



The conspiracists' election: How the farthest fringes of politics are making a play for the centre

Charlie Mitchell

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As New Zealanders spent much of April stuck at home, some turned their attention to the flourishing ecosystem of conspiracy theories on Facebook and YouTube. It has propelled a wave of conspiracy theories on the margins of New Zealand politics. National Correspondent Charlie Mitchell reports.

“I want you to start making some notes, if you haven’t been already.”

Billy Te Kahika is nearly 40 minutes into a two-hour monologue, delivered like a sermon and streamed live on his personal Facebook page.

It is May 17, shortly after New Zealand entered alert level two restrictions. Te Kahika, a 47-year-old businessman and musician, is sitting at a table at his home in Northland, with a pile of hand-written notes scattered in front of him.

Over the course of the video, Te Kahika lays out a theory. It interweaves the Hegelian dialectic, the origins of communism and fascism, satanism, geoengineering, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic into a sinister global plot to control the population.

Te Kahika is even-tempered and eloquent. He speaks calmly, sprinkling te reo into his speech. He often interrupts himself to say what he’s talking about is not a conspiracy, but a fact.

It came out of leftfield. Before the pandemic, Te Kahika’s Facebook page was free of politics. It primarily documented his career as a guitarist, following in the footsteps of his father, the pioneering musician Billy TK.

His posts started to become politically tinged in late March, in the early days of level four restrictions. Like everyone else, Te Kahika was in self-isolation with his family, which meant he had his days free to research issues online.

Much of this research veered towards fringe ideas, circulated on Facebook and YouTube. His political posts became regular, and increasingly incorporated information from the emerging ecosystem of conspiracy theories related to the pandemic, typically centring on unsubstantiated or outright false claims.

It culminated in his live broadcast, which merged these ideas into a unified theory: That the pandemic had been planned, and the New Zealand Government was at the forefront of a global push to enslave the population.

The video was intended for his Facebook friends, but it spread much wider. Within a week, it had been seen nearly 30,000 times. In the days afterward, Te Kahika continued his live broadcasts, which drew thousands of views each.

Three weeks after his first video, Te Kahika launched the New Zealand Public Party (NZPP) at Auckland's Akarana Yacht Club. From there, he took his theory on the road - At an event in Christchurch on July 11, a month to the day after he announced the party, Te Kahika drew a raucous crowd of 500 in Christchurch. A few days earlier, he had spoken to a similarly-sized crowd in Tauranga.

He leveraged his growing influence in conspiracy theory circles internationally, with a long-form interview with Pete Evans, the Australian chef and conspiracy theorist. Perhaps the world's most notorious conspiracy theorist, David Icke, has shared Te Kahika's content on social media.

Just seven weeks after it started, the party launched its campaign at the Logan Campbell Centre in Auckland. Thousands of people cheered for Billy Te Kahika, and the hope that he represented. By merging with Advance NZ, the political vehicle for Botany MP Jami-Lee Ross, the NZPP could officially contest the upcoming election (the party had formed too late to officially register).

"The momentum that we've got now... New Zealand politics hasn't seen anything like it, and that's a fact," Te Kahika told *Stuff* this week.

The party's Facebook page, not yet two months old, already has 20,000 followers, more than the ACT party, which has been online for nine years. Content on the NZPP's Facebook page is getting engagement levels similar to that of the National Party.

FINDING AN AUDIENCE

In early June, while Billy Te Kahika was coming to terms with his growing political profile, dozens of protestors went to Auckland's Aotea Square to write chalk messages on the pavement.

Some of the protestors had signs: One read "5G Kills"; another read "Covid-19 is a false flag".

Among the chalk messages were "Stop mind control" and "It's okay to be white," a purposely innocuous statement which has been spread by neo-nazis and white supremacists to provoke backlash.

This was a rally for the Outdoors Party, a party that formed in 2015 as a political vehicle for moderate environmentalists.

The party's focus had shifted abruptly since the last election. Then, its unofficial slogan had been "The Greens without the extreme"; its policies largely concerned water quality, responsible forestry, and ending Government support for irrigation schemes.

At the June rally, a rotating group of people took the megaphone. One man said the terrorist attacks that toppled the World Trade Centre in 2001 were a false flag, a term used in conspiracy

theory circles to describe an orchestrated event used as cover to further political aims. He received applause.

