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# Flak On the Frontline: How Dissent was Suppressed in Early-Neoliberal Aotearoa

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**Abstract**
In April 1990, an episode of the TVNZ current affairs programme *Frontline* which criticised the Fourth Labour Government's close relationship with big business, became the centre of an extraordinary scandal. Its makers were the target of fierce flak, as TVNZ was sued by the incumbent prime minister and three other cabinet ministers, whilst the Broadcasting Standards Authority upheld complaints made by Treasury and the New Zealand Business Roundtable. This article considers this episode to be a critical and overlooked flashpoint in the history of neoliberalism in Aotearoa, as it demonstrates how contestation in the media was a crucial ideological dimension of class struggle during the inception of the neoliberal regime. Using a Marxist theoretical framework, this article details how the early proponents of neoliberal reform marginalised dissent. It also outlines how a Marxist approach is needed in order to produce a more systematic critique of government–business relations, as the programme's relatively unsophisticated analysis made it an easier target for the backlash it received.

**Keywords:** neoliberalism; New Zealand politics; Marxism; Fourth Labour Government; media; flak

## Introduction

On 29 April 1990, Television New Zealand (TVNZ) broadcast "For the public good" (FTPG), an episode of the Sunday night current affairs programme *Frontline*. It attained a near-instant status of infamy: the acting leader of the opposition said its allegations "could make the Watergate scandal look like a Sunday School picnic" (NZPA, 1990a, p. A3); two days after it aired, the Prime Minister compared it to a work of Nazi propaganda (Collins, 1990a); in less than a month, TVNZ was facing defamation lawsuits from an assortment of the country's most powerful people and half of its news staff were on strike (McLeod, 1990, p. 89; NZPA, 1990c); its executive producer has not worked in Aotearoa as a journalist since (Hager, 2008, para. 34; Jesson, 1992, p. 4; Young, 2007, para. 6); and another journalist would later say the "episode forever changed the face of news and current affairs broadcasting in New Zealand" (Wallington, 2015, para. 19). FTPG was primarily concerned with the close links between the then-incumbent Fourth Labour Government (FLG) and the highest echelons of Aotearoa's business community. It scrutinised the massive donations that Labour received from businesspeople in their successful 1987 reelection campaign, drawing a link between this support and the privatisation of state-owned assets which followed shortly thereafter, with many of these purchased by those same wealthy supporters (McLaughlin, 1990). For some, it was a sensationalist conspiracy which seriously violated journalistic ethics. For others, it was a biting critique of the powerful interests then in the midst of reshaping Aotearoa's political economy.

This article aims to make a novel contribution to the Marxist and other critical literature that details the historic shift towards neoliberalism in Aotearoa. Much of the existing literature takes place on a high level of abstraction, focused largely on the broad political-economic contours of neoliberal reform (Kelsey, 1995; Roper, 2005). This article, however, focuses on one particularly illuminating incident of these years:

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the scandal surrounding FTPG. Though it based its analysis on a shallow understanding of 'corruption', FTPG scrutinised matters of central importance in Aotearoa's political economy: government–business relations, corporatisation, privatisation and the democratic process. This meant its critique of the FLG was met with fierce backlash by the most powerful proponents of neoliberal reform: cabinet ministers, business executives and Treasury officials. Thus, through a careful analysis of this scandal, it is possible to understand how contestation over media portrayals of the FLG's reforms was a crucially important, but hitherto understudied, ideological dimension of the class struggle for and against neoliberalism. Marxists understand the introduction of neoliberalism as a capitalist-class counter-offensive and response to the upsurge in working-class struggle and prolonged economic crisis of the 1970s. The introduction of any new political-economic regime, particularly one that centrally involves an assault on the standard of living of workers, requires ideological legitimation. This meant that it was incumbent upon the FLG and its allies to suppress and marginalise the dissent that FTPG expressed—an endeavour aided by the programme's relatively simplistic critique of the Government's conduct. FTPG, somewhat astonishingly, is still subject to legal restrictions more than 35 years after it aired, which makes it extremely difficult to access and further demonstrates the value of analysing its broadcast in detail. Although FTPG has been discussed by a range of authors in varying levels of detail (Burke, 1992, p. 81; Jesson, 1992; Kelsey, 1993, p. 141), it has never been subject to the level of analysis or critique attempted here. Because neoliberalism remains the dominant political-economic paradigm (Roper, 2024)—and because the hegemony of this paradigm was consolidated shortly after FTPG's broadcast with the election of the Fourth National Government and their intensification of neoliberal reform—the study of its history and how its early proponents marginalised and suppressed dissent is highly relevant for an understanding of present-day Aotearoa.

The furore surrounding FTPG will be analysed in three sections: the first situates its broadcast in the history of neoliberal change in Aotearoa up to that point and surveys the political economy of the media at the time; the second focuses on the broadcast of, and immediate backlash to, FTPG; and the third presents a Marxist critique of FTPG, demonstrating how the programme's flaws and somewhat unsophisticated critique provided a pretext for its subjects to effectively discredit it.

