

THE MOST RECENT TEN YEARS OF CAFCA

Murray Horton

Murray has been a political activist since 1969. He was a founder member of CAFCINZ (now CAFCA) 50 years ago and has been involved with it ever since. He has been CAFCA's Organiser and Watchdog Editor since 1991.

Introduction

We are not celebrating something that happened or existed 50 years ago, but 50 continuous years of campaigning. I need to explain that this date (October 25) is randomly selected. Our foundational activity was the 1975 South Island Resistance Ride, which took place in February of that year. And if we want to be picky, the preparations for CAFCA (or CAFCINZ as we started out as) took place in 1974. For example, the inspiration for the Resistance Ride was the May 1974 Long March across Australia. But we thought that Labour Weekend 2025 was as good a time as any in 2025 to mark our 50th.

My topic is the most recent ten years of CAFCA. So, I won't be telling war stories from the good old days. I won't ignore them entirely. CAFCA and CAFCA people have their place in NZ history. I should mention three books that have come out within the last three years, all of which feature both CAFCA members and CAFCA itself – the book of essays about Owen Wilkes, a CAFCA founder; Maire Leadbeater's book about SIS spying on the Left; and the biography of famous painter Tony Fomison, a CAFCA member in the 80s. Plus there is an upcoming biography of Wolf Rosenberg, who was a CAFCA member and *Watchdog* writer. All of those books record aspects of our history and honour people who were, or still are, members of ours.

CAFCA grew out of the ferment of the late 60s and early 70s and that period remains of keen interest to following generations – I and other CAFCA members are involved in an art project inspired by the 1972 protest at the US military facility on top of Mt John in the Mackenzie Country; and I was also recently interviewed by a student interested in underground magazines and student papers of that period (I was the 1974 Editor of *Canta*, the University of Canterbury student paper). She called it "analogue publishing", a phrase I had never heard before.

This is not a conference or a seminar; there are no workshops, plenaries or resolutions. It is not being held to decide anything or to establish anything. It is a celebration and a reunion. It is to celebrate not only CAFCA but to place us in the broader context of the extra-Parliamentary Left and progressive movement. It is a gathering not only of our members but of our friends and supporters. It is worth noting that, of today's speakers, only two are actually CAFCA members (myself and Bill Rosenberg).

My speech is not about the issue of foreign control as such but CAFCA's response to that. It is more about "us" than it is about "it". I will speak about CAFCA in the period 2015-25, to emphasise that we remain a relevant

and important organisation today, rather than dwelling on past glories. To research it I re-read my annual Organiser's Reports for the past decade. And what a fascinating exercise that proved to be. I was intrigued to be reminded about what I'd forgotten and to be reminded what a strange, unique, turbulent decade it has been. We have dealt with huge external factors; we have had successes and failures; and we have remained constant in our core work. Let's get started.

What Has Gone?

I'll begin with what has gone from the CAFCA world in the most recent ten years. Firstly, the annual Roger Award for the Worst Transnational Corporation Operating in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A highly enjoyable event to announce that year's Roger winner was held in conjunction with CAFCA's 40th anniversary celebration in 2015. To emphasise our long and productive working links with the union movement, that event was also combined with a May Day celebration.

In 2016 there was a wonderful Roger Award event in Palmerston North, which was only the second time that it had been held outside one of the country's main cities (the other one having been in Nelson, several years earlier). With the benefit of hindsight, that Palmerston North event should have been the end of the Roger, because it would have gone out on a high. By contrast, the 2017 event in Auckland was poorly attended and felt flat and tired. That was the last one.

For 20 consecutive years, from 1997 to 2017, the Roger Award was a central CAFCA project, in partnership with GATT Watchdog and Christian World Service. It ended not because there were no longer any transnational corporate bastards to be held to account (there are even more of them now) but because the project had run out of steam, it was a lot of work for a small number of people, and it had served its purpose wonderfully well while it lasted.

In its heyday the Roger Award attracted very high profile judges, considerable public interest and media coverage and had credibility as an indictment of the transnationals. And it was great fun. As for the physical trophy itself, it was snapped up by Canterbury Museum (Te Papa passed on it). The Museum was so pleased to acquire it that it put out a press release to announce the fact.