A woman said she had recently learned the Earth was flat. “Does it feel like you’re spinning around at 1600km/h?” she asked the crowd. “We’re supposed to be upside down here right now.”

The rally was emblematic of how far the Outdoors Party has shifted. Five years after its formation as a party for moderate environmentalists, it has come to embrace the farthest fringes of the conspiracy movement. While the rally attendees were not all party members, they clearly felt comfortable sharing their views with those who were.

Both the NZPP and the Outdoors Party have tapped into a conspiracy pipeline that has prospered online, particularly on Facebook and YouTube, and has come to dominate the edges of New Zealand politics.

Some members of these groups reject the term conspiracy theorist. Te Kahika, for one, believes it is too often used to dismiss an issue out of hand, without substantively engaging it on its merits.

But many of the things Te Kahika and like-minded figures allege are, by definition, conspiracies: Secret plans to do something wrong or harmful.

The rise of these conspiracy theories on the edges of New Zealand politics may seem sudden, but experts say it has been a long time coming.

“There are a bunch of situations where it is perfectly rational to believe in a theory about a conspiracy,” says Dr M R.X. Dentith, a research fellow at Waikato University who studies conspiracy theories.

“The question is, at what point do we say what’s going on here is irrational, and the conspiracies people are putting forward are unwarranted.”

New Zealand has been a popular destination for conspiracy theorists. In 2009, US conspiracy theorist Richard Gage - a prominent figure among those who claim the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre were orchestrated by the US government - visited Wellington and spoke to a crowd of more than 600 people at Te Papa.

So many people turned up, the meeting had to be broadcast on screens into a spillover room. Gage later said it was the largest crowd he had drawn in his years of speeches on the topic.

UK conspiracy theorist David Icke has visited New Zealand twice in the last decade. Icke - one of the world’s best known conspiracy theorists, partly due to his theory that many prominent figures are actually shape-shifting alien reptiles - drew 800 people to the Manukau Events Centre on his first visit, and 2000 people to the Logan Campbell Centre on his second.

Both were stunningly large crowds for overseas conspiracy theorists on the farthest fringes of the discourse.

Icke, in particular, was a surprise drawcard - he speaks for around 12 hours, charges up to \$150 per ticket, and had predicted in the 1990s that New Zealand would soon disappear from the Earth, the sort of claim that might be treated with suspicion by an audience of New Zealanders.

“There's always been some appetite for views of this particular type here,” Dentith says.

“It means organisations like the Outdoors Party and the New Zealand Public Party are quite cleverly tapping into a pre-existing audience”.

‘ENSLAVEMENT’ THEORY

One theory for the psychological function of conspiracy theories is that they bring order to a disordered world. In times of chaos and dysfunction - say, during a global pandemic - it can be comforting to rationalise events into an explainable framework.

While conspiracy theories around vaccines, fluoride, climate change, and many other issues are not new, they have become streamlined. They are no longer just individual strains of conspiracy, but part of an elaborate, interlocking mechanism.

For Billy Te Kahika, every issue he’s concerned with can be seen through one lens - a United Nations programme called Agenda 2030, previously called Agenda 21.

In short, Agenda 2030 outlines 17 “sustainable development goals” (SDGs) for countries to meet. New Zealand has ratified those goals, along with the vast majority of nations. They are not legally binding, and there is no consequence for not meeting them.

Its roots as a conspiracy started in the United States, with far-right political groups such as the John Birch Society.

It has become a useful Boogeyman for conspiracy theorists; Agenda 2030 is seen as equally responsible for world leaders instituting a global slave state, and local council planning rules that thwart attempts to build a structure on your own property.

As an explanation for the supposed enslavement of humanity, the theory has much to be desired.

One problem with the theory is that numerous countries have already implemented the vast majority of Agenda 2030 goals, which include broadly non-controversial aims such as ending poverty, advancing gender equality, and taking urgent action to address climate change.

Play Video

1 NEWS

Jacinda Ardern was asked to respond to the NZ Public Party’s questionable views on the coronavirus.

According to the Sustainable Development Report, which tracks progress towards the SDGs, the countries furthest ahead are liberal democracies such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, which have each met around 84 per cent of the targets and rate highly in measures of freedom and liberty.

Te Kahika has said the world is watching New Zealand as leading the way on instituting the SDGs.

The data show New Zealand is ranked 16th in progress, having met 80 per cent of the goals, trailing Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. It has made equivalent progress to Japan, and is only slightly ahead of the United States and Australia.