## Neoliberalism and the media in Aotearoa

Marxists generally understand *neoliberalism* as a capitalist-class offensive that sought to overcome the social and economic crises that plagued advanced capitalist countries in the 1970s (Harvey, 2005). Harvey (2005, p. 2) defines neoliberalism as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade". Bevins (2023, pp. 30–31), in a non-Marxist but nevertheless complementary definition, argues that neoliberalism functions at three levels: globally, it "impose[s] limits" on what states can do to break with free-market orthodoxy; nationally, it seeks a weakening of the welfare state and promotes the dominance of markets; and individually, it encourages people to see themselves as autonomous individuals, "maximizing, optimizing, hustling … rather than existing as part of any community". In an Aotearoa context, Roper (2005, p. 192) summarises the Marxist view, saying, "The [Fourth Labour] Government's neoliberal restructuring constituted a concerted attack, with the active financial and political support of the dominant capitalist class, on the historic gains of the labour movement from 1935 to 1984." The Marxist approach is by no means hegemonic amongst those critical of neoliberalism (Vallelly, 2021, p. 11, p. 189 endnote 23). Nevertheless, the particular course of neoliberal reform in Aotearoa rather dramatically affirms the usefulness of understanding neoliberalism as interwoven with dynamics of class struggle. On the one hand, this reform directly followed the largest wave of working-class struggle in Aotearoa's history, and on the other, the country's most powerful businesspeople exerted a massive and ostentatious influence on

neoliberal policy formulation and implementation. A political-economic shift of this kind, however, cannot be unilaterally imposed on a resistant populace—it requires *ideological legitimation*. This means that contestation in the media over the meaning of policy, as a key ideological dimension of class struggle, acquires greatly increased importance in the context of crisis and change. This section contextualises the arrival of neoliberalism in Aotearoa and surveys its impact on the political economy of the media.

The 1970s in Aotearoa were defined by two crises. First, the period of neoliberal reform was directly preceded by the "largest and most extensive upturn in working class struggle in New Zealand's history" (Roper, 2011, p. 14). In June 1968, the Arbitration Court issued a nil general wage order, meaning that no wage increases would be given to workers—in effect, a pay cut. This "unleashed a period of industrial conflict at levels beyond anything previously known in New Zealand, other than in the historic confrontation in 1951" (Walsh, 1994, p. 178). There is an extensive literature that details the intensity of workers' struggles during "the long 1970s" (Boraman, 2016; see also, Borman, 2019, 2023; Locke, 2022; Roper, 2011; Roth & Hammond, 1981), which was accompanied by the massive growth of anti-war, women's liberation and Māori protest movements, all of which included high levels of working-class participation (Roper, 2011, pp. 22–27). Secondly, interrelated with this class struggle, the 1970s saw the appearance and persistence of economic crisis for the first time in the post-World War II era. Stemming from a collapse in wool prices in 1966, but staved off by a commodity boom (Easton, 2020, p. 362), 1973 spelled the "end of the golden weather" (Roper, 1993a). This was the year which saw Britain's entry to the European Economic Community and the oil shock sparked by the Yom Kippur War. This meant that the 1970s were a decade defined economically by contracting GDP, worsening terms of trade, growing balance of payments and fiscal deficits, and the appearance of unemployment on a significant scale for the first time in decades (Dalziel & Lattimore, 1999, pp. 1–20). Marxists locate the source of the crisis in a decline in the rate of profit (Davidson, 2018, pp. 62–64). This is significant in this study of class struggle because, for Marx (1865/1974, p. 58), the level of profit that capitalists appropriate "is only settled by the continuous struggle between capital and labour", and the intensity and success of workers' struggles in the 1970s did indeed threaten profit margins in this way (Roper, 1993a, p. 19).

Against the background of these crises, business associations reached a consensus on the policy changes they desired. This consensus sought to overturn the Keynesian, social-democratic paradigm which had been dominant since 1935. These views, particularly as they were "systematised" by the New Zealand Business Roundtable (NZBR) (Roper, 1992, p. 18), would have a "remarkably close correspondence" with the policies of the FLG (Roper, 1992, p. 1). Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, all major business associations began to express support for neoclassical and monetarist economic policy. The remarkable cohesion which these policy preferences established in the business community is demonstrated by a letter sent to the incoming prime minister, David Lange, in 1984 by the Top Tier Group—composed of Federated Farmers, the Chambers of Commerce, the Employers Federation, the Manufacturers Federation and the Retailers Federation. The policy prescriptions laid out here, nearly all of which were taken up by the FLG, included floating exchange rates, adoption of tariffs as "the primary form of protection" (meaning the abolition of import licensing), "flexibility in wage bargaining", a reduction in taxes on corporate profits, a greater reliance on indirect taxes, reduction of government expenditure, and disinflationary monetary policy. For this article, especially notable is its anticipation of the policy of corporatisation of government departments which the FLG was to introduce in its first term: "Government trading departments should be required to return a commercial profit on cash funds employed" ("Top Tier Group's submissions", 1984).

In accordance with the advice of business associations and Treasury (1984, pp. 275–286, 293–294; 1987, pp. 96–120), the FLG corporatised, then privatised, state-owned assets. With corporatisation, the Government reorganised a range of public sector organisations along private sector lines of profitability. The corporations, known as state-owned enterprises (SOEs), cut massive numbers of jobs (Kelsey, 1995,

pp. 122–123). Members of the pro-privatisation NZBR were well represented on the SOE boards (Kelsey, 1993, pp. 138). Although Labour ministers initially denied that corporatisation was the first step towards privatisation, a sweeping programme of asset sales was revealed by Finance Minister Roger Douglas in December 1987, four months after Labour had won reelection (Easton, 1989, p. 129 endnote 20; Williams, 1990, pp. 141–144). Kelsey (1995, p. 128) recounts that the asset sales campaign was "breathtaking in its scope, speed and disregard for popular opinion". By 1990, Labour had sold off a vast array of state-owned assets, many to members of the NZBR (Kelsey, 1995, p. 384 endnote 46; Williams, 1990, pp. 141–144). At the time of FTPG's broadcast, the Government was in the process of selling off Telecom, which was eventually purchased, in part, by three members of the NZBR (Goldsmith, 2012, pp. 181–204; Harris & Twiname, 1998, pp. 24–25). This article cannot account for all of the FLG's policy, but has introduced privatisation insofar as it is the primary Government policy dealt with in FTPG and starkly demonstrates the close interconnection between the Government, business and Treasury.

