

Tensions in New Zealand government over Afghanistan war

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21 November 2001

Prime Minister Helen Clark and Deputy Prime Minister Jim Anderton moved forcefully last week to stamp out dissent within the Labour-Alliance coalition over a New Zealand government offer of Special Air Services (SAS) troops to serve in Afghanistan. Anderton, the Alliance Party leader, effectively nullified a vote at his party's conference to "review" a decision by Alliance MPs to support the troop deployment.

The Alliance is the junior partner in the coalition government. At the last election it presented itself as the "left" alternative to Labour, but then entered the government, vowing to keep Labour "honest". The coalition does not have a parliamentary majority, and relies on a deal with the Greens to support the government on essential matters to do with confidence and supply. The Green Party was the only party to vote against the New Zealand military commitment when it was presented to parliament in early October.

The rift within the Alliance brings to the surface two interrelated developments. It reflects growing levels of unease and opposition to the war among the population at large. Sentiment against the US-led war has been steadily growing. Hundreds of people have taken part in protests in the main centres of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. Letters regularly appear in the main newspapers opposing the war.

More generally, the Alliance finds itself losing support to the Greens as opposition develops to the government on a range of issues. Involvement in the war has gone hand-in-hand with a secretive move to strengthen repressive security laws. At the same time, teachers, nurses, health workers and university staff are engaged in industrial campaigns against austerity measures. The Greens have been the main beneficiary of the disaffection. Support for the Alliance has slumped from 7 percent at the 1999 elections to barely above the margin of error—2 percent—for most of this year.

At the Alliance conference, party activists foreshadowed a resolution calling on the party to immediately withdraw its support for the NZ troop commitment to Afghanistan. During a reportedly "intense" two-hour debate, opponents of the war declared this a matter of principle, outweighing the "political expediency" of compromising with Labour to prop up the government. One delegate said the Alliance should not be associated with the US bombing. "Instead we should be leading

the world in saying the emperor has no clothes," he said. Disarmament Minister Matt Robson, a former peace campaigner, was heckled and accused of "selling out" when he attempted to defend the government line on the war.

In fact, opposition to the war inside both the Alliance and Green parties is essentially opportunist in character. The main parliamentary "opponent" of the war, Green Party foreign affairs spokesman Keith Locke, does not object to the commitment of NZ troops to Afghanistan as long as it is "consistent with international law, and under the authority of the United Nations". It amounts to a call for more effective window-dressing to disguise what is an imperialist war led by the US to secure domination of the key strategic and resource-rich region of Central Asia.

There are concerns in the political establishment, however, that even these limited disagreements may become the focus for broader opposition. With US and Australian diplomats attending the conference as observers, the Alliance leadership made it quite clear that if the resolution from the floor passed, the coalition government would be put at risk. Under pressure from Anderton, deputy leader Sandra Lee and parliamentary whip Grant Gillon, a watered-down amendment to "review"—rather than "oppose"—the troop deployment was passed, by a narrow margin of 85-61 votes.

Anderton made the vote a matter of confidence in himself as party leader, and demanded that the amendment be approved in order to give Alliance MPs room to manoeuvre in the government caucus. He supported the amendment by saying that should the US-led military assault on Afghanistan become "disproportionate," the Alliance would be prepared to pull out its support.

Immediately after the conference ended, Anderton and Clark closed ranks to assure the US of continuing New Zealand support. Asked how and when the "review" would be carried out, Anderton replied that it would be under his leadership and would not be debated publicly. He insisted that the review would not examine the initial offer of SAS troops, which he deemed "appropriate", but concentrate on the circumstances surrounding the US action against terrorists, and whether these had changed.

Anderton then invoked the principle of "cabinet

responsibility” to muzzle any potential dissent among his MPs, at least two of whom—Phillida Bunkle and Womens Affairs Minister Laila Harre—are known to be unhappy over any involvement of NZ troops. He warned the four Alliance cabinet ministers that their jobs were on the line. Noting that all the Alliance ministers had initially supported the government, Anderton stated: “I told them I would not go into the cabinet with ministers who did not support a government position.”

