

Rigging Avian Ballots: New Zealand's Bird of the Century Competition

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They can be a serious lot in New Zealand. They got upset at – forgive this author such reference – the use of a rule in cricket back in February 1981 which led to expressions of misty anger from the Prime Minister of the day, Robert Muldoon. While permissible within the laws of cricket, sides are generally not meant to bowl underarm. This, Greg Chappell's Australians did. "I thought it most appropriate that the Australian team was dressed in yellow," Muldoon [fumed](#).

Recently, mild tempers were stirred by what could be regarded as a form of ballot interference, this time regarding the vote for the country's most famous Bird of the Year competition. On this occasion, the competition, run by the conservation group Forest and Bird since 2005, had an elevated importance, being badged as a vote to identify New Zealand's Bird of the Century.

While electoral and voter interference has become the stuff of mania since the 2016 US election, inducing fits of spluttering concern against those mischievous meddlers in Moscow and Beijing, some New Zealanders could be justified in showing irritation at the vigorous, external advocacy by the Anglo-American comedian, John Oliver, for the pūteketeke. Also known as the Australasian crested grebe, Oliver had detected a loophole in the voting rules, which permitted anyone with a valid email address to cast a vote.

Oliver made a stirring promotional pitch on Jimmy Fallon's *The Tonight Show*, and [expressed](#)

[admiration](#) on his own HBO show *Last Week Tonight*.

“They are weird puking birds with colourful mullets. What’s not to love there?” He also admired their “mating dance where both grab a clump of wet grass and chest bump each other before standing around unsure of what to do next.”

If billboards and an advertising campaign are measurements of love, then Oliver had it in feathery abundance as the bird’s self-appointed campaign manager. Billboards celebrating his special avian choice made their appearance in Wellington, Paris, Tokyo and Mumbai celebrating this “Lord of the Wings”.

The comedian’s background in this enterprise was, in many ways, fitting. Both the United Kingdom and the United States have made it something of a corrosive specialty swaying foreign elections and doctoring ballots over the decades. “This is what democracy is all about,” [declared](#) Oliver, “America interfering in foreign elections.”

Nor was Oliver venturing into a competition of virginal innocence. Fraud and idiosyncrasy have been prevalent themes. In 2018, 300 fraudulent votes [were cast](#) by Australians attempting to rig the result in favour of the shag. In 2019, accusations were made that Russian votes (of course) had played a spoiling role, though a spokesperson for Forest and Bird, Megan Hubscher, [regarded them](#) as legitimately cast by Russian ornithologists. “New Zealand actually shares birds with Russia,” she plausibly reasoned. In 2020, 1,500 fraudulent votes were cast for the kiwi. The following year, the competition was won by the long-tailed bat, [prompting calls](#) that the election had been stolen.

The voting that followed in 2023 was [truly global in nature](#): 350,000 ballots cast from almost 200 countries during a frenzied bout of campaigning. At one point, the voting verification system crashed, delaying the result by two days.

There were also instances of blatant voter fraud. A supporter of the eastern rockhopper penguin (“hipster penguin” to Oliver) [cast](#) 40,000 votes for the bird. Another, based in Pennsylvania in the US cast 3,403 votes, with one arriving every three seconds. Both mercifully failed in having their efforts count.

The number for the pūteketēke was a lopsided tally of 290,000 votes, leaving the kiwi in second place with a paltry 12,904. The next three placements were the kea, kākāpō and the fantail. Nicola Toki, the chief executive of Forest and Bird, was gingerly diplomatic about the result. She [described](#) the pūteketēke as being “an outside contender for Bird of the Century but was catapulted to the top spot thanks to its unique looks, adorable parenting style, and propensity for puking.” Toki and her colleagues were “not surprised these charming characteristics caught the eye of an influential bird enthusiast with a massive following.”

The incoming New Zealand Prime Minister, Christopher Luxon, did not seem too troubled either.

“Congratulations to the campaign manager @iamjohnoliver [John Oliver] and all those who gave their support to the pūteketēke,” he [posted](#) on the platform formally known as Twitter.

Many did not share that view. Umbrage was taken at Oliver’s derisory remark at one of the country’s most recognised birds, the kiwi, as “a rat carrying a toothpick.” Supporters of the

kākāriki karaka, or orange-fronted parakeet, countered with their own billboard campaign sporting such lines as, “Dear John, don’t disrupt the pecking order.”

While the whole thing seemed like an indulgence, notably given the daily news digests of war, famine and societal failure, Toki could take heart at a bird campaign that had been globalised. At home, the country’s native species (politicians, take note) are struggling; 80 percent have made their way to the dreaded threatened species list, and the Department of Conservation is having its budget cut. “We promised controversy but didn’t quite expect this! We’re stoked to see the outpouring of passion, creativity and debate this campaign has ignited.” Sadly, passion and awareness are not always politically convertible currencies.

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