The nations that have made the least progress towards the goals - or have not ratified them at all - include authoritarian and dysfunctional regimes such as South Sudan, North Korea, and Eritrea. There is an almost exact correlation between countries that rate highly on personal freedom indices, such as the one published by libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, and progress towards establishing Agenda 2030.

When asked about why people would distrust Agenda 2030, Te Kahika says it is designed to sound good - that no one could possibly object to ending poverty, for example.

“You have to peer beyond the verbiage they use” he says. When reading through it, you need to cross out the word “sustainability” and replace it with “control”, he says. That is to say, essentially replace a word with a specific meaning with another word that means something else.

While it may be tempting to dismiss these views out of hand, they can reflect broader anxieties about the world.

When the conspiracy theories are stripped away, Te Kahika’s concerns fit well within the mainstream of New Zealand politics.

He lists the issues he’s concerned about: “Things we view as very important are things like protecting our economy, stopping the debt, paying the debt, stopping the unrestrained spending that we’re seeing and developing economic and business strategies that are going to get us back on our feet,” he says.

“These are everyday concerns people have.”

He mentions a family from Tauranga who rang him recently to vent - they wanted to build a cottage for an elderly parent behind their house, but had been thwarted by council rules.

At the campaign launch in Auckland, Te Kahika spoke passionately about the poverty he sees in his community of Te Tai Tokerau - people living in shacks, sleeping on the beach, or living in treehouses. It ties into his own work with homeless people in Auckland.

They’re standard issues in New Zealand politics. Traditionally, the political response would be a promise to rein in the excesses of the Resource Management Act (RMA), or to significantly scale-up the supply of public housing.

But in the current era, even local planning issues are implicated in a global conspiracy - these situations, like all others, can only be explained by Agenda 2030.

The theory can be applied to almost any issue. 1080 poison is not about competing ideas of pest control, but a plot to poison the rural landscape to concentrate people in cities (1080 drops are primarily on public land, and long pre-date Agenda 2030).

Vaccines and water fluoridation are not about public health, but about numbing the population, increasing their compliance and reducing their intelligence (vaccines have significantly reduced the rate of vaccine-preventable diseases; there is no evidence fluoride has any impact on intelligence).

5G is not an iterative evolution of existing technology, but a dangerous weapon being used on an unsuspecting population (Numerous studies show 5G, which is on the non-ionising part of the

electromagnetic spectrum, poses no health risk at low levels such as those proposed for use in New Zealand).

While the conspiracies may be understandable, it doesn't mean they're rational.

"It's more the way people don't understand what counts as evidence which ends up being important here," Dentith says.

"We know that conspiracies occur - no one denies that conspiracies don't occur - the question is how common they are, and how often they end up being explanations of important events within the world.

"Part of that, unfortunately, comes down to a lack of scientific literacy in our society.

'THE LION'S PAW'

Vinny Eastwood, a rambunctious Kiwi with long hair and a booming voice, drags an image onto the screen.

On the left of the image is John Key, sitting at the head of the Cabinet table when he was Prime Minister; On the right is Jacinda Ardern in the same position a few years later. Both have their hands resting in their laps.

"This is John Key doing an all-seeing eye, a Freemasonic hand sign", Eastwood says. "And this here is Jacinda Ardern doing the Lion's Paw".

Eastwood had interrupted his weekly interview with Billy Te Kahika to bring up this image, which he uses as evidence that recent prime ministers from opposing parties are under the influence of Freemasonry.

His online talk show Free America Radio, which he broadcasts live from his home in Auckland, has nearly 50,000 subscribers on YouTube. His show usually comprises interviews with international conspiracy theorists, or fringe New Zealand political figures.

Eastwood has become an influence broker, of sorts, within the rising conspiracy movement.

He is an enthusiastic backer (and contractor to) the NZPP, in that he helps run its social media operation. Prior to that, he had an association with the Aotearoa Legalise Cannabis Party.

In an interview with *Stuff* this week, Eastwood was effusive in his praise of Te Kahika, who he sees as an uncommonly talented communicator, emerging at a time when people are more likely than ever to agree with the world of conspiracies Eastwood occupies.

"They haven't ever had anybody to turn to who shared their concerns before," Eastwood says.

"They simply wanted someone to tell them what they thought at the moment. I believe there's a significant portion of the population who are basically being ridiculed left, right, and centre no matter what they say, regardless of topic, and he is a man who says it with credibility, with an air of statesmanship.