It is now appropriate to analyse the position of the media amidst this reform, as a crucial site of ideological legitimation in such a context. Herman and Chomsky's "propaganda model" (1994) sets out the foundations for a political-economic understanding of mainstream media in advanced capitalist societies. Their model sets out "five filters", by means of which "money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, p. 2). For this article, two filters are of particular interest: the "*size, ownership, and profit orientation*" of media; and the use of "flak" (Herman & Chomsky, 1994, pp. 3–14, 26–28). In the 1980s and 1990s, media ownership in Aotearoa was highly concentrated. From the 1960s onwards, Hope (1999, p. 94) says that across the economy, "the stock market saw a trend toward interlocking directorates and a concentration of capital ownership". As a result of the mergers and acquisitions which typified the economy of the 1980s, between 1984 and 1987, three companies "dominated the newspaper market". Even after the deregulation of television in 1989, this field was similarly concentrated, with TV1 and TV3 the only news media outlets (Hope, 1999, pp. 97–98). Phelan (2014, p. 70) says that in the 1980s, "the national media system was reconfigured according to the same neoliberal script" like the rest of the economy, as media markets were "integrated to an unprecedented degree in international circuits of capital".

*Flak*, also referred to in more recent overviews of the propaganda model as "countermeasures to discipline the media", refers to the organised production of backlash by powerful actors to media coverage they deem unacceptable (Pedro, 2011, pp. 1886–1888). Here, the FLG is seen as the major producer of flak in the backlash to FTPG, with junior partners in the NZBR and Treasury. Herman and Chomsky (1994) describe the Government taking this role as typical, saying that governments can be seen "regularly assailing, threatening, and 'correcting' the media, trying to contain any deviations from the established line" (p. 28), while also tying an increase in business-led flak to the advance of neoliberalism (p. 26).

Up to 1990, the media in Aotearoa were generally uncritical and supportive of neoliberal reform. Scott (1997, pp. 184–186) argues that from 1984, Aotearoa experienced a sharper pro-neoliberal narrowing of political discourse than in Britain under Margaret Thatcher. Scott attributes this to four factors: (1) an increasing concentration of media ownership, (2) Government "cultivation" of sympathetic journalists, (3) the proliferation of Government-led "information management and public relations", and (4) the increasing use of public relations and lobbying by groups like the NZBR meant "an alternative authoritative commentary for media coverage was largely absent". Burke (1992, p. 81) agrees that on account of deregulation of the media, concentration in press ownership and Labour's professionalised and highly political structure of public relations, journalists failed to produce substantive critiques of neoliberalism. Exceptions to this were FTPG and the coverage of the Lange-Douglas feud. Kelsey (1993, p. 141) describes FTPG as the first exploration by the media into the close relationship between business and the FLG. Kelsey argues (1995, p. 299) that across this period of reform, "The media largely abandoned their

traditional role in favour of uncritical hype." Jesson (1990, p. 142) argues that only in 1990, with Labour facing "an ignominious defeat" at the forthcoming election, did the media's tone become negative, describing journalists as "ecstatic" during "the early years of Rogernomics". Vowles and Aimer (1993, p. 186), for their part, say that "critical or scathing media comment" was a longer-running feature of Labour's second term, after the Government's internal divisions exploded into the public eye in early 1988. Hope (1999, p. 101) says that the increasing prominence of business leaders in the media meant a glorification of the symbols associated with the new regime, while harsh pejoratives were reserved for the supposed backwardness of the pre-neoliberal economy. These factors, Hope (pp. 98–99) argues, combined to create the perception that "the policy course being followed appear[ed] necessary and inevitable".

## Broadcast and backlash

FTPG aired, then, in an environment of dramatic change. The last two decades had seen the most significant upsurge in working-class struggle in the country's history and the onset of prolonged economic crisis, followed by the FLG's implementation of a vast programme of neoliberal reform.

FTPG dealt primarily with four interrelated issues (McLaughlin, 1990): (1) large donations made by businesspeople to Labour's reelection campaign in 1987, (2) the party's alleged improper handling of those donations, (3) the programme of privatisations announced four months after the 1987 election as an alleged favour for their donors, and (4) the lack of laws requiring transparency around electoral donations and disclosure of MPs' pecuniary interests. The show documented that Labour had spent $3,000,000 in their 1987 reelection campaign, more than any other campaign in Aotearoa's electoral history. The vast majority of funds came from about a dozen businesspeople, with a $250,000 donation given directly to Roger Douglas by Equiticorp Chairman Allan Hawkins. The country's second-richest person ("A Lion roars", 1990), Sir Bob Jones, recounted that he mailed a pro-Labour brochure to voters in 25 electorates. Prime Minister David Lange was given a jet by "business giant" UEB to campaign across the country (McLaughlin, 1990).

Furthermore, the programme contained an assortment of more specific allegations: that Labour's economic statement on 20 March 1990 was intended to generate donations from business; that the Labour Party had considered awarding government contracts to advertising firm Colenso in order to settle an outstanding debt; that Labour had rewarded their wealthy supporters with knighthoods; that Lange and Douglas had been gifted money by financier Sir Frank Renouf to open share accounts with Renouf's firm and that Renouf had set up a similar account to raise money for the Labour Party; that files had been surreptitiously deleted from computers in the SOE ministry after Richard Prebble was removed from that portfolio (with Prebble reinstated as SOE Minister to curry favour with the business community); and that the National Party had also solicited large donations from businesspeople in order to develop and launch their economic policy.

