much support and it goes beyond just the children and the preschool.

Interviewer: You're saying he's walking a very thin line between his own personal beliefs and the political reality?

P8: Politicians are always saying what they can to keep the vote on their side. I think the visibility that the LGBTQIA+ community has now and the support – because it is actually

such an encompassing community, it's like a spectrum and so many people are affected by it. So to not support it in any way...

Interviewer: We're going to finish off with this short X.com post by Winston Peters. So this is a Winston Peters post from 9th of March this year.

[Text 5 – Winston Peters' X.com post – Definition of “woke”]

P8: I feel like it describes him. If I was to use the word woke I feel it would be Winston Peters is the furthest from that. But when I read that – I think that defines him.

Interviewer: It's interesting you should say that. It's the first time I've looked at it from that perspective. And you know, it is a slippery and elastic definition.

P8: But when I hear the word woke, I feel like it's the most extreme of someone who is awake to the manipulation that goes on in terms of our political climate or just any issues that affect us really. Like I think someone who's woke is the most extreme version of someone who is awake to the fact that this is a facade at the end of the day. And we are nature. We're so far removed from that idea.

Interviewer: So what's the facade?

P8: The facade, I think, is that anyone in power or any of these systems is going to get us to a place that is better than where we are, but we've all got such a different idea of what that is. But the way that he's using the words and spinning his idea of what woke is, it reminds me of Make America Great Again because it's like turning the meaning of those words into something that doesn't necessarily exist in relation to what it actually means. I don't know if that makes sense.

So like the idea of make America great again, what really was so great about it that you want to get back and did it ever actually really exist as that or is it just what you perceive it to be? Whereas his idea of woke is – do the people who you call woke really exist as that whole idea or is it just what you perceive them to be?

Interviewer: Is it a word that people can fill with whatever they want? And is that its power?

P8: I think so. Yeah. That's a very good way of putting it.

Interviewer: Well, that's probably a really good point at which to stop. So, thank you.

Appendix 3: Interview information for participants

Information for prospective interviewees

Massey University

Research Information and interview consent form

Kia ora,

My name is Alison (Ally) Carline. I'm a Master's student studying by distance from Hastings, Hawke's Bay, through Massey University.

During 2025 I'm conducting research for my thesis under the supervision of Associate Professor Sean Phelan in the School of Humanities, Media, and Creative Communication.

As part of that project, I am conducting one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of 8 voting age New Zealanders. My objective is to investigate how people respond to "culture wars" rhetoric from politicians and media, particularly when it is used in debates around environmental protection and economic development.

The interview format

During each interview, conducted either face to face in a venue of your choosing or by Zoom, you will watch and listen to short excerpts from four (4) political and media broadcasts, and will be asked to describe your responses to the expressions, speech, and gestures in the clip.

I will occasionally prompt with a prepared set of open-ended questions and follow up on points you make with new open-ended questions. You will always have the flexibility to deviate from the conversational direction of travel or reconsider your initial responses.

There are no right or wrong answers; you will be free to express exactly how you feel about what you have watched or heard. If there are any clips you would rather not comment on for any reason, please say so and we will stop the interview or move on to the next question, whichever you prefer.

Your interview is intended to last at most 60 minutes in length (four 2–5 minute clips followed by an approximately 10 minute question/answer session for each).

There will be an audio-visual recording made of this interview conducted either through video conferencing software or by me, in person.

You retain control over your content.

As soon as possible after the interview has taken place I will send you: 1. the transcript of your verbal responses and 2. access to the actual footage of your interview. At this point you can review, change, correct, or delete any part of the interview record.

Once you had the chance to review and signed off on your interview footage and transcript, the video footage will be destroyed by or under the direct supervision of my Supervisor and only the anonymised transcript will be used for research purposes from that point onwards. This transcript data will be held as set out by the [data retention policy of Massey University](#) and for a maximum of one year.

Your participation is voluntary.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to pause or stop the interview at any time without explanation. You may choose not to answer any question, and you can withdraw at any time up until you have had the opportunity to review your own content and have released it back to me for inclusion in the project.

If you do choose to withdraw at any point before you have released your reviewed footage and transcript back to me, any contribution you have made up until that point will be destroyed under the supervision of my supervisor.

Your participation is confidential.

My supervisor and I will be the only parties with direct access to the transcripts of the video recordings.

While the confidential data records will need to include some information to make it clear which participant said what, at no point will any participant be identified in the published research. If the research refers to a specific response you have given, I will use a pseudonym to conceal your identity (eg Participant 1). If you have one you would like me to use for you, please let me know.

If you're interested, let's meet!

If after reading this information, you are interested in participating in this research, thank you! I would first like to offer you the chance to meet with me before any formal research takes place so we can get to know each other a bit better, and you can ask me any questions you would like to about the study. You are free to decide at this point that you are not interested in taking part.

You will receive no financial compensation for taking part in this research, but you may find it enlightening and rewarding to talk about how you feel as a citizen in a world of rapid political change.

You can contact me at: Alison.Carline.1@uni.massey.ac.nz or on [REDACTED].

You can contact my supervisor, Assoc Prof Sean Phelan, at:
Sean.phelan@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 25/28. If you have any questions about the ethics of this study, you can contact the Ethics Committee, which reviews research studies in order to protect research participants:

Email: humanethics@massey.ac.nz, Phone: (06) 356 9099 ext 83840

Participant consent form

Once you have read the information above and had time to discuss any questions with me, and with the proviso that you can withdraw at any time and for whatever reason, please let me know whether you choose to participate in this interview. If you decide to go ahead, I will give you a copy of this consent form that you can keep for your records.