That was what has gone at the micro level, what about at that macro level? Well, how about globalisation. It was all the rage ten years ago. Remember the big issue that had tens of thousands of people marching in the streets a decade ago – the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPPA). Didn't happen but Donald Trump did. There is a substitute agreement for the TPPA but it doesn't include the US. The world of "free trade" is a very different one now. At our 40th, we invited Jane Kelsey to be one of the speakers, as a global expert on the subject. We didn't invite her this time; instead, we asked Byron Clark to speak about the far Right and the Right, which is very much a major issue today.

One Failure

CAFCA had one undisputed failure in the most recent ten years. A bit of background. We started off half a century ago as a product of the anti-war movement of that time. We have always been an anti-imperialist movement. But we have concentrated on the economic manifestations of imperialism – the transnational corporations, the international investment agreements, et al. It had been years since we'd said or done much about foreign policy and all things military and intelligence, leaving that to the Anti-Bases Campaign (of which I'm also the Organiser).

Last decade we decided to have a go at reconnecting with our roots and, motivated by the advent of Trump's first term, tried to create a new group which would campaign for a genuinely independent foreign policy. It had a name – the Aotearoa Independence Movement (AIM) but, sadly, it never got any traction. It was thrashed out at a national gathering of activists in Blenheim in 2018, who were there for that year's protest at the Waihopai spy base. The decision was clear – people didn't want a new group, they preferred to keep working and cooperating, in their existing ones. So that was that. If any of you do wish to revive AIM, you don't need to create your own banner. You can have the one that's been in our garage for years.

Rather ironically – and certainly since the advent of Trump's second term – foreign policy is once again front and centre among the issues that people are most concerned about, not to mention good old fashioned, full blooded imperialism. Starting with the Ukraine War and going to a whole other level with the Gaza War, there is once again a massive anti-war movement, both in New Zealand and globally. I am actively involved in that, primarily in my Anti-Bases Campaign capacity. But CAFCA also has more than a passing interest in current military, intelligence and foreign policy issues.

Take Rocket Lab for example – it's an NZ subsidiary of a US transnational corporation, operating a privately-owned foreign military facility on NZ soil, which is used to aid and abet the US military and spy agencies, not to mention helping Israel's genocide in Gaza. CAFCA was among the very earliest groups to call out Rocket Lab. Dennis Small first wrote about it in *Watchdog* in 2017, sounding the alarm and putting the boot into the Green Party which was among those bedazzled by little old New Zealand joining the space race (I'm pleased to say that the Greens have long since seen the error of their ways).

Watchdog

OK, so I've mentioned things in the past decade that have gone from CAFCA's world and one project that failed. What about what is still there. There's plenty. Let's start with *Watchdog*, which has been a constant for the whole 50 years of our existence. It has come a very long way since its humble beginnings as a gestetnered newsletter to the magazine it is today. It looks the best that it ever has. It has undergone changes in the most

recent ten years. Leigh Cookson, our Layout Editor for more than 20 years, stepped down from the role (which she fitted in on top of a full-time job) and has been replaced by Marney Brosnan, who does a very professional job.

Dennis Small, one of our most prolific writers for decades, retired from writing and there was the death of Jeremy Agar, our quite brilliant Reviews Editor and resident Trump-obsessive (he has been replaced by two reviewers, Greg Waite and Linda Hill, and readers regularly compliment their reviews. Nobody is writing about Trump now and I couldn't care less). I must mention Ian Dalziel, who has done – at his own volition – our wonderfully quirky and pun strewn cover graphics for more than 20 years and has refused all offers of payment.

Watchdog was far from alone when it started out but now it is the last of the old school Left hard copy publications (it is also available online), and an unashamed practitioner of long form journalism. The two issues so far in 2025 have both been 100 pages. *Watchdog* has a tiny circulation, because it is tied to subscribers who are paying members of CAFCA, and that membership is dropping (I'll come to that) but it has a reach and an influence disproportionate to that. The calibre and name recognition of people who write for it (for no pay) is quite remarkable. And for many years it has featured some of the most memorable obituaries on offer.

