

An exchange over New Zealand's military intervention in the Solomon Islands

John Braddock
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The following is an exchange between a New Zealand reader of the World Socialist Web Site and our New Zealand correspondent John Braddock concerning the motives behind the Labour government's support for the Australian-led military intervention in the Solomon Islands. The initial email was sent in response to the article "New Zealand commits troops and police to Solomon Islands occupation force".

Dear WSWs,

I am a little puzzled by Mr. Braddock's article regarding the N.Z. government's latest intervention.

Personally I'm all for N.Z. declaring neutrality regarding matters military (particularly to avoid meddling in other folks' affairs in the Pacific region), and I suspect this whole "humanitarian" gesture is more of kiss and make-up exercise with the Australian political elite.

However, I think it's a little far-fetched to regard N.Z.'s token commitment to this venture as some kind of nefarious neo-colonial exercise. I'm not that knowledgeable regarding the modern geopolitical importance of the Solomon Islands (excepting the events of WWII) but I failed to glean from this article exactly what the WSWs's point was.

That the conservative print media lies to us? Most people recognise that already.

That the Greens lack any political credibility? This is well established.

That the NZDF and police contingent will be armed to the teeth? Probably a good thing.

That Alexander Downer is a mendacious, dirty little fascist cast in the Rumsfeld mold? We only need to watch him on TV to know this.

What I'm trying to get at is that nowhere in this article was the WSWs's view on the purpose of this intervention made clear, apart from a sentence quoted from the *Dominion Post* newspaper indicating the government's intention of maintaining a "10-year involvement" in the Solomons' political affairs, which was referred to "colonial".

As I'm sure that N.Z. has had a hand in messing up the Solomons in the first place, surely we have a responsibility to help fix the situation. Is it possible that in realising their failure to help out after the recent cyclone disaster (which earned them a lot of bad press) our politicians are actually trying to make amends with a genuine humanitarian gesture in attempting to restore law and order?

I know I'll probably get bagged as a raging imperial apologist, but surely it could be recognised that despite all the political smoke-and-mirrors and rhetoric from the Labour Party, trying to restore some form of government (however corrupt it may turn out to be) to the Solomons is better than letting the country slip further into anarchy.

In the WSWs's view, what is the payoff for the N.Z. elite in this escapade apart from the obvious cozying-up to their Australian counterparts?

What in fact should the N.Z. government be doing to address the Solomons situation? Turn a blind eye or intervene in a diffident fashion?

What would the WSWs's solution to this crisis be if not intervention?

Thanks for your time.

GW

Dear GW,

Thank you for your letter in response to the article "New Zealand commits troops and police to Solomon Islands occupation force". It provides an opportunity to clarify the perspective of socialist internationalism, which differentiates the orientation of the *World Socialist Web Site* from all forms of nationalist and middle class radical politics.

This is not a matter, as you contend, of "bagging" a correspondent with whom we disagree, but of clarifying basic political conceptions. While you begin by claiming to be "puzzled" about the article, you appear to be intent on defending the Labour government's colonial-style military intervention in the Solomons.

This is essentially the signature tune of that section of the NZ "radical" milieu which is happy to denounce imperial ventures carried out by the US and Australia, but which vociferously denies that the same interests and imperatives apply to New Zealand. So long as Labour, or any New Zealand government, masks its military affairs with the cloak of "peacekeeping", its operations are enthusiastically endorsed and promoted.

The original article made the following points: New Zealand is acting in concert with the Australian Liberal government on a neo-colonial incursion in the Solomon Islands. This action, planned at the highest trans-Tasman political levels, followed immediately upon Prime Minister Clark's u-turn on Iraq and her decision to participate in the Bush administration's brutal subjugation of Iraq and Afghanistan. The military venture, which has nothing to do with restoring "law and order" in the Solomons, marks a new turn by the main powers in the region—Australia and New Zealand—to aggressively assert their interests, using Bush's doctrine of "pre-emption" to their own advantage.

Your letter seeks to dismiss this assessment with a series of unsupported assertions: to regard this as a "nefarious neo-colonial exercise" is "too far fetched"; New Zealand's involvement is nothing more than a "token gesture"; if its forces are "armed to the teeth" then so much the better; NZ is involved in nothing more than a "kiss and make-up exercise" with Australia, and so on.

What is most "far fetched", however, is the proposition that after a four-year period which has seen New Zealand troops, warships and aircraft dispatched to one theatre of war after another—East Timor, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Bougainville—what is involved is simply some sort of humanitarian exercise or mere diplomatic placation of Australia. It is worthy of note that New Zealand defence personnel are currently posted in 19 separate locations around the world—more than in any period other than the two imperialist world wars.

Most obviously missing from your letter is any consideration of fundamental historical issues. Imperialism is not a policy that is turned "on" or "off" according to circumstances. Both New Zealand and Australia have acted as minor imperialist powers, particularly in the Asia-

Pacific region, for the past century. The New Zealand ruling class, for its part, has long regarded the Pacific as central to the pursuit of its own strategic and economic interests.