In terms of tone, FTPG plays up a sense of untoward and secretive conduct pervading the FLG. The programme opens with a shot of the moon in the night sky, with the narrator saying: "Away from the public gaze, there is a dark side to New Zealand politics" (McLaughlin, 1990). The narrator often invokes language that emphasises the far-reaching influence of business leaders; for example, "a web of undisclosed connections" and "the tentacles of business were spreading" (McLaughlin, 1990). The most influential figures from Treasury and the Reserve Bank are dubbed the "high priests" of Rogernomics. There are recurrent shots of tangled wires, accompanied by hypnotic music and warped vocals. It features voyeuristic nighttime footage taken of a dinner of cabinet ministers and businesspeople at Vogel House. Businesspeople in boardroom meetings are shown in silhouette; high-rise office buildings are drenched in a blue filter or eerie darkness. A reenactment of a nighttime meeting of David Lange and Air New Zealand board members resembles something from film noir. As alluded to in the programme's title, the central

theme is that the FLG has not been governing for the public good—it has favoured its wealthy donors, with the public none the wiser.

As Herman and Chomsky predict, the production of flak was instantaneous and overwhelming. The controversy generated by FTPG was front-page news in every major newspaper in the country (Armstrong, 1990; Collins, 1990b; Goulter, 1990; Kilroy, 1990a; McBride, 1990; Riddell, 1990). Geoffrey Palmer, prime minister after Lange's resignation in 1989, led the backlash, issuing a "point-by-point" refutation of the programme's allegations (Riddell, 1990, p. 1). He compared it to the work of the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, saying: "This programme was based on a series of big lies. Dr Goebbels is alive and well in New Zealand" (as cited in Collins, 1990a, p. 2). Lange was similarly incensed, as *The Dominion* reported that "in the course of a brief telephone conversation", Lange "mentioned several times he would sue Television New Zealand" (Kilroy, 1990a, p. 1). Lange also unsuccessfully attempted to prevent a version of the show being broadcast in Australia, which led him to sue that broadcaster as well (Kilroy, 1990b; McLeod, 1990, p. 89). Former and then-Finance Ministers Roger Douglas and David Caygill denounced the programme as based on lies (Munro, 1990; Shelton, 1990). NZBR Chairman Ronald Trotter said the programme had employed "labelling and smear tactics" (as cited in NZPA, 1990b, p. 2). Jones (1990, p. 8), in his column in *The Dominion*, said FTPG was "one of the most scandalous abuses of power I have ever witnessed", retorted that businesspeople like himself support political parties for "largely altruistic" reasons and called for the programme's makers to be sacked.

Besides outrage, the flak consisted of several more substantive criticisms (see also Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1991, p. 37). Palmer's response described the programme as a conspiracy theory and denied that there was anything improper in the 1987 campaign committee's relationship with business; denied that government policies were for sale, and said that neither the 20 March economic package nor the dinner at Vogel House were part of fundraising efforts; and denied that Colenso were awarded government contracts in order to wipe the party's debt (the show did not allege that they had been, only that it had been discussed in the upper echelons of the Labour Party, which was confirmed by Palmer) (Armstrong, 1990; "'Conspiracy theory' rejected", 1990). Palmer also argued that Lange and Douglas's shareholdings were legitimate because they were held in blind trusts (Riddell, 1990). The same day, however, Douglas confirmed that his shares were not held in a blind trust, though denied that he had been gifted any shares by Renouf (Smellie, 1990). Palmer further said that its "worst feature" was that the programme featured accounts by two former Labour and then-NewLabour Party members who were not identified as such (Kilroy, 1990a, p. 1). Several other accounts argued that the programme's allegations were flimsy and unsubstantiated. Journalist Colin James (1990, p. A9) felt the show was "a miserable episode" with a dearth of supporting evidence. Then-National MP Winston Peters (1990, p. A6) said he was left "desperately searching" for evidence to back up its claims. Caygill argued it was unfair that Prebble was not interviewed for the programme and that it was "outrageous" to suggest Prebble had been reinstated to Cabinet to appeal to business interests (as cited in Shelton, 1990, p. 4).

What was not contested by those critical of FTPG is equally noteworthy. Two examples of the prime minister's 'refutation' being erroneous (with regard to the Colenso debt and Douglas's shares) have already been given. More broadly though, no members of the Government could dispute that their 1987 reelection campaign spent more money than any campaign in the country's history, or that the vast bulk of it came from businesspeople. The programme featured open acknowledgements by businesspeople like Hawkins and Jones of their extensive support of Labour and featured minister Trevor de Cleene admitting that appealing to the business community for a handful of large donations was a more effective fundraising strategy than grassroots alternatives. Labour MPs largely did not deny that their Government had close connections to the business community. Instead, they generally appealed to the *legitimacy* of a government cultivating such relationships (this argument is dealt with below). James (1990, p. A9), whose critical comments on FTPG were quoted above, nevertheless agreed that the FLG's policies had meant "Big

business has elbow room the like of which it has not had in decades". Palmer must have felt there was some element of truth to the programme's criticism of Aotearoa's rules regarding the disclosure of MPs' pecuniary interests, as he announced unexpectedly strict new rules the day after its broadcast. New rules were already in train before the show aired, but the timing of their announcement and their surprising stringency can plausibly be viewed in connection to the potency of FTPG's critique (Clifton, 1990a). Thus, even when judged by the statements and actions of those most indignant about FTPG's alleged inaccuracies, it contained a great deal of truth about the policies and conduct of the FLG.