OIO

Watchdog also serves another function. It is the journal of record and analysis of the Overseas Investment Office (OIO), and has been since Bill Rosenberg launched that project back in the 80s. He was our OIO writer for around two decades, then James Ayers did it for several years. For about half of the last ten years it was Linda Hill. Then several years passed with no OIO writer, despite us searching high and low throughout the country. It's a very specialised, time-consuming job, with no pay. I did a very token job as OIO writer for a few years. But, just a few months ago we finally got a new volunteer OIO writer, a stranger, who is the first one from outside our ranks – an Auckland woman in her 20s. She has told me she is in it for the long haul.

Organiser Account

Another constant presence has been the CAFCA/ABC Organiser Account, which has existed continuously since 1991 for the sole purpose of paying the Organiser (which is currently me). It is no mean feat for it to have lasted this long, funded almost solely by donations and pledges from members and supporters. I say "almost solely" because, in recent years, it has sometimes needed a helping hand from special appeals or boosts from CAFCA.

To acknowledge that reality, I work less paid hours than I used to. Having the Organiser Account as a separate entity from CAFCA (and ABC) means that CAFCA can concentrate on its core work without having to be

constantly fund raising to pay the Organiser. It is a funding model which is the envy of other groups and it has stood the test of time (with the inevitable ups and downs).

Overseas Investment Act

Our core work is foreign control and the law that governs that is the Overseas Investment Act. That dates from 1973, so it has been a constant throughout our existence, although Governments led by both major parties can't resist fiddling with it to make it more "efficient" and "streamlined". Who for? The transnational corporations, of course.

I can't help but laugh at Winston Peters' current iteration as a grumpy old man, "anti-woke" champion, scourge of the Left. 30 years ago, New Zealand First asked for CAFCA's help with information in their campaign against the 1990s' amendment of the Overseas Investment Act. 30 years ago, Winston Peters (along with Jim Anderton) was guest speaker at a Christchurch Town Hall public meeting organised by CAFCA about that Act. Bill Rosenberg and I shared the speaking platform with him. It was an interesting evening.

Right now, David Seymour is amending the Overseas Investment Act yet again, to make it – you guessed it – more efficient and streamlined. My topic is the most recent ten years of CAFCA and I can report some progress on that Act in that period. When Labour came to power in 2017 (courtesy of Winston Peters, let's not forget) Jacinda made Green MP Eugenie Sage the Minister in Charge of the Overseas Investment Office.

For the only time ever, CAFCA was consulted by a Minister about anything, let alone the Overseas Investment Act, which the Government was amending. I met with Eugenie, had a very productive discussion and some of the things that CAFCA had been advocating for decades actually ended up in the Act (the same Act that is now being amended, yet again, by David Seymour). I should point out that CAFCA was also publicly critical of some of the decisions Eugenie made as Minister.

Other positive things happened in that first 2017-20 term of Jacinda's government. CAFCA was among groups invited to a video briefing by the relevant Minister, David Parker. James Ayers and I attended. For the only time in our history, CAFCA was consulted by Treasury - they spoke to me by phone. We all managed to be civil to each other. It was such a striking event that the media made a story out of it.

This consultationitis was catchy – a veteran official of the Overseas Investment Office rang me for a chat. That honeymoon period ended once Labour won its unprecedented single party victory in 2020. The amended Overseas Investment Act was passed and Labour considered that subject to now be closed. Eugenie was not a Minister in Jacinda's second term; we never heard from any Ministers or Treasury again.

A Major Success

Right, so I've talked about things that have gone from CAFCA's world in the most recent ten years; I've talked about one undisputed failure; and I've talked things that have remained constant. Have we had any successes within the last decade? You'll be pleased to know that we have, a major one and it is ongoing at present. I'll briefly set some context. CAFCA is a tiny group, so throughout our history we've always sought to actively work with other likeminded groups and individuals. We are prepared to work with those who are prepared to work with us. And, in such dealings, we concentrate on what we agree on, not what we disagree on.

