

Gone by lunchtime – or at least, declares the National Party, by 2050.



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Weasel Words

Pesky critics cast doubts over two flagship environmental policies.

On a recent winter weekend, not much over an hour north of Auckland, I spent several minutes up close with a creature eerily comparable to a dodo.

Flightless, cumbersome and portly – at least in contrast with the leggy pukeko loitering nearby – the bird we stood a few metres from at

Tawharanui Regional Park was a joy to behold. It would have blown the mind of an Edwardian naturalist.

In the first decades of last century, the takahe was believed to have followed the dodo into extinction. The handful at Tawharanui and those at other sanctuaries around the country have been bred from a small remnant population discovered in the Murchison Mountains near Lake Te Anau in 1948.

They remain critically endangered, which explains why the ones we saw all have aerials stuck to their backs, so their perambulations around the park can be tracked by human minders. The technological apparatus is no distraction from the pleasure of witnessing first-hand their green and blue plumage, handsome red beaks and stately foraging style.

Down the track, a loud squawk and crashing of foliage announced the arrival of a saddleback, red wattles quivering. A kereru swooped through just as noisily, like an overlaid cargo plane struggling to maintain altitude. Fantails were everywhere. On the beach, a dotterel scooted along the waterline.

On other trips to Tawharanui, we've seen and heard scores of bellbirds in a single tree, been cawed at by kaka and had a kiwi brush against our legs during an evening stroll. Visits there are a magical hint of what New Zealand was like before humans arrived with their accompanying pests.

That's due to the 2.5km predator-proof fence erected across the Tawharanui peninsula in 2004, and a subsequent poisoning campaign to rid the 588ha park of rats, cats, possums, weasels, stoats and ferrets. Since then, native birdlife has flourished and numerous species have been reintroduced. The volunteers and conservation groups involved in the project have set a compelling example of what might be achieved under the government's recently declared goal of a predator-free New Zealand by 2050.

Proposed by the late scientist

Sir Paul Callaghan, who compared it to the Apollo moon mission, the target makes great politics. In this country, native birds are up there with motherhood and apple pie, which is why politicians will leap into their anoraks and gumboots at any prospect of a photo opportunity with a kiwi chick.

This policy wins easy environmentalist kudos. And for the benefit of National's more traditional support base, who might retain their suspicions of tree huggers and bird lovers, emphasising the TB-reducing agricultural advantages of possum eradication provides a more hairy-chested spin.

Making this announcement, John Key, Steven Joyce and Maggie Barry opted to accessorise with tuatara for the photo shoot, which had the advantage of making all three ministers seem comparatively lively and unwrinkled. Due to the tuatara's longevity, it also meant the animals involved stand a reasonable chance of still being alive in 2050, as we celebrate our deliverance from Mr Ratty and friends.

Yes, a dollop of scepticism is justified. Distant goals are always a kind of political funny money, buying warm fuzzies with good intentions. In this case, 11 electoral cycles will wind past before the day of reckoning, giving the politicians involved plenty of time to get their excuses ready, if required.

In response to the policy, Labour preferred to focus on the here and now, and the cash-strapped Department of Conservation's failure to meet existing pest- and weed-control targets. Without proper funding, it was "just another empty stunt", said the party's conservation spokesperson, Nanaia Mahuta.

The Greens similarly considered the initial \$28 million investment a drop in the \$9 billion bucket of cash Auckland University has estimated it would take to eliminate the predators, and asked what would happen to the "predator-free dream" if the government can't attract the private funding it relies on.

All valid points. And the policy's bolt-from-the-blue arrival rather supports the theory that it was

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hatched by National strategists in an attempt to get us talking about something, anything, other than housing. But the impression also remains that National has burnished its environmental credentials at relatively little cost.

Meanwhile, another of the government's big environmental statements, the planned Kermadec Islands marine sanctuary, faces much more meaningful opposition.

Te Ohu Kaimoana (the Maori Fisheries Trust) has challenged the proposal – proudly announced by Key at the United Nations in New York last year – in the High Court, in a bid to defend its fishing rights around the islands. In late July, the trust launched a campaign accusing the government of "confiscating" the rights of Maori, and it has set aside a hefty war chest of funds it can use to fight the case.

Given Environment Minister Nick Smith's difficulties with his housing portfolio, you can imagine he would rather a supposed feel-good issue didn't turn into another long-running embarrassment for the government.

The row has echoes of the Seabed and Foreshore Act hostilities that erupted under the Helen Clark Government a dozen years ago, leading to the formation of the Maori Party, though Smith and National will be grateful that this battleground is 1000km away and therefore perhaps less likely to inspire the passionate feeling among both Pakeha and Maori generated in 2004, when the nation's entire coastline was seen to be at stake.

The bitterness of those days was revisited recently when the Maori

Party chose not to support Clark's bid to become Secretary-General of the United Nations. This was an unexpected tear in the warm cloak of non-partisan domestic support previously draped over the former prime minister's campaign.

Key laid it on so thick in his talks with visiting US Vice President Joe Biden that his guest later remarked on Key's zeal: "I was impressed. I thought she was his sister."

There has been no such friendliness across the Tasman, of course, where a campaign for the job by widely unloved former prime minister Kevin Rudd was finished off with a blast of political pesticide from his own country.

Here, no sisterliness towards Clark was on offer from the Maori Party's Marama Fox, either, who steadfastly defended her party's stance, despite incurring the odium of those who would prefer a united front of support. Was it utu, as described by former Labour minister Dover Samuels, or treachery, the label applied by New Zealand First Leader Winston Peters? Or were they both getting a little carried away?

For anyone who questions exactly what national advantage would accrue from Clark winning the job – apart from it being a supposed feather in the national cap – the Maori Party view might have been just the blast of fresh air required when the national consensus had become a mite too cosy.

"It's not tiddlywinks," as Tana Umaga once remarked. In politics, as in rugby, things will sometimes get rough.

That happened back in 2004 and it could again. For Fox and her co-leader Te Ururoa Flavell, this was a chance to remind Maori voters of the staunchness represented by their party's founding, something easily forgotten over their years of support for National. Being a determinedly independent voice is critical for their brand.

And like other minor parties, they have to take the limelight when and where they can. Better to appear a pest to those who won't vote for you anyway than risk going the way of the dodo.

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