The flak was not confined to denunciations of the programme in the media. Two days after the broadcast, Palmer said "several forests would be needed" for the lawsuits TVNZ would face, but added that he would not sue as he did not believe in suing the media (Kilroy, 1990a; Munro, 1990, p. 2). Three weeks later, however, Palmer sued TVNZ (NZPA, 1990c). TVNZ was also sued by Lange, Douglas, Jones and Prebble (McLeod, 1990, p. 89). Subsequent accounts (Wallington, 2015, para. 18) suggest that the plaintiffs received significant out-of-court settlements, though Palmer (2013, p. 528) recounts in his memoir that he only received payment for his legal costs along with a full apology read before court. *North and South* reported that Lange and Palmer also sued the *Evening Post* over a review of FTPG by David Cohen (McLeod, 1990, p. 89). Lange and Jones sued the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which broadcast an altered version of FTPG (McIntyre, 1990; McLeod, 1990, p. 89). TVNZ received eight formal complaints—one was confidential and the others were from Treasury, NZBR, Palmer on behalf of himself and four other cabinet ministers, and four further complaints from Alan Gibbs, David Richwhite, Michael Fay and Bruce Wallace of Fletcher Challenge, the former two being members of the NZBR (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 1–2; McLeod, 1990, p. 98). Six complaints were ultimately referred to the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA), which are examined below (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 1–2).

Some of the programme's shortcomings warrant attention. By the narrator's own admission, possibly the programme's most speculative claim was that sensitive files were deleted from SOE ministry computers after Prebble lost the SOE portfolio in 1988: "One can only speculate at the reason … It seems unlikely, however, to have been in the public good" (McLaughlin, 1990). In Palmer's complaint to TVNZ, he tabled documents that were reported as showing the files were personal and their deletion was not suspicious (though Prebble had initially denied any such deletion took place) (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1991, p. 25; Clifton, 1990b). The programme further alleged that Prebble had favoured the sale of Air New Zealand to Brierley Investment Limited (BIL), but Prebble called attention to a submission he made to the Commerce Commission opposing their bid (Clifton, 1990b). The show's claim was based on reports—disputed at the time by Douglas—in 1988 that Douglas and Prebble supported the full sale of the airline to BIL and British Airways, after Treasury advised the Government that there was no reason to only sell 25% of Air New Zealand, the amount announced in the 1987 Budget (Burns, 1988). Prebble supported the full sale and specified it should be retained in domestic ownership (Riddell, 1988). BIL did fit these conditions and did eventually purchase the airline alongside Qantas, Japan Airlines and American Airlines (Williams, 1990, p. 143). The programme also cited a Cabinet paper in alleging that Prebble had sought to alter Air New Zealand's board in order to facilitate its sale, but Prebble denied this (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1991, p. 23). Lastly, at the time of FTPG's broadcast, *Frontline* executive producer Murray McLaughlin was in a relationship with Palmer's private secretary, Christine Sutton. Palmer later alleged that McLaughlin had, without Sutton's knowledge, accessed her work papers and found out about the dinner with business leaders at Vogel House depicted in the programme (Palmer, 2013, p. 527). The above points demonstrate that the programme may have contained inaccuracies and may have been produced with the assistance of ethically suspect methods, but its overall argument—that businesspeople who had close personal and political connections to the FLG had been the primary beneficiaries of its policy—was well-founded.

On 18 May, against the advice of TVNZ's lawyers, the journalists who made FTPG—Murray McLaughlin, Bronwen Reid and Chris Wilks—were suspended by TVNZ Chief Executive Julian Mounter (Abernethy, 1990; McLennan, 1990). In response, on 21 May, "about half" of TVNZ's news staff struck, with workers striking in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. They demanded the immediate reinstatement of their colleagues, as TVNZ's internal inquiry had not been completed at the time of their suspension (NZPA, 1990c, p. 1). While this inquiry was ongoing and while he was still officially an employee, McLaughlin's job was being advertised by TVNZ (Abernethy, 1990). Further still, TVNZ issued a statement saying they would apologise for FTPG's inaccuracies, before the investigation into whether there were any inaccuracies had been conducted (McLennan, 1990). In the event, none of the staff were reinstated and the strikers returned to work on 24 May after TVNZ agreed to negotiate new disciplinary procedures, protect journalists from being liable for legal action taken against TVNZ, and halt the advertising of McLaughlin's job (Drinnan, 1990a; McKenzie, 1990; Moore, 1990). On 13 June, it was reported that McLaughlin had resigned (Drinnan, 1990b). Reid and Wilks were "reprimanded" (Drinnan, 1990b, p. 1), transferred from *Frontline*'s Wellington headquarters to Auckland, and banned from working together (McLeod, 1990, p. 101). Within months, none of the three were working at TVNZ (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, p. 12). McLaughlin later said, in the words of *The Dominion*'s John Drinnan, that "there had been an unprecedented campaign of intimidation and denigration" in the wake of the programme, that Mounter had fast-tracked complaints procedures and put pressure on members of TVNZ's complaints committee, and that Prebble's lawyers had warned him that commenting on the saga "could be sub-judice to defamation proceedings" (Drinnan, 1990c, p. 12).