"It was precisely what I was looking for, and I doubt I was the only one."

He points to the level four restrictions as a turning point. With nothing else to do, people such as Te Kahika were free to research online.

Eastwood has been broadcasting for more than a decade, and has become increasingly popular.

His most popular video - headlined 'Jacinda Ardern Exposed!' - has been watched nearly 200,000 times.

Eastwood and Te Kahika appear to enjoy mutual benefit from their cooperation.

Te Kahika has a sizable Facebook following, and Eastwood is popular on YouTube. Their content has largely merged together in recent weeks as a mixture of party broadcast and alternative news network. Eastwood - who regularly infuses jokes and wild tangents into his show - says he has learned from Te Kahika's measured delivery, and applied it to his own self-presentation.

"The videos with Te Kahika are some of [Eastwood's] most popular - they seem to be growing each others' audiences," says Byron Clark, a Christchurch-based YouTuber who monitors online conspiracy theories.

"YouTube as a platform makes someone like Vinny Eastwood appear authoritative, like a news anchor or radio host, but his audience is small enough that his followers feel like he's a friend of theirs rather than a media personality."

On YouTube, Eastwood's show, and others like it, serve both as a platform to spread Te Kahika's message, and as a safe place to explore particularly transgressive theories.

In an episode early last month, Te Kahika told Eastwood he had received a credible death threat from a "well recognised international assassin", who had evaded quarantine measures and entered New Zealand to silence Te Kahika. The plot was shut down, he said, and the assassin was last seen fleeing to Queenstown, "a well-known CIA hangout".

It's unclear how ensconced NZPP's supporters are in the more extreme conspiracies, but it's clear that conspiracy theories generally are crucial to the party's support.

"The people who are voting for NZPP, who are listening to these things, have often been talking about it to their families for years and been called conspiracy theorists, they'll call up the media and be called conspiracy theorists," Eastwood says.

"But now, they have someone speaking their language, who not only knows that they're not crazy, but that they have been onto something for all this time."

POLITICAL PROSPECTS

It's not clear where the NZPP's supporters are coming from, politically speaking.

Te Kahika himself says he's tried to figure this out, to no avail. Attendees at his meetings cross race, class, and age lines.

There is, however, one strong constituency: Māori. To observers of online conspiracies, this has been a worrying trend.

One explanation for why modern conspiracy theories may appeal to Māori is as a consequence of colonisation: Māori have been subjected to conspiracies by the state throughout recent history, engendering a justified sense of distrust.

Karaitiana Taiuru, a Māori cultural adviser and doctoral researcher, says the proliferation of conspiracy theories among Māori was a “direct result of inter-generational colonisation, trauma and racism by the state”.

He points to several examples: The Tohunga Suppression Act of 1908 made it illegal for Māori to practice traditional forms of medicine, a law that was only repealed in the 1960s. Children were beaten for speaking Māori in schools; Māori remain underrepresented in the science and technology fields. To this day, Māori are disproportionately imprisoned for minor offences, and more likely to have their children uplifted by the state.

“If you consider just those few examples, and then consider what the media are reporting on in China with minority groups being placed in concentration camps, Hong Kong citizens being tracked with facial recognition... it all makes for compelling reasons why Māori seem to be more likely to believe in alternative facts and rely on non traditional media sources of news,” Taiuru says.

In terms of the NZPP, Te Kahika has fulsomely embraced his Māori culture, which would also appeal to Māori in a way past conspiracy theory movements have not.

“If you have a life time of lived discrimination and see people with your cultural background who are successful or who are leaders, it is easier to follow them,” Taiuru says.

“We also have generations of Māori in Parliament who have yet to break the social, cultural and economic issues Māori face. We have inter generational issues that can not be solved within the current political frameworks. These new parties offer new hope and often play on Māori aspirations for change and betterment.”

It risks further disadvantaging Māori, he says.

New technologies such as 5G have promising applications for Māori, but distrust fuelled by conspiracy theories could see those benefits lost.

“Iwi, political and Maori leaders need to address these conspiracy theories as a new tsunami of colonisation that is impacting current and future generations of our people with misinformation and lost opportunities.”

Despite the clear momentum on Facebook, none of the conspiracy-minded parties have registered on recent political polls.

The most recent one, conducted by Colmar Brunton in the days after the NZPP’s official launch, registered no meaningful support for the party, at a time when public consciousness should be high.

