Maoris claim ownership of water
Move to stop sale of power station

Prime Minister John Key appears doggedly determined to win through his plan to partially sell state-owned power companies, as well as Air New Zealand, looking like a good deal for all.

It could raise $500m to $1bn for the government to ease its crippling debt burden.

As far as investment plans go, floating off shares in three government-owned power companies as well as Air New Zealand looks like a good deal for all.

But the very mention of asset sales appears to send New Zealanders foaming in the mouth. Over the past couple of months, protesters have been frequently marching up and down the main thoroughfares of major cities condemning the government's move.

A major logistical fear of many Kiwis is that some foreign groups might be able to buy their 'lucky shares' on these assets where some mum-and-dad investors want to take advantage of higher prices.

But the political sentiments lend weight to the perception that New Zealanders are easily swayed by political and other interests to view foreign investment as a threat to national well-being.

This perception is being used as an instance by a local consortium to continue legal proceedings aimed at derailing the sale of a 10 per cent stake in the Hydro electric assets overseas.

But the decision by the High Court has ruled that the buyers have met all stringent guidelines laid out by the government.

To complicate matters, the New Zealand Maori Council has gone lone claim to ownership of the water which flows through the mighty Waikato River where some of the country's power station infrastructure is located.

With the agreement of the Waitangi Tribunal to consider its bid to halt the sale of Mighty River Power, shares pending resolution of the water ownership claim, a huge question mark hangs over the asset sale.

The power company requires water — lots of it — to generate electricity. Obviously, if there is a claim on water ownership then it impacts on their business model, says union organiser Matt McGregor in his weekly Herald on Sunday column.

People are warning that this new uncertainty causes a real problem that will drive down the sale price.

Even highly respected investment guru Gareth Morgan has warned investors to hold off plans to part with their savings for the share sale.

Key's response has been to hastily dismiss the Maori ownership of water and reiterated that the government would not be bound by any Tribunal finding regarding the claim.

His stand has angered Maori leaders including the three Maori Party MPs who have formed a coalition within his coalition government.

Key also described the Maori Council's claim of water ownership as 'opportunities' and reiterated that a potential court challenge was unlikely to delay the government's asset sales plans.

If there was any self-respect, they should have left the coalition but swallowing the pride, they stayed on and the PM emerged from a meeting soured by the Maori Party without giving an inch.

Without Maori support, Key would rely on United's sale MP Peter Dunne, to use his one vote to push through the sale, public opinion be damned.

Defending his stance, Key said: "If you want to follow the argument that the Maori Council is putting up, why wasn't that tested in 1989 when Contact Energy was sold, why wasn't it tested when Transpower were sold? In my view, it's opportunistic.

"They have a legitimate right, they have historically always had a connection with the river and they are passionate about that and we work with them," he said.

"We don't believe anybody owns water. We do accept that people own water rights. We don't think the sale of 40 percent of Mighty River Power in any way impinges on those water rights," he said.

But Maori Council co-chairman Hone Harawira said: "As far as my people are concerned we have the water and the water is ours.

"Submitting the concerns of New Zealanders is proper," Maori council lawyer Annette Ferguson said. "We do not want to stop Water Korero coming out of the tap or prevent farmers having access to crops."

The claim was not about having an ownership interest in the river. People are being forced to say claim to things that have never been lost or given away.

The council did not separate the water in a river from the river itself, he said. Water resources had always been, and still are, fundamental to all cultures.

"Therefore, it is reasonable to expect some sort of a water rights would be available to all. Maori ownership should not mean that anyone in New Zealand has their tap turned off."

Maori Council New Zealand chair Kereopa Te Rau said that no ethnic group had exclusive ownership of the water that flows through NZ rivers. If the water 'run' were unaltered, what would stop the Maoris from claiming ownership of it?

"People are raising eyebrows across the land, when he complained that lawyers for the Maoris were being forced to accept less than minimum wage after their bid for legal aid was turned down."

He was reduced to give the dollars amount, but said the Ministry of Justice, which he claimed had been involved in funding an agreement over legal aid with the council and was considering laying a complaint with the Human Rights Commission over the matter.

"Demanding tax dollars to fund a bid to squeeze more tax dollars out of the government? Oh please."

As New Zealanders wait to see how the tribunal would rule over the water ownership issue, Key remains openly unperturbed. The man is one heck of a poker player.