The complaints referred to the BSA were dealt with in two decisions: the first addressed the complaints made by the NZBR and Treasury, and the second the complaints made by Douglas, Prebble and Lange (Broadcasting Standards Authority 1990, 1991). The bulk of the BSA's decisions in the latter case deferred making rulings until the defamation proceedings were complete (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1991, p. 6). Thus, the decisions relating to the NZBR and Treasury's complaints are the primary focus here. The BSA found overwhelmingly in favour of these organisations. Of a combined 11 complaints about the substance of the programme, the BSA upheld the NZBR and Treasury's complaints in eight instances. In the case of the NZBR, the BSA found that TVNZ breached truth and accuracy standards by claiming that businesspeople were buying policies from the Government; by giving the impression that state-owned assets were sold below their market value; and by giving the impression that the NZBR and its members had engaged in covert action designed to subvert democratic government. The BSA further found that TVNZ breached impartiality and balance standards by not allowing NZBR's chairman and executive director opportunity to address allegations made against them in the programme, and by displaying a bias against the business community in general and the NZBR in particular (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 18, 21, 25, 30, 31). With regard to Treasury, the BSA found that TVNZ breached truth and accuracy standards by giving the impression that state-owned assets were sold below their market value; and by giving the impression that consultancy firms with ex-Treasury staff were favoured for the award of contracts relating to privatisation. TVNZ was also found to have breached impartiality and balance standards by not allowing Treasury the opportunity to comment on the asset sales procedure (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 44–45, 46, 48).

Overall, the BSA agreed with the thrust of complaints from all parties. It contended that FTPG had marked a "totally unacceptable" shift to "advocacy journalism", in violation of TVNZ's norm of "uncommitted" journalism (Broadcasting Standards Authority, p. 4). As a result, it ordered TVNZ to air apologies to the NZBR and Treasury and banned TVNZ from broadcasting ads during prime-time hours on 3 February 1991 (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 34–35).

One more point is noteworthy. Douglas complained that economist David Steele, interviewed in the programme, should have been identified as affiliated with a communist organisation. In Steele's

interview, he explained that members of the NZBR had "very close" personal links with figures in both major parties and Treasury. He further stated that these business interests, in making substantial donations to both parties, expected to see their preferences "reflected in the policy positions that Government adopt". The BSA declined to uphold Douglas's complaint because, in their view, Steele's remarks were "uncontroversial". This was held, in part, because Steele expressed views very similar to those Lange gave in his interview and because he qualified his statement that "he who pays the piper calls the tune" as being a "tendency" (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1991, pp. 15–16). Here we have a perverse acknowledgement that, if we neglect the controversy that did ensue on account of remarks like these and forget about the BSA's wider conclusions, the thrust of the show's criticism was in fact "uncontroversial"!

The public's reaction to FTPG—given the fact that politicians' and businesspeople's outrage was most prominent in media coverage—is harder to gauge. Three factors, however, indicate that, at least, the public were sympathetic to the programme's argument and were quite possibly actively supportive. First, in the *Auckland Star*'s editorial on 4 May, it was reported that TVNZ had received "a flood of messages of support" for the programme ("Frontline probe", 1990, p. A8). Secondly, except for one confidential complaint, the only complaints made to TVNZ were by cabinet ministers, Treasury, the NZBR and four other high-profile businesspeople (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, pp. 1–2). It seems reasonable to suggest that if the programme constituted as flagrant a violation of journalistic standards in the public's eyes as it did in the eyes of those it scrutinised, there would have been many more complaints. Finally, and most significantly, Labour suffered a heavy defeat in the 1990 election. Vowles and Aimer conclude that a rejection of Labour was the "dominant motif" of that election (Vowles & Aimer, 1993, p. 130). They also found that privatisation was supported by only a minority of the electorate and described FTPG as summarising the public's main reservations with asset sales: its causing extensive job losses and social dislocation; increasing foreign control of the economy; and the impression that a small coterie of businesspeople, with close links to the Government, were reaping the rewards of this policy (Vowles & Aimer, 1993, pp. 150–151).

## A Marxist critique of "For the Public Good"

FTPG had the notable merit of being one of the very few pieces of contemporary media coverage to substantively criticise the FLG. Its critique, however, was not systematic and relied too heavily on notions of corruption and secrecy being the Government's primary flaws. In so doing, it invited some of the criticisms that proved so costly to TVNZ and the journalistic profession. This section has two aims: first, though it has been argued that the programme's central claims were largely accurate, this section will demonstrate how, because of its erroneous conception of corruption, the backlash of its targets was able to stick; and second, it seeks, on the basis of that analysis, to demonstrate how a Marxist perspective is capable of unravelling the nature of government–business relations in a way that FTPG could not.

An important qualification is necessary. The argument being made here is not that the makers of FTPG would have been insulated from flak if they had made a Marxist critique of the FLG. It is likely that the backlash to the programme would have been even more intense if it self-consciously advanced a Marxist argument. The primary reason for the backlash being so intense was not the programme's flaws per se, but rather the necessity for the Government and its allies to ideologically legitimate the fledgling neoliberal regime. FTPG's flaws, real though they were, were the *pretext* for a campaign that primarily sought to marginalise and suppress opposition to neoliberalism. This section aims to demonstrate exactly how and why the programme's critics were able to seize on those flaws and blunt the force of its critique.

First, as is common to non-Marxist analyses of inequality, it worked from a conception of Aotearoa's social structure being of rich and poor, rather than capitalists and workers (the narrator tells us: "Labour was presiding over a vast split between rich and poor" (McLaughlin, 1990)). The Marxist

conception offers greater insight into these social relations because it outlines the structural sources of capitalist class power and the basis for their class interests. The wealth and power of the capitalist class, for Marxists, stems from exploitation—capitalists are in a position to systematically appropriate the unpaid surplus labour of workers, and their political interests are tied to establishing the social conditions most conducive to this exploitation (Marx, 1867/1958, p. 534; Wright, 1979, p. 15). The distinction between rich and poor might give some insight to social divisions at a particular moment in time, but does not explain how those divisions have been generated or formulate a clear basis for the political conflicts they give rise to. Because FTPG both aired amidst and analysed a period of intense political-economic change, its lack of a fundamental theory of the social conflicts that had generated that change must be seen as a major shortcoming. In turn, this shortcoming has negative implications for all other aspects of its critique, as well as the suggested reforms its critique informs. It is to these implications that this section now turns.

