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John Key was known as the smiling assassin. And people still liked him

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Like another poster boy for trickle-down economics - Tony Blair - the New Zealand prime minister had the Teflon gene. Even while presiding over record levels of child poverty, his popularity remained high



Despite ignoring public preferences not to privatise state-owned enterprises, increasing the GST, and more-or-less ignoring New Zealand's chronic child poverty, none of it stuck.' Photograph: Mariana Bazo/Reuters

John Key's legacy will not be defined by great policy achievements; it's his success as the model of a neoliberal leader - a poster boy for trickle-down economics - that he will be remembered for. Key presided over increasing and gross social [inequality](#) with all the glibness of the banker who was known as the "smiling assassin" in his [Merrill Lynch days](#). And people still liked him.

In this regard, Key was like a [Tony Blair](#) of the South Seas: a certain level of personal charisma and a socially inclusive façade allowed both Key and Blair to sell the nasty side of neoliberalism.

Compared with the likes of Donald Trump in the United States and Tony

Most viewed

Abbott in Australia, Key was socially moderate in ways that many thought - and hoped - Malcolm Turnbull would have been before he capitulated to the far right of his party on refugees, marriage equality and climate change. Key was more inclusive, and less divisive. [He pulled ponytails](#) instead of grabbing pussies. Key [supported marriage equality](#) in New Zealand and, as far as race is concerned, Key's National party entered into a [coalition government with the Maori party](#) not once, but twice.

Like Blair, Key had the Teflon gene. Despite ignoring [public preferences not to privatise state-owned enterprises \(2-1 against in a referendum\)](#), increasing the GST during the global financial crisis, and more or less ignoring [New Zealand's chronic child poverty](#) because he [blames the victims](#), none of it stuck. What *did* stick with Key was his reputation as a smart-money guy who was also likeable, self-effacing and wouldn't look out of place having a beer with regular folks. Never mind the hundreds of thousands of [children living under the poverty line](#) in New Zealand - a country of four million - and him brushing off the recommendations of the government panel charged with improving their lot; Key was seen as a good guy and a safe pair of hands.

Key's likeability goes some way to explaining how he remained so popular while presiding over ever-greater social inequality. But there is more at play. Political ascendancy is about passion, timing and narrative strategy. Key was a person who fitted the narrative of neoliberalism perfectly - he was a man of his time. He came of age at a time when a neoliberal coup turned the more-or-less socialist mixed economy of [New Zealand](#) on its head. As financial markets were deregulated and the Keynesian social consensus dismantled, Key began his ascendancy to banking-money heaven.

The heart of the Key narrative - like the Trump narrative - is money. They both have a personal story about business acumen and the notion that making money is the high art of society and the hallmark of good character. Key is known as someone smart - and competent - enough to make a pile of cash.

It's no coincidence that this "good with money" story has found such great traction and continues to propel wealthy business people into political power. In New Zealand - and many other countries, including Australia, the UK and the US - there's a powerful narrative that says that running a government is very much like running a company; you must balance the books first of all. And so it follows that someone who can manage (or at least acquire vast sums of) money can be trusted to manage government and society.

Equating the values of entrepreneurship and fiscal discipline with the judgment required to legislate in the public interest is crude nonsense. But this money story not only has currency, it is *the* currency of the reigning monetarist fiscal discourse.

The riposte to this story is not so difficult to form, but it has proven hard for the big social democratic parties to grasp - not least because they helped reinforce the "good with money" story. Labour parties around the world have long been experiencing an identity crisis: they are divided between their complicity in creating a neoliberal society, their adoption of Keynesian responses to the global financial crisis and the ideological opposition to neoliberalism among their ranks (in the form of, for example, Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders).

Many of the opponents of neoliberalism, including those who tried to unseat Key, still haven't figured out how to counter the "money story". The New Zealand Greens gave it a shot with their campaign slogan ["For a richer New Zealand"](#). But until you pull that money story apart - and New Zealand



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Labour still need to do this - people *do* buy into it, and they kept voting Key in because they believed in the equation that “good with money” equals “morally upstanding”.

People don’t want this bubble popped. When presented with inconvenient facts about Key - such as when journalist Nicky Hager revealed in his book [Dirty Politics](#) that Key’s party had employed a raft of secretly funded bloggers to do a hatchet job on his opponents - people won’t accept them unless they have a viable and persuasive counter-narrative to hang them on.

Constructing counter-narratives is the work of opposition parties. Counter-narratives (or at least the best-informed ones) are developed by exploring people’s views and values in focus groups; polling is essential to test the narrative, but focus groups are where they are developed. When opposition strategists went hunting in focus groups for the chink in Key’s armour, the results were remarkable (and rather disheartening).

Given Key’s ability to win traditionally Labour voters, a crucial question for strategists in New Zealand was how to stop women who traditionally vote Labour from voting for Key. Political qualitative research draws on market research techniques. Just as a beer company will use personification to understand how people relate to beer - *If a Carlsberg lager were a person, what kind of person would they be?* - so, similar tools are used in politics.

Political communications research also draws heavily on the analogy of family relationships: *If X was your parent, what kind of parent would they be? If X was your spouse, what kind of spouse would they be? What would define those relationships? What would break them?*

When Labour-voting women were asked what kind of husband they imagined Key would be, they saw him as having so much social and economic capital that they would be prepared to tolerate multiple breaches of trust in the relationship before considering severing it. Such was the appeal of Key’s persona.

But the money story central to neoliberalism and so crucial to Key’s success is built on a false analogy that can be killed off with the correct mix of branding and narrative.

For a start, it is necessary to assert that we live in a society, not an economy. The national budget is *not* like a household budget and anyone who tells you it *is*, is hiding something from you. Households don’t indulge quantitative easing (ie printing money); make decisions about what levels of social inequality are tolerable; set tax levels; or decide what scale of deficits will be run in order to redistribute income, feed the poor, educate our children or, heaven forbid, help them get well (for free!) when they are sick.

These are all social decisions that determine our approach to fiscal management, rather than economic imperatives that determine our values as society. We don’t decide to starve our children until the mortgage has been paid off.

If you want to unseat the neoliberal elites, be they the Trump-style authoritarians, or the Key and Blair style charlatans of social inclusion, you have to unpick their story of fiscal morality. And you need charismatic and popular champions to tell your story about creating a society that is caring and just.