

New Zealand parliament gives unanimous backing for East Timor troops

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20 September 1999

The New Zealand government has received the unanimous backing of all political parties for its decision to contribute troops to the Australian-led military intervention in East Timor. Parliament was specially reconvened last Friday to discuss the army deployment, the four-hour session concluding with a unanimous vote of support.

There was no debate on any of the central issues. A series of set speeches by party leaders was heard in silence. Nor were there any protesters or dissenting views on display in the public gallery, unlike previous occasions such as the lead-up to the 1991 Gulf War. Opening the session, National Party Prime Minister Jenny Shipley referred to the possible Balkanisation of Indonesia and argued that "just a few hours' flight to the north of us, we have our own Kosovo". She warned that the mission was dangerous and that casualties among New Zealand troops were possible.

All the opposition parties fell into line. Labour's Helen Clark and Phil Goff, as well as Alliance leader Jim Anderton, claimed that the troops were being sent to secure the "independence" of East Timor. Both parties, which have previously posed as "peace" parties and opposed increases in defence spending, took the occasion to criticise the lack of preparedness of the armed forces and the age of the equipment they will be using. Greens MP Jeanette Fitzsimons gave her "full support" to the decision, as did Richard Prebble, leader of the right-wing ACT party, who went on to warn that "our armed forces are going to need support not just for the next few days but possibly for years".

The local media, which has become increasingly bellicose in whipping up an atmosphere in support of armed intervention, was ecstatic at the prospect of military involvement. Auckland's *Weekend Herald* revealed the hypocrisy behind all the talk of "peacekeeping" with a front-page headline proclaiming:

"As Parliament wishes our troops Godspeed... Anzacs ready for battle". Anzac is an acronym for joint operations of the Australian and New Zealand armed forces, first coined during World War I and used to support both countries' military ventures ever since. It was a precursor to the ANZUS pact, which bound Australia, New Zealand and the US in a formal alliance following World War II and became the umbrella for military aggression against Vietnam.

The New Zealand military commitment is already escalating well beyond that announced just prior to the APEC summit of Asia-Pacific countries in Auckland last week. It is set to exceed the level of involvement in any overseas operation since the Korean War, including Vietnam at its height. Earlier announcements indicated that New Zealand's contribution would be based around a rifle company of 250 soldiers, armored vehicles and a medical unit. However, defence analysts are predicting that the government will send at least a 700-strong battalion of troops with armored vehicles, helicopters and support staff, bringing the total number of military personnel to over 1,200.

Forty Special Air Services personnel left for Darwin before the weekend, for advance deployment to East Timor with the Australian army. The recently launched frigate *Te Kaha*, stationed off Darwin for the past 10 days, is being joined by the frigate *Canterbury* and the navy tanker *Endeavour*. The airforce Hercules transport aircraft that has been assisting the Australians with air evacuations of UN staff from Dili is also to be reinforced.

One of the significant factors in the political preparations for the invasion was the possibility that the Shipley government was about to be outflanked by the opposition parties of the "left," the Labour Party and the Alliance, just months out from impending national elections. From the outset, Labour and the Alliance were pushing for the government to put Timor on the official

agenda. Labour leader Helen Clark said that failure to do so would render APEC irrelevant:

“If the regions assembled here do not discuss the chaos in East Timor, it raises questions over the very purpose of APEC. The government cannot get away with saying this is a meeting of economies, not of governments. Economies, after all, are made up of people. Indonesia is a particularly broke economy which looks to other wealthier economies to bail it out”.

Clark claimed that if the Shipley government was too “timid” to give the lead on East Timor in the APEC meetings, the US would be forced to do so. In other statements, Clark claimed that the government was making “excuses” for the Indonesian government and that Shipley and McKinnon had been at pains to defend it in their attempts to avoid upsetting the APEC summit.

Alliance leader Jim Anderton, over a week before APEC, called for Indonesia to be warned that it could lose its international financial aid if the militias harmed UN staff. Even more hawkish was Alliance spokesman Matt Robson, who had returned from a joint parliamentary trip to observe the Timor referendum with a demand that an armed UN force be dispatched immediately, with or without an invitation from Indonesia. Green Party MP and co-leader Rod Donald joined in, saying he was “intensely angry” that many of the New Zealand troops, which had been placed on stand-by for East Timor had been committed to APEC duties instead and would not be immediately available for overseas action.

The position of Labour and the Alliance was strongly supported by leading elements within the trade union bureaucracy. A statement by the US-backed International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), calling for a UN force to “act urgently to disarm and disband armed militias and arrest and bring to trial all those responsible for the accelerating bloodbath,” was promoted within union circles. The statement, from the ICFTU website, boasted of the ICFTU’s “status with multilateral financial institutions and Indonesia’s major donors and trading partners”, and threatened to use these contacts to help organise a financial embargo of Indonesia.

On the eve of the APEC conference, the Wellington-based *Evening Post* temporarily interrupted its lambasting of Ansett NZ pilots—currently facing an employer lockout over cuts to jobs and conditions—in order to carry a report on calls for action over East Timor by various union spokesmen. The newspaper included a prominently-displayed article airing a demand by a branch officer of the secondary teachers’ union, the Post-Primary Teachers’

Association, for a general strike in protest at the “lack of government action” on Timor.

The rapid move by the Labour and Alliance parties to the head of the pro-intervention lobby represents a very significant political shift within a few short months. At the beginning of the NATO campaign in Kosovo, Anderton and Clark both issued statements opposing the bombing. Clark predicted the bombing would be a “complete disaster” and said the NATO allies should have stuck to diplomacy, and acted as part of the UN.

At the time, both leaders were quickly pulled into line. Following their initial statements, a flood of hostile editorial comment appeared, and nothing more was said publicly by either party as the bombing intensified. The media response was a salutary lesson for an opposition intent on presenting itself as a “responsible” alternative government. Now with the prospect of military intervention far closer to New Zealand, they have become even more obsequious in defending the material interests of the ruling class in the region.

At the same time, the Shipley government is preparing to cynically use the war in East Timor in an attempt to rouse nationalist fervor in order to secure its own re-election. The government has for most of this year avoided committing itself to an election—due by December—as its fortunes in opinion polls have sharply declined after a deterioration of economic and social conditions and a series of financial scandals. The day after parliament approved the dispatch of troops Shipley suddenly announced her intention to name the election date next week.

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