We've been in all sorts of campaigns and coalitions. In 2014 I was contacted by somebody writing a history of the Aramoana aluminium smelter project, which reminded me that we worked with the Save Aramoana Campaign way back in the 70s and 80s. We worked with various unions, such as the seafarers, on their campaigns, when our issues aligned. We kicked off the Campaign for People's Sovereignty here in Christchurch in the 90s. We kicked off the Keep Our Port Public coalition when there was a threat to sell Lyttelton Port in the noughties. We currently have working relationships with a number of groups ranging from Aotearoa Water Action to Coromandel Watchdog of Hauraki (that one dates back to the 80s).

But, undoubtedly, the most successful campaign we've been involved in is Keep Our Assets Canterbury (KOA), which has been running for a decade and a half. CAFCA has been involved with that from the start; I'm its Convenor; other CAFCA Committee members and former members have been or still are involved. To briefly explain for the benefit of people from out of town – Christchurch City Council still has a multi-billion-dollar portfolio of publicly owned assets, such as the port, airport, electricity lines company, broadband company, and a couple of others.

Post-quakes the Key government poured billions into the rebuild, whilst simultaneously pressuring the City Council to sell its assets in order to "pay its share" of the rebuild. KOA got stuck into that fight big time. I won't go into all the details. Briefly – the City Council announced it would sell several hundred million worth of assets, starting with Citycare, its' maintenance and works company. KOA led the successful campaign to stop that.

We went on the front foot. In both 2016 and 2019 KOA ran John Minto for Mayor, on a broad progressive platform. First time around he got nearly 15% of the vote, which was a remarkable result. Asset sales is an issue that never goes away. In 2023 there was another surprise move to open the process for sales. At extremely short notice – one day – KOA and a broad range of other groups mobilised, filled the City Council chamber with vocal opponents of asset sales and the Council voted, by a majority of one, not to proceed.

2025 Election

2025 was local body election year and KOA and its mates made sure that asset sales were front and centre among the issues. There were public meetings; an opinion poll that established that 75% of Christchurch people are against asset sales; KOA revived a tactic that we originally used in the 2013 election – we called on candidates to sign a pledge not to sell assets. They queued up to sign. KOA has credibility and a proven track record and those in charge of this city, New Zealand's second biggest, know it.

At the beginning of 2025 we met with the Mayor and CEO of the City Council and, separately, with the Chair and CEO of Christchurch City Holdings Ltd, which is the holding company of the City Council's multi-billion dollar asset portfolio. They were happy to talk and to listen to what we had to say. As the Mayor eloquently told us, he was happy to talk to us because "every three years you fellows put a rocket up us".

There have been losses – central Government forced the City Council out of its huge social housing portfolio (up until a few years ago the Christchurch City Council was NZ's second biggest landlord, after the Government). The Council sold its bus company, which is now owned from overseas, meaning that a city that has declared a climate emergency has no publicly-owned public transport. But, by and large, Christchurch has kept its assets and is much better off than most other cities in the country.

And, as a result of the local body election in October 2025, the Left bloc on the Council (The People's Choice) increased its seats by one, meaning that with Left independents, it is the majority, and committed to retaining assets. The day after the election, its campaign manager wrote to KOA to thanks us and to assure us that the Christchurch City Council won't be selling assets. That is a huge victory for both KOA and CAFCA.

Why Is CAFCA So Heavily Involved In This Campaign?

Because we support public ownership of utilities, services and infrastructure. And because we know who would buy the assets if they were sold – transnational corporations. It was a French company that was interested in buying Citycare when that was on offer last decade; 20 years ago, it was a Hong Kong company that was after Lyttelton Port Company; right now, there are persistent rumours that a Dubai company is after Lyttelton.

Keep Our Assets is a group and a campaign that CAFCA has backed for years with people, time and money (we were the single biggest donor to one of John Minto's Mayoral campaigns). Just weeks ago, we donated several thousand dollars to an allied group for its public ownership campaigning during this local body election. It has been a big battle that has gone on for years but we have won victory after victory and CAFCA can claim its share of the credit for that.