In an advanced capitalist country like Aotearoa, the vast majority of economic activity is conducted by capitalist firms with private ownership. Because the state is fiscally dependent "on revenue derived from the taxation of incomes generated in the process of capital accumulation", the state's strength and economic security is tied to its ability to facilitate this growth (Roper, 1993b, p. 150). This in turn means the business community "enjoys a massive superiority" over competing interests in state policy formulation and implementation (Miliband, 1969, p. 146). Also, because of their appropriation of unpaid labour, businesspeople command significant financial resources for lobbying for their favoured policies. Rooted in these structural sources, the advantage of business interests over competing groups is apparent in numerous ways: governments pursuing policies perceived as unacceptable to business are threatened by capital flight; a key metric of a government's success is business "confidence" (Miliband, 1969, 150); capitalists fund various think tanks and lobby groups and own and control the largest media organisations; and businesspeople are often appointed to key positions *within* the state for policy reviews, economic advice and so on.

While analysing a handful of manifestations of this structural advantage—businesspeople's massive electoral donations, their control of SOEs, and the NZBR's strength as a lobby group, for example—FTPG altogether failed to produce a substantive analysis of the underlying mechanisms that had given rise to the events it depicts. This, perhaps, is precisely what one should expect from an hour-long television documentary aimed at a broad public audience—rather than being a sign of any special defect of the particular journalists involved, it is a basic constraint of their field of work. Nevertheless, there are two important points here: (1) this constraint should not be taken for granted or accepted as commonsensical, as it is itself revealing about the power relations of liberal capitalist societies and their media; and (2) even if one bears in mind this charitable interpretation, it is nevertheless true that this relative lack of any structural or fundamental basis for the programme's critique made its claims open to easier refutation. By placing such an emphasis on the role of electoral donations, for example, the programme makes an essentially instrumentalist argument, where Labour politicians were *induced* to implement the policy preferences of business. Arguments that allege a quid pro quo taking place in this way not only suffer from their relatively greater difficulty to definitively prove, but also tend to divert attention from the enduring features of capitalist society that compel all ruling parties to be a friend to business before anyone else.

Just as it could little explain the social structure of capitalist society, FTPG could not account for processes of historic change that this structure generates. From the Marxist perspective, an adequate account of the rise of neoliberalism would have to discuss the dynamics of class struggle that gave rise to this political-economic paradigm. Understanding class struggle in turn presupposes making a Marxist analysis of class structure under capitalism and the socioeconomic conditions that make a capitalist-class offensive likely to occur and succeed. In FTPG, however, there is a degree to which neoliberalism appears to have arisen spontaneously. Some of the obstacles that prevented these policy shifts from happening earlier are glossed: the Treasury and Reserve Bank officials who were deemed "cranks" in the Muldoon

years are now the "high priests" of Rogernomics. Also introduced are the forces that have impelled the reform to a breakneck speed: the businessmen supporting Labour are "highly motivated" and "fervent" (McLaughlin, 1990). But no clear origin of neoliberal reform is offered by the programme. Understanding neoliberalism requires recognition of how it is simultaneously a continuation of, and break with, previous iterations of capitalism. Neoliberal reforms were aggressively lobbied for by a capitalist class *already in existence* in order to overturn the gains of working-class struggle which had become fundamental to the social democratic (but nonetheless capitalist) political economy. Thus, what is qualitatively new about neoliberalism, at least in the context of the post-World War II era, is the defeat of countervailing, working-class forces: the end of the "historic compromise" (Jesson, 1989, pp. 14–21, 80–95). FTPG erred by being overawed by the newness of Douglas's reforms and failing to recognise that they had their origin in the social structure of capitalism in Aotearoa.

In turn, this furnished the programme's critics with one of their most common refrains: that it is completely legitimate for governments to maintain a close relationship with the business community. Palmer said that "if politicians and prime ministers and ministers of finance do not discuss the state of the economy with business leaders, they would be neglecting their duty" (as cited in Collins, 1990c, p. 4). Trotter further said that: "Because Government policies have a major effect on businesses, politicians and business people have always maintained a dialogue on public policy issues" (as cited in NZPA, 1990b, p. 2). No Marxist would deny the truth of statements like these. For Marxists, however, "it is not simply a matter of what is taken as true and false but of the structure of explanation inherent in the categories used in thinking" (Ollman, 2003, p. 143). The structure of this explanation is one that aims to naturalise the social relations of capitalism. If it is held that it is legitimate for governments to liaise with the capitalist class, then all this does is presuppose the existence of a capitalist class, which in turn presupposes all the other structural elements of that class's power and prestige. This, as Bhaskar (1998, p. 431) says, is a kind of truth "validly applicable to experience but only *within* certain historical limits". These limits are a mode of production where a particular class, which makes up a small minority of the population, appropriates the unpaid labour of the majority and uses the wealth and prestige so obtained in order to perpetuate and extend that power. Thus, if it is argued that governments in capitalist societies must necessarily deal with the capitalist class, this can either be a fundamental step in recognising the historically specific character of this phenomenon and making a critique of the society where this occurs, or support an argument where those relations are deemed to be eternal, natural or just. FTPG failed to take the former position and so was vulnerable to the latter counterattack.

