

New Zealand opposition leader launches racist diatribe against immigrants

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The leader of New Zealand's second main opposition party, New Zealand First, has used the first parliamentary sitting following the July 27 election to deliver an extraordinarily inflammatory speech blaming the country's worsening social crisis on recent immigrants.

In a major speech to the new parliament late last month, Winston Peters declared that the country's indigenous Maori population was being treated in an inferior way to new migrants. In what commentators described as an "impassioned" attack on the re-elected Labour government, Peters insisted: "We are treating thousands of immigrants for all sorts of diseases, who will never work in our economy ever, and yet Maoridom has, for example, no diabetes programme, have they?"

Peters claimed there were people in his own electorate of Tauranga "who've waited three years for serious operations. We can't help a New Zealander but we can help every Tom, Dick and Harry, Mushtaq and Ben Laden (sic) first. Do you know what they call that in other countries? They call it treason." Peters went on to allege that "[h]alf of the refugees" entering New Zealand were "carrying HIV and all sorts of Third World diseases into our country", and that "necrophiliacs and triple murderers" were being allowed in as a matter of course.

Peters' aim is to catapult New Zealand First ahead of the National Party as the main parliamentary opposition to Labor. In the July election, amid record voter abstention and a movement to the rightwing minor parties, NZ First gained 13 seats after winning almost 11 percent of the vote, doubling the number of its MPs and giving it the most seats after the two main parties, Labour and National.

Labour had been expected to win by a wide margin,

but its support declined from about 54 percent to 41 percent during the course of the campaign. As a result, it was obliged to form a minority government. At the same time, the vote for the National Party—the traditional conservative party—collapsed to an historic low of 21 percent, giving two opposition front-bench places to NZ First. Between them, the three minor rightwing parties—ACT, NZ First, and United Future, Labour's coalition partner—accounted for 24 percent of the electorate vote.

Like Pauline Hanson in Australia, Pym Fortyn in Holland and other populist demagogues, Peters seeks to divert popular hostility with the present political set-up into anti-immigrant chauvinism. He has been able to capitalise on the widespread disaffection with Labour among Maori, as a result of the government's rundown of public health and its entrenchment of unprecedented levels of social inequality.

Peters delivered his diatribe from a newly promoted position on the opposition front benches. Yet just three years ago he was all but a spent force in New Zealand politics. That he has returned to national prominence is entirely due to the policies pursued by the Labour-Alliance government, with the support of the Greens, over the course of its past term in office.

Peters first came to political attention as a National Party MP and leadership aspirant in the late 1980s, after two terms of economic "restructuring" had been undertaken by Labour. Appealing to the growing anger at Labour's betrayals, he presented himself as a "battler" and campaigned against foreign capital and the excesses of big business. He clawed his way to prominence by forcing the establishment of the so-called "Winebox Inquiry", which uncovered extensive corporate tax evasion, led by Fay Richwhite, one of the country's most prominent and aggressive "New Right"

merchant bankers. As a result, he began to top the polls as preferred prime minister.

When, in 1990, the turn against Labour swept the National Party back into government, Peters was appointed Minister of Maori Affairs and put in charge of imposing a new round of austerity measures on the Maori population. In her notorious 1991 “Mother of all budgets”, Finance Minister Ruth Richardson embarked on the next stage of the assault on jobs, living standards and social welfare demanded by big business. Vicious cuts to social welfare plunged tens of thousands of beneficiaries into acute poverty. Even long-standing National policies in support of aged superannuation and rural services were reversed, causing divisions and ruptures within the party’s own ranks. Ever the opportunist, Peters dissociated himself, launching demagogic attacks on the government and its financial backers—and was eventually expelled.

In 1993, basing himself on the growing opposition to both parties, Peters founded New Zealand First on a program—encapsulated in the party’s name—of nationalism and chauvinism. Populist appeals against privatisation and foreign investment and in defence of small business were coupled with anti-immigration and law-and-order rhetoric. In the elections that year, NZ First garnered 8.4 percent of the vote and two parliamentary seats. During the next two years, while the “left” Alliance moderated its positions to re-accommodate itself with Labour, popular resentment against the major parties saw support for NZ First rise as high as 30 percent in opinion polls.

In the 1996 election, NZ First won 13 percent of the vote, largely on the basis of opposition to Asian immigration and the boosting of law-and-order measures. It gained particular support among those who had suffered most under successive Labour and National governments—the elderly and Maori. NZ First won more than 50 percent of Maori votes and took all the Maori parliamentary seats. This was the first time Labour had ever lost them.

Having won the balance of power, Peters defied his own election promises and realigned himself with the National Party and its pro-market agenda. He was rewarded with the Ministry of Finance, thus assuming direct responsibility for implementing the policies of big business and launching further attacks on working people, including Maori. As a result, NZ First almost

collapsed, with the bulk of its Maori MPs quitting, and deputy leader Tau Henare setting up a short-lived Maori party, Mauri Pacific. The 1999 election proved a debacle for NZ First. Maori voters deserted it *en masse*, and Peters only held on to his own seat by a meager 65 votes. Labour and the Alliance were able to exploit the mood of opposition to National and cobble together a coalition government.

But, in the absence of a genuine, socially progressive alternative, Labour’s anti-working class program created a new and larger constituency for Peters’ rhetoric. Moreover, while Labor politicians publicly attacked his recent racist comments, the government itself encouraged immigrant scapegoating by introducing harsher immigration policies. Recently, it announced its intention to further toughen up on migrant entry by reviewing screening practices and introducing, among other measures, mandatory testing for infectious diseases, including HIV. In doing so, it intends to sidestep the Human Rights Act, from which the Immigration Act remains, in the main, exempt.

It is precisely this economic and social climate that has given Peters a fresh breath of political life.



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