Anti-Imperialist & Progressive Nationalist

Have our politics changed within the most recent ten years? No, they have remained constant. We are not a political party, we are not affiliated to any political party and we reserve the right to criticise all of them. We work with parties when our interests align. In terms of broader politics, we remain, and always have been, an anti-imperialist group. Back in the 80s we polled our members about whether they wanted us to also be an anti-capitalist group and the result was split, so we've stayed with the status quo. I take solace from the fact that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism.

We are a nationalist group. Now, that word has become a fraught label. So, let me be clear – we are a Leftwing progressive nationalist group, which is also internationalist. We are not to be confused with Rightwing reactionary racist nationalists such as New Zealand First or, God help us, America First. We would never work with racists or fascists, both of who like to call themselves nationalists. We are not an anti-immigrant group. There is a reason why we have never tried to set up branches elsewhere and it is unapologetically that we do not wish to risk losing control of our “brand” and message. It would be disastrous to have a group calling itself CAFCA railing against migrants, for example.

We're a Christchurch-based group, so we are subject to the same external factors as everyone else in this city. In the most recent ten years, we've had a couple of decent earthquakes (one being the Kaikoura quake); we've had big fires on the Port Hills; we've had floods; we've had the horrific mosques massacre. All of those events affected the CAFCA Committee and our local members (in the case of the massacre, the murderer was caught on the highway just a few minutes' walk from the CAFCA office i.e. our home).

Along with everyone else in NZ, we lived through the exceedingly strange covid lockdown period. For me personally, it was pretty much business as usual, as I've worked from home, quite often by myself, since 1991. The Committee couldn't meet for a few months – we conducted business by email (CAFCA has never held a Zoom meeting). As during the much more disruptive and destructive quakes period we got *Watchdog* out. We have survived it all.

Membership

I'll conclude by talking about CAFCA's membership and our future. When I re-read my 2015 annual report, it listed our membership as being in the 440s. Currently it's in the 250s. So, it has nearly halved over ten years. Clearly, CAFCA is a sunset organisation. There are obvious reasons why we lose members – death, old age, cost of living (we insist on a paying membership, as subs and donations are our only source of income. If we'd kept on all those who have quit, we'd have a membership in the thousands. But it wouldn't be a financial membership).

Beyond that, there are other reasons why members quit. CAFCA members are wonderfully disputatious. They have quit because banks stopped accepting cheques; they have quit because of covid vaccines; they have quit

because we criticised Jacinda; because we criticised the Greens; and because we criticised Donald Trump. They hold strong opinions and are happy to share them with us.

What Is The Future Of CAFCA?

We discussed this – as we often do – at our AGM in September. We concluded that, as we have one Organiser (currently me) who is a contractor, when the time comes, we will contract another one. We operate a model that is a transferable work from home one, we have none of the costs or real estate issues of running an office. Money is not an issue.

But obviously, the Committee has got smaller. As an organisation we are old and white, whereas the future of Aotearoa is young and brown (which I personally think is fantastic). Where are the young people (the hardy perennial question)? We have some involved - our new OIO writer is in her mid-20s; Joseph Bray who is one of the speakers at our 50th today is younger than that; Byron Clark, who is also speaking today and Elliot Crossan, the new guy who updates CAFCA's *Key Facts* on our Website, are both young or, at least, youngish.

But CAFCA, as we are, is unlikely to appeal to young people and their different ways of doing activism. That's why I'm relaxed about "succession". I doubt that younger people would want to take over CAFCA as it is. We are definitely old school. I doubt that young activists would read, let alone publish a 100-page hard copy magazine. Any new equivalent will have to organically evolve, reflecting a younger generation's slant on the issue of foreign control. I think our main contribution is to stand aside when the time is right and offer practical help, in the form of experience, knowledge and money.

Note the phrase "when the time is right"; we're not planning on closing down any time soon; this gathering is not our farewell party. My co-organiser of this event asked if I thought if CAFCA will have a 60th. We both thought not. Mind you, at the time of our 40th, I didn't think we'd have a 50th, and yet here we are. So, let's celebrate 50 years of CAFCA, which is a quite remarkable achievement, and let's look forward to however long or short a time we have left. The struggle continues!