I have read this information and consent form. All my questions about this form and participation in Alison Carline's Master's research project at Massey University have been answered.

I note Ally has offered to meet with me, free of further obligation, before any formal research takes place.

I agree to take part in this study and permit the audio-visual recording of the interview to be used for research purposes.

Interview participant name _____

Interview participant signature _____

Date _____

If you would like a summary of the eventual findings from this research, and/or a copy of the eventual thesis document (and any associated journal articles), please confirm your email address:

Researcher Signature _____ Date _____

Thank you very much for being part of my project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 25/28. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, email humanethics3@massey.ac.nz.

Poster advertising for interview participants

Distributed to neighbourhood Facebook groups and community groups.

Invitation: Interview participants wanted

Massey University research project



**Would you like to talk about the way
politicians and media communicate?**

**Can you spare an hour for a confidential,
online or in-person interview?**

<p>Kia ora! My name is Ally Carline. I'm a Master's student studying by distance from Hastings, Hawke's Bay, through Massey University.</p> <p>During 2025 I'm conducting research for my political communication thesis in the School of Humanities, Media, and Creative Communication. My objective is to investigate how people respond to 'culture wars' rhetoric from politicians and the media, with a focus on environmental issues.</p> <p>I will be conducting one-on-one interviews with a cross-section of 8-10 voting age New Zealanders.</p>	<p>Participants will as far as possible reflect a 'slice' of Aotearoa New Zealand - including Māori, Pākehā, younger, older, rural, urban, from an immigrant community, from the LGBTQ+ community. You may feel more than one of these describes you, and that's great too.</p> <p>Your personal political views and voting history are not the focus of my research, but you're welcome to talk about whatever you'd like during the session. You will never be identified in any published results, and you can withdraw at any time during the process.</p>
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**To find out more, visit <http://bit.ly/3GKu5lm>
or contact me (Ally) on [REDACTED].**

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Oahu Matatika 3, Application OM3 25/28.

Interview Guide (reference for interviewer)

Opening

Welcome, introductions, and go over the research objective again. Remind the participant the session is being videoed and that I will be taking notes. They will be able to review this footage as well as the interview transcript once complete, and make any changes they wish.

“I’m interested in your reactions to and thoughts about recent political and media discussions about the environment and economic development in this country. There are no right or wrong answers, no direction I want you to head in; how you respond to these excerpts, and what you truly think, is what interests me. You can go in any direction you like.”

Reiterate confidentiality measures, and the right of the participant to skip any of the clips or withdraw entirely up until the point the interviews are anonymised and aggregated.

Political and media clips

Play the clips one by one and engage in conversation after each one.

After each clip, first invite the participant to describe their reactions, without prompts.

Once they have run out of observations, provide some open-ended prompts, such as:

1. What stands out to you in this clip
2. How do you relate to the issues being described?
3. What do you think about the way messages are being communicated here (verbal and non-verbal?)
4. What issues are being highlighted in this clip?
5. What did you think about the way media portrayed this debate?
6. When you hear the terms “cabbage patch kids”, “unicorn kissing”, what comes to mind?
7. How did you react to (for example) the concept of “climatism as the new religion” and “skinks as [some sort of] a religious icon”? These choices will vary depending on the level of interest the participant has shown in particular statements made during the clip.
8. What does the term “woke” mean to you? What do you think about how this term was presented?

Appendix 4: Ethical Basis for Multicultural Engagement

(Smith, 2021)

A full ethics application for the interview component of this project received final approval in May 2025, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 25/28.

Core Treaty of Waitangi principles guided how this research was designed and carried out for all participants (Massey University, 2017), including acknowledging the ethical implications of multicultural engagement.

Aroha ki te tangata:

A respect for people – allowing people to meet on their own terms. I was open to requests from all participants to conduct the interview in spaces of their choice and at a time that suited them.

He kanohi kitea:

Meeting people face to face. I drew my participants from community groups and professional contacts. A Hastings District Councillor passed on the explanatory materials to community groups she visited, and two of my participants came from those initial introductions.

Titiro, whakarongo ... korero:

Looking and listening (and maybe speaking). The interviews were very much participant-led. All participants were offered the opportunity to skip an excerpt, move to another question, or withdraw entirely, although none elected to do so.

Manaaki ki te tangata:

Sharing, hosting, and being generous. Knowledge flowed both ways. I offered to share my findings with all participants – three accepted the offer. I welcomed any input, suggestions or criticism from my participants that may change the direction of my project, and P1 in particular provided some useful remarks that are included in the final chapter.

Kia tupato:

Be cautious. I remained reflective of my outsider status, and mindful that I needed to interact with people who shared my characteristics no differently than I interacted with those who had a cultural background different from mine. I respected the knowledge and insights that were shared with me from a different perspective than the one I hold.

Kaua e mahaki

Do not flaunt your knowledge. I will share my findings, if requested, to empower community processes. I believe this research is relevant to the needs and priorities of all our communities. It focuses, for example, on legislation and rhetorical tactics designed to disempower and denigrate Māori and environmentalists. However, communities empower themselves; my research will ultimately serve only as one tool for that empowerment.

Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata

Do not trample on the “mana” or dignity of a person. I will guard against assuming I know much more about my subject than the people I am interviewing. All the interviews had their own assumptions, knowledge, and opinions that are valuable in their own right to this project. It is important I acknowledge power imbalances inherent in the researcher / interviewee relationship to ensure no participant is misrepresented during the analysis of their thoughtful, and invaluable feedback.