Another of the most common criticisms was that the programme's allegations could not be proven. This line of argument was given weight by FTPG's claim that businesspeople were "buying specific policies in return for donations" (McLaughlin, 1990). This suggests that there was a direct, quid pro quo exchange between the Labour Party and their donors. Though their close relationship was hardly a matter of debate, the wording of the above quote put politicians and business leaders in a position to demand a smoking gun and, given the fact that no such 'corruption' in the strict sense of the word need take place in order for a right-wing government to implement business-friendly policies, they could confidently proclaim that FTPG did not have evidence to back up its claims.

This impression of straightforward corruption, rather than a more detailed analysis of *why* the FLG was so amenable to business, was bolstered by the programme's tone. Through its visual and narrative style, it needlessly emphasised the supposed secrecy of the Government's dealings with the business community. The BSA upheld the NZBR's complaint that FTPG had given the impression that the NZBR were engaged in "*covert* action to subvert democratic government" (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 1990, p. 25; my emphasis). Their complaint was substantiated by the numerous points in the programme that emphasised the "*undisclosed* connections", the "*facade* of open government", the "*covert* operation[s]" and so on (McLaughlin, 1990; my emphasis). The programme used this language despite the fact that, as Roper (1992,

pp. 1–2) describes, "the remarkably close correspondence between the policy prescriptions of the Business Roundtable and the policies of the fourth Labour Government … constitutes one of the more *conspicuous* features of New Zealand politics after 1984" (my emphasis). It has already been shown that by 1990, the public were distinctly uneasy about the prominence and prestige of businesspeople friendly with the Labour Government. This is further evidence that secrecy, given the widespread public knowledge and concern about these connections, was not the FLG's fatal flaw. Again, a Marxist approach, which does not stand or fall according to whether the structural advantage of business interests is a secret or not, is needed. If the members of the NZBR had been treated less as members of a secretive sect and more as "personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests" (Marx, 1867/1958, p. 10), FTPG could have produced a more structural analysis of the subversion of democracy bound up with the state's reliance on capital accumulation.

FTPG was not simply a negative critique of the FLG. It advocated two reforms: MPs should be compelled to disclose their pecuniary interests, and political parties should be compelled to disclose their receipt of electoral donations above a certain threshold. The first reform was announced immediately after the programme's broadcast, while a 2009 amendment of the Electoral Act required political parties to disclose donations over $20,000 (Electoral Act 1993, s. 210C). What the foregoing analysis has shown, however, is that these reforms should be viewed as terribly ineffective in undermining the influence of the business community on policy formulation and implementation. Even if, for argument's sake, businesspeople were banned from making political donations, the structural sources of the advantage that the business sector has over competing interests would not be undermined. This advantage is not tied to how freely or covertly businesspeople are able to make donations to political parties, but instead to their position in the process of production in capitalist society. Even if one neglects the difficulties that would be encountered in the course of attempting to implement a ban on business donations, the business community would still hold the material resources to lobby for its repeal. This is another key lesson from the era of neoliberal reform: no matter how well a social democratic 'compromise' may seem to be embedded in a country's political economy, the continued existence of a capitalist class keeps alive the spectre of that compromise being eviscerated.

This section has aimed to demonstrate how the backlash to FTPG was able to stick. The programme's failure to produce a systematic critique of government–business relations, insofar as it led the programme to rely upon less sophisticated 'quid pro quo' arguments, made it an easy target for the flak machine. It also demonstrates just how narrow the spectrum of acceptable dissent is—although this article has shown how a much further-reaching critique could be constructed, FTPG's more limited critique was nevertheless subject to massive backlash from the country's most powerful people.

## Conclusion

The FTPG scandal was a critical flashpoint in the history of neoliberal reform in Aotearoa. The 1970s were a decade defined by crisis—on the one hand, a huge upsurge of working-class struggle and related protest movements, and on the other, the end of the post-World War II economic "golden weather" (Roper, 1993a). This ultimately led to the FLG, from 1984 onwards, implementing a vast suite of policies that the business community, in conjunction with their ideological comrades at Treasury, had formulated and aggressively lobbied for. Despite a conspicuous absence of substantive media criticism of these sweeping changes, by 1990 the increasingly divided Labour Government had become substantially unpopular. FTPG was emblematic of the questions the public were then asking, as it sought to highlight the intimate relationship that Labour's key ministers had cultivated with the country's most powerful businesspeople. In particular, it demonstrated how this aided their reelection in 1987 and likely contributed to their extensive programme of privatisation. Because of this substantive critique, but also aided by the programme's clumsy

language and framing, those concerned to legitimate the new political-economic paradigm immediately produced flak on a massive scale, with considerable success in undermining the programme and the journalists behind it. Between costly lawsuits, official complaints and a public relations offensive, FTPG largely went down in infamy. It has been this article's argument, however, that its central claims were largely accurate and that a more structural and systematic Marxist critique of the FLG is needed in order to properly comprehend government–business relations. This article has demonstrated how the media's portrayal of the policies and conduct of the FLG was a critical ideological dimension of the class struggle which saw a neoliberal regime supplant the previously dominant social democratic orthodoxy. This regime has been dominant for more than four decades, and it is highly significant that neoliberalism's dominance was greatly consolidated and intensified with the election of the Fourth National Government soon after FTPG's broadcast, as this demonstrated the steadily diminishing public space for dissent to this regime. Neoliberalism's endurance increases the risk that its tenets, very much the product of (class-biased) human action, will appear to be inevitable or natural. Studying these moments of crisis and change can show us that it is not.

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