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At least seven candidates with links to alternative politics or conspiracy theories are running for local government in the upcoming elections.

The candidates were identified in a nationwide search to find those standing for office who were also pushing "harmful conspiracy theories",

according to Fighting Against Conspiracy Theories Aotearoa [FACT].

FACT was an activist group made up of volunteers from all professions with the aim of monitoring, exposing and de-platforming misinformation on social media.

Beliefs and views held by the candidates

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The background check:

Controversial links found

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were varied but included anti-fluoride and anti-vaccination campaigns, as well as identifying with sovereign citizen movements.

In Featherston, Claire Bleakley and Mary Byrne were running for the Featherston Ward and Featherston Community Board respectively. Bleakley and Byrne have both expressed views against covid-19 vaccinations. Bleakley was arrested at the parliament occupation earlier this year, and in September last year, Byrne was seen standing outside a Lower Hutt school handing out anti-vax flyers to students.

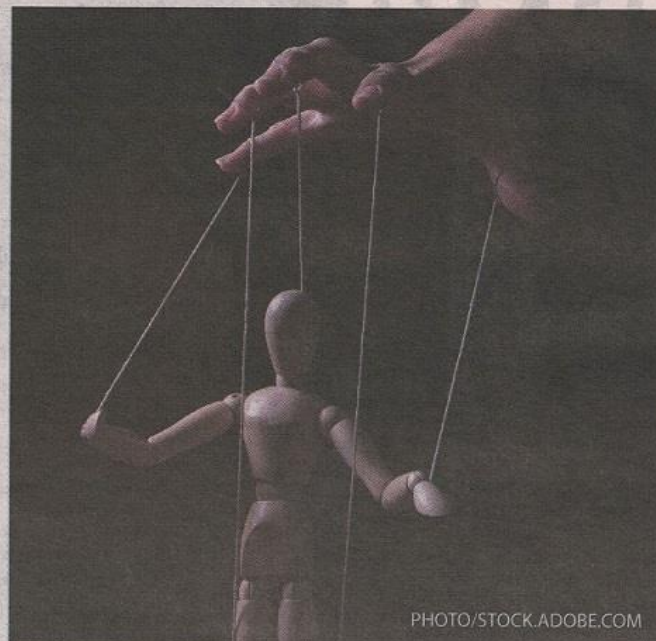
Bleakley said that the allegations by FACT were unfounded and inaccurate.

"I am not affiliated with or standing on any vaccine platform.

"My private views are confidential and will not affect any decision I make at the council level. I, however, do support the democratic right for everyone to have freedom of choice as to decisions they make that affect their lives."

In Greytown, anti-vaxxer Jo Woodcock was running for the community board. Woodcock had previously referred to South Wairarapa District Council's use of vaccine passes as "medical apartheid". Greytown Community Board had vacancies but only three candidates, meaning Woodcock was guaranteed a seat.

In Carterton, Jill Greathead



was standing again for council. Greathead had been vocal about her connections to Voices for Freedom and had also been present at the parliament occupation earlier this year.

Meanwhile, in Masterton, Aileen Haeata-Kuku was running for mayor. Also known as "Huck", she was, according to FACT, an anti-vaxxer and sovereign citizen.

Tina Nixon, another mayoral candidate, had been promoted by conspiracy website Resistance Kiwi earlier this month. On Facebook, she was also seen to be following Leighton Baker, father of Chantelle Baker, and far-

right conspiracy group Conserve NZ, which was associated with former NZ National Front leader Kyle Chapman. However, FACT said Nixon followed many pages and this might not be indicative of her personal beliefs.

In Tararua, Dot Watson was running for the Maori Ward. Watson had shared anti-vax views and was running under 'Refreshing Local Democracy' – the same ticket as Jill Greathead.

Massey University professor Paul Spoonley, an expert on sovereign citizens, said there were two elements that were concerning regarding groups such as those with sovereign

citizen ideas involving themselves with the upcoming elections.

"One is the deep suspicion held of our systems of government and of the people, politicians or government employees, involved.

"The other is the attempts to subvert due political process and to threaten people with faux trials.

"There is also the attempt to subvert systems, such as taxation or traffic fines, either by arguing that the state and court system has no jurisdiction or by submitting documents – and lots of them. This has been called "paper terrorism" in the USA as it blocks up the court system with paperwork."

Spoonley said the attempts of sovereign citizens would appeal only to a very limited number of New Zealanders.

"We should respect local democracy and wishes but not at the expense of legal and other systems. It is important that the political views and aims of these groups should be understood by electorates.

"The test of their appeal comes in the ballot box."

Spoonley said that in the USA, sovereign citizens had made some local systems of government difficult to operate, intimidated officials and politicians and been involved in a series of violent acts.

"My sincere hope is that we do not repeat the excesses of the American sovereign citizen movement."