

2002

Scandal and strife on the campaign trail

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Helen Clark

A coalition between Labour and the Greens was even less likely today after the election campaign took a nasty turn into brutal political territory.

Prime Minister Helen Clark's searing attack on the Greens burnt off the remnants of cordiality between the two parties amid claims the Government covered up an accidental release of genetically engineered corn.

The potentially damaging scandal threatened to derail Labour's campaign and a furious Miss Clark said the Government "utterly rejected" the allegations in Nicky Hager's book, *Seeds of Distrust*, published today.

The Greens said they were shocked and horrified by the disclosure and questioned the Government's honesty, which brought the ultimate insult from Miss Clark - they were as bad as the National Party.

"I am sickened by the dirt in the campaign and I am sickened by the fact that the Greens have joined the National Party in such an approach," she said.

"I expected the dirt from the National Party and there has been a ton of it - I didn't expect it from these people."

She said it would now be very difficult to rebuild trust, which seemed to dash the Greens' hope of being part of the next government.

The row broke out as Miss Clark was still fighting off National's claims that she did not co-operate fully with the police when they investigated "paintergate", and the genetic engineering (GE) cover-up allegation played into the Opposition's hands.

Party leader Bill English said she should front up over "her role" in the affair.

"Helen Clark campaigns on trust, but yet again people's faith in her has been broken," he said.

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However, a new poll showed National stuck at a dismal 24.5 percent and Labour holding its huge lead despite the assaults Miss Clark has had to face over "paintergate" and her personal popularity stayed at a record high.

Small parties got a boost in the New Zealand Herald DigiPoll, with ACT and New Zealand First breaking 5 percent and the Greens still rising at just over 10 percent.

It showed that if an election was held tomorrow, Labour would have just enough seats to govern with Jim Anderton's help.

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While the campaign has focused on Labour, GE and the Greens, in Auckland today law and order hit the news when Corrections Minister Matt Robson was booed and heckled at a Queen St march organised by the Sensible Sentencing Trust.

Mr Robson, now a candidate for Jim Anderton's Progressive Coalition, told about 500 people the Government's new sentencing and parole laws needed time to work, but they did not give him the time of day.

They shouted him down when he asked them to support the Government's new sentencing and parole laws, and give them time to work.

Mr English was given a much better reception, but not even National's tougher proposals satisfied the crowd.

He promoted his party's minimum 15-year sentence for any murder but he was told "not enough".

National did get some good news, however, when the Serious Fraud Office announced it had cleared the party of any wrong-doing over the donation of funds in 1996 by merchant banker Fay Richwhite.

All the party leaders were out on the campaign trail and NZ First leader Winston Peters upped the stakes on law and order by suggesting it was time the police were armed.

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