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Ian Taylor: Seymour’s rise to the second seat with power far beyond his mandate

Ian Taylor

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Sir Ian Taylor is the founder and managing director of Animation Research.

OPINION: I have to confess, I underestimated [David Seymour](#).

Like many, I was distracted by the sequins. The man who tangoed into our living rooms on Dancing with the Stars. More jester than artist. A novelty act in lycra. But back then we kept him in the game long after the judges had given up on him.

And we've done it again. We've allowed Seymour to dance his way into the second most powerful position in the country, wielding power far beyond the mandate given by his 8.6% share of the public vote. And he's wasted no time laying out his vision.

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A week before stepping into the role of Deputy Prime Minister, Seymour offered this reflection on the state of the world, and [the ideology he believes](#) brought us here.

'At the end of the day, people have never lived this long, this happy, this healthy, this free from violence, this prosperous and well nourished. I think the jury is in, and liberalism won. Our job is to keep expanding those spheres of liberty.'

This was classic Seymour. Sharp, certain, self-congratulatory, and completely at odds with the world we see unravelling around us.



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violence, this prosperous, this well-nourished.”

This is not just tone deaf. It is detached from the reality that confronts a growing number of New Zealanders every day. When a political leader declares victory on behalf of a system clearly failing so many, both here and abroad, he's not just ignoring reality, he's giving permission for that failure to continue.

Failures that see thousands of children in Aotearoa living below the poverty line. Children going to school hungry, or not going at all. Children sleeping in cars, or with grandparents forced to choose between heating their bedrooms or cooking food. Reports of some as young as eleven, living homeless in the streets.

Failures that see hospital staff propping up a [healthcare system](#) stretched so thin it's held together by goodwill and overwork.

Failures that see teachers juggling overcrowded classrooms in under-resourced schools, alongside students with increasingly complex needs.

Failures that see home ownership drift out of reach, jobs of the future grow uncertain, and climate change action met with silence. When students marched on parliament demanding answers, Seymour suggested they be penalised for skipping school.

Ironically, the vision Seymour now claims as reality was first built by a libertarian, Richard Seddon, who in the 1890s laid the groundwork for New Zealand's welfare state, introducing old-age pensions and protections for workers.



Just four years after leaving the the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, Seymour became ACT leader.
BRUCE MACKAY / THE POST

By the 1930s, under Michael Joseph Savage, we became global leaders in social policy.

The Social Security Act delivered universal superannuation, unemployment and sickness benefits, state housing, free healthcare, strong unions and full employment. The world looked to us as a bold example of what a compassionate democracy could achieve when it put people's well-being at the heart of policy.

Growing up in the 1950s and 60s, I was a beneficiary of many of these policies. I lived in a warm state house and began school at the Raupunga Native School (yes, that's what they were called), where truancy was rare, probably because all our parents had jobs. I gained a free university degree and entered a job market where unemployment was virtually zero. If Seymour's vision ever existed, it was then.

It is clearly not the case today.

So, what is the 'liberalism' that Seymour claims as the winner?

Putting aside the vagaries of an electoral system that gifted him Epsom in 2014, when National chose not to run a candidate, and which now lets him wield

To answer that, we need to look beyond his upbringing in the far north, beyond the whakapapa that ties him to this land.

We need to look to Canada.



David Seymour takes aim at Labour as Deputy Prime Ministership begins

This was where Seymour worked as a policy analyst for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy (FCPP) from 2006 to 2010. The FCPP is a right-wing collective publicly associated with climate change denial, free market ideology, deregulation, privatisation, and cuts to public spending. Sound familiar?

Just four years after leaving the FCPP, Seymour became ACT leader. His colleagues back in Canada have taken keen interest in his rise to power.

In 2023, in a gushy press release after the new coalition government was announced, the President of the FCPP proclaimed; “The winds of political change are sweeping across New Zealand as David Seymour, leader of the ACT Party, brings a renewed emphasis on classical liberal values.... The ACT Party’s principle-driven approach is evident in its opposition to identity politics, specifically regarding special benefits for the Maori community.”

Aboriginal Governance Board. In answer to a question on indigenous rights he replied:

“There is a difference between civilised and non-civilised people, what used to be called savagery, although we can’t use that term today. Civilised people are, in the long run, more powerful than uncivilised people, so the task of the government today is not to indulge in continual breastfeeding about colonialism but to invite people whose ancestors lacked these elements of civilisation into the tent. Call that assimilation if you like. But it has to happen.”

That idea was seemingly echoed here in New Zealand in 2017 by a group called 1Law4All, who distributed flyers declaring: “Māori have benefited from colonisation lifting them out of a violent stone age existence.”

To be clear, Seymour has rejected this radical view. He does, after all, whakapapa back to the early voyagers we both share as tupuna. But the neoliberal notion of ‘one law for all’ remains central to his argument on Te Tiriti. He claims it’s not racist. I guess he sees it as an invitation into the tent. His tent.



“Despite his latest protestations about computer bots, David Seymour must have known his Treaty Principles Bill was going nowhere.”

MICHAEL BRADLEY

And despite his latest protestations about computer bots, Seymour must have known his [Treaty Principles Bill](#) was going nowhere. His dancing partners in the coalition had made that clear. But this is where Seymour performs best. I believe the Bill was his lycra outfit, costing taxpayers millions, but meant to distract us from the real prize: the Regulatory Standards Bill.

This Bill is Seymour’s rewrite of the legislative rulebook. Framed as neutral and technical, it is anything but. Beneath its bland title lies a blunt instrument. One that can be used to strike out laws that honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, protect the environment, or support collective wellbeing.

One law for all, but only if it fits the script Seymour began writing in a Canadian neoliberal think tank, years ago.

new dance floor at Oxford University, in the land of Queen Victoria, the Crown's signatory to Te Tiriti, dancing his Treaty Tango.

The question we have to ask ourselves is: when the music stops, who will be left to face the consequences?

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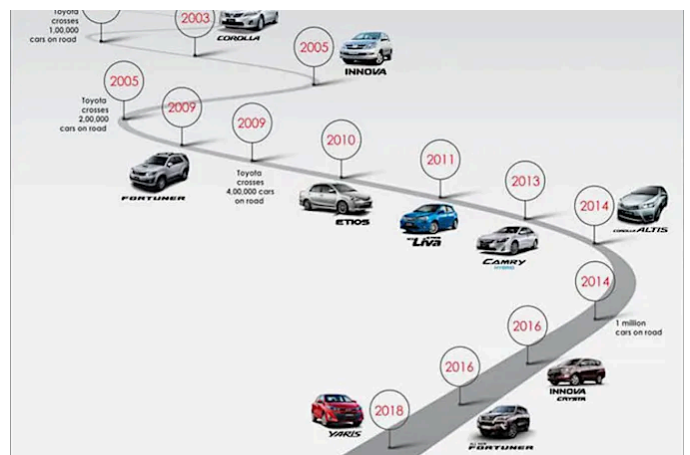
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