Speaking on behalf of the government, Clark asserted that nothing had, or would change. “To avoid any doubt, the Deputy Prime Minister has advised the cabinet that all Alliance ministers stand by their previous support... and that they will continue to do so publicly,” she said. “I’ve made it clear that the government is not reviewing the offer it made. So I guess people undertake their reviews in that context.”

The Alliance caucus quickly fell into line. At a meeting of MPs a few days after the party’s conference, an agreement was reached to carry out the policy “review” on the basis dictated by Anderton. It was left to Harre to front television news cameras to explain that the decision had been unanimous, and the caucus was absolutely “solid” on how to proceed.

The government first made its offer to supply SAS troops within days of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on September 11. Foreign Minister Phil Goff confirmed the offer in a meeting with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage during a visit to Washington in late September.

The decision was not referred to parliament until October 3, and was then presented as a *fait accompli*. Clark said the government did not need the approval of parliament, but brought it to a vote because she “wanted the troops to know... they had the full support of MPs”. The resolution was passed 112 votes to 7, with only the Greens dissenting. An amendment moved by the conservative National Party opposition to include the words that parliament “totally supports the approach taken by the US...” was included with the government’s agreement.

All 10 Alliance MPs except Phillida Bunkle, who abstained, supported the resolution in parliament. Anderton claimed that there was no opposition within the Alliance caucus before the issue was taken to parliament, and according to Clark, no Alliance or Labour ministers raised any dissent in cabinet.

The government rejected attempts by the opposition to criticise its response to the events of September 11 as reluctant and too slow off the mark. Clark described the offer of SAS troops as a “very significant” one, and fully expected them to be deployed in Afghanistan. Clark, however, consistently refused to be drawn on when and under what circumstances this might occur, citing the need for “security”. She emphasised that “terrorism isn’t confined to Afghanistan” and indicated the government had not ruled out their use elsewhere if the “war against terrorism” were widened.

Labour maintained its hard line in support of the war, even as the US-led operations caused increasing unease in New

Zealand. When the air strikes began on October 7, Clark issued a statement justifying the military action under Article 51 of the UN charter which, she said, “enables a nation to act in self defence”. Following a telephone discussion with US President Bush the same day, Clark was pleased to report his “very, very fulsome appreciation” of her government’s support.

As the bombing campaign intensified, Labour stuck to its support for the war. Clark dismissed concerns about civilian casualties, saying they were inevitable in a bombing campaign. “Everyone is conscious that when bombing raids go in you can’t always guarantee that carefully selected targets will be hit,” she said. She rejected suggestions that the US should alter its strategy because of civilian deaths, claiming that “we might have Hitler still standing in Berlin if we did not have civilian casualties”.

While in government in the 1980s, Labour attempted to stake out an “independent” position for New Zealand defence and foreign policy, by opposing visits by nuclear-armed US warships and nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific by France. The ban on nuclear warships resulted in the formal ANZUS defence alliance with Australia and the US becoming inoperative in 1986. Since taking office in 1999, the Clark government has fallen into line with the US and Australia.

A key turning point came in 1999 when, as opposition leaders, Anderton and Clark initially issued statements opposing the bombing of Kosovo, predicting it would be a “complete disaster”. Both quickly retreated following a flood of hostile editorial comment. A few months later, the two parties demonstrated that they had learned their lesson, taking the lead at an Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Auckland in rounding up support for military intervention in East Timor.

Calls have already been made for the government to resume the ANZUS defence arrangements. While Labour has indicated that it will not do so at present, Foreign Minister Goff has been at pains to make clear that Labour will fully support US military actions even without a formal treaty. Labour did “not need ANZUS to know right from wrong,” he declared.



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