It did, however, register Te Kahika at 1 per cent in the preferred prime minister rating.

A problem that has plagued the conspiracy-minded parties in New Zealand is factionalism. Around half a dozen conspiracy-aligned parties are competing for a small segment of the vote, and are seemingly unable to coalesce.

It partly reflects a glaring structural problem within the movement: Supporters prone to believing in conspiracy theories are likely to be suspicious of others, and pick and choose which conspiracies to believe in and which conspiracies to reject.

Almost immediately after setting up the NZPP, Billy Te Kahika himself became the subject of a slew of conspiracy theories, driven largely by other notable figures within New Zealand's conspiracy theory movement.

Among them were claims that he was a Māori separatist, based on his work with the Māori king; there were claims that he was a plant by the Chinese Communist Party, a Scientologist, and an abortion industry executive.

Critics excavated his history and found he'd gone to the UN in 2016, where he posed for a photo with former prime minister Helen Clark; they found a video of Te Kahika speaking at an event promoting Chinese investment in Māori businesses, and an entry on his LinkedIn page describing his work with China's Belt and Road initiative.

Te Kahika has addressed these claims repeatedly on Facebook, but they continue to be levelled against him within the conspiracy theory movement. "The guy is a dangerous con artist," one prominent YouTuber said about Te Kahika in a recent video.

Perhaps the most striking conspiracy theory about the NZPP concerns not Te Kahika himself, but the party's secretary, Michael Stace, a private investigator based in Wellington.

A familiar boogeyman for conspiracy theorists is the Freemasons, the fraternal organisation with roots dating back centuries. The NZPP has itself denounced the Freemasons as part of the globalist conspiracy to enslave humanity.

Stace, however, worked for the New Zealand Freemasons as its head of communications, and served as editor of *New Zealand Freemason* magazine.

This, naturally, aroused suspicion in conspiracy circles, but has been dismissed by the likes of Te Kahika and Eastwood as irrational concerns.

(Stace, in response to questions from *Stuff*, acknowledged he had worked for the Freemasons but said it did not reflect his views and was merely a job he took out of convenience.)

While it may seem like a sideshow, these conspiracies have had a meaningful impact on whether the parties can consolidate.

For weeks, there has been pressure on the Outdoors Party to join the NZPP, given their almost identical policy platform and the latter's clear momentum as the standard bearer of the conspiracy movement.

The Outdoors Party has resisted, however. A pinned post on its Facebook page lists a series of questions the party has about the NZPP, some of which concern legitimate organisational questions, but many of which tap into the theories levelled against Te Kahika and Stace.

The party's co-leader, Sue Grey, has said she has faced online abuse from NZPP supporters. Stace, from the NZPP, says the news of his past role within the Freemasons has been largely spread by three "trolls" associated with the Outdoors Party.

It appears likely the two parties will continue to butt heads, and devour each other's share of a potentially limited voter base.

With less than two months to go to the election, the extent to which the conspiracy theorists will influence the outcome is still unclear. Both recent political polls suggest the current Government parties - which the NZPP say are part of a communist takeover to enslave New Zealand - enjoy between 60 and 70 per cent support.

“There's a lot of people scrabbling for what we hope is a very small part of the vote,” M R. X. Dentith says.

“In that respect, it might not be too dangerous, but we live in interesting times - it might be the case that, come the election, these parties which are campaigning might do better than we expect.”

For Te Kahika, the pressure is growing. He tells *Stuff* he's the “most reluctant politician you've ever seen”.

It has clearly taken a toll. In a recent interview with Vinny Eastwood, Te Kahika was upfront about the implications of his campaign.

“I'm pretty sure I'm going to lose my business out of it,” he said.

“I've put my house at risk because I'm not working, I'm doing this. And I almost put my marriage at risk - my wife didn't want me to do this, and thankfully my wife is 100 per cent behind me now, praise God, but she was basically saying if you do this, you're going to have to move out.”

The pressure has extended more broadly in the conspiracy movement. Under their framework, New Zealand will imminently become a slave state. Te Kahika could be their last hope.

“People need to understand that it is now, or never; it is do, or die,” Vinny Eastwood said in a recent interview with former Horowhenua Mayor Michael Feyen, who is a candidate for the NZPP.

“This is the last election we could possibly participate in in this country's history, where you won't be a slave, guaranteed, by the next election.”