Beginning with George Grey, British governor of New Zealand in the periods 1845-53 and 1861-68, then premier 1877-79, New Zealand rulers looked covetously towards the South Pacific. As early as 1874, a group of Auckland businessmen led by one Frederick Whitaker was agitating for the establishment of a company to colonise and “civilise” the South Pacific. This was envisaged by the authorities of the time as a white-ruled extension of the British Empire, centring on New Zealand.

According to historian Keith Sinclair, New Zealand’s imperial ambitions matured during the 1890s with the policies of Richard Seddon. Seddon began making claims that Samoa and the existing British colonies in the Pacific—Fiji and Tonga—be “federated” with New Zealand. During a visit to the US he bluntly informed President McKinley of New Zealand’s interests in the Hawaiian Islands. Sinclair notes that Seddon’s “agitations caused no small stir in the South Seas” (*A History of New Zealand*, Penguin, 1985, p.224).

New Zealand finally emerged as an imperial power in its own right after gaining self-government from Britain at the turn of the century. As the region became a competing ground among Britain, France, Germany and the US for colonial possessions, New Zealand seized the opportunity and annexed (or according to Sinclair, was allowed to do so by the main powers—“after half a century of pleading”) the Cook Islands, Tokelau and Niue.

In Samoa, with the outbreak of war in 1914, a joint Australian-New Zealand naval expedition was sent to end German control. A New Zealand military occupying force was installed, the beginning of a colonial regime that lasted for the next 50 years. The people of Samoa never forgot this bitter experience. An influenza epidemic in 1918, which killed almost a quarter of the island population, was directly attributable to the indifference and incompetence of the New Zealand authorities in both Auckland and Apia.

The colonial authorities were racist and dictatorial, employing methods such as deportation and internment without trial. Chinese workers were imported to work the fields under slave labour conditions. Inter-racial marriages were banned. When a popularly-based Samoan independence movement, the *Mau*, appeared, it faced repeated repression. In the 1929 “Black Saturday” massacre, New Zealand police opened fire with rifles and a machine gun on a peaceful demonstration led by several Samoan chiefs, killing nine demonstrators and wounding another 50.

Throughout the past century, New Zealand’s commercial, business and political interests in the region have been assiduously protected. A century of colonial domination by New Zealand and Australia in the region has left all the Pacific Islands acutely under-developed and dependent on imports and hard currency from the two dominant powers. New Zealand’s exports to the region currently total around \$NZ500 million annually, but imports amount to a mere \$135 million. While New Zealand’s Pacific trade is not, in dollar terms, equal with that to Australia, Europe or the US, economic and business links are strategically significant. There are at stake sensitive and internationally competing interests in commercial areas such as tourism and the fishing industry.

A major portion of New Zealand’s foreign aid goes to the Pacific Islands, with constant complaints from Pacific governments that this aid has much to do with securing business and political influence in the region, rather than philanthropy. While New Zealand governments have continually boasted that aid is designed to improve the lot of ordinary villagers, much of it has in fact been spent on New Zealand commodities, produce and personnel.

During the post-war boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Pacific Islands were a major source of cheap labour for New Zealand businesses, with tens of thousands of Polynesian workers brought into the country to

fill low-paid jobs. When the boom subsided in the 1970s, many of these workers and their families were subjected to vicious anti-immigrant campaigns and forcibly repatriated. During the 1990s, immigration from the Pacific region increased again, and today nearly 250,000 of the country’s 4 million inhabitants are Pacific Islanders or their descendants. Alongside the Maori they make up the most oppressed sections of the working class. At the same time, remittances from New Zealand families are a major source of international currency for many of the impoverished Pacific states.

New Zealand has now turned its attention to the Solomon Islands in the context of this history as a third-rate regional capitalist power. Australia and New Zealand have declared the Solomons a “failed state” and bullied the country’s government into a request for outside “assistance”. Without pausing for a parliamentary debate in either Canberra or Wellington, or the imprimatur of UN approval, an occupation force of 2,000 troops and police “armed to the teeth”, as you observe, have been sent to establish control over the levers of power and monopolise its resources.

This incursion has not occurred, as is depicted in the media, simply in response to recent developments. The Solomon Islands has been a subject of discussion in ruling circles since the coup in 2000, which erupted 17 days after George Speight’s armed thugs overthrew the government in Fiji. An editorial in the *New Zealand Herald* in June 2000, headed “Rather too many coups for comfort”, expressed sharpening concerns over such political troubles appearing so close to home. According to this editorial, the “double blow to peace and security in the region is a reminder that democracy, civil rights and the rule of law need constant nurturing and sometimes resolute defence.”

Academic and defence analysts began warning of a “ring of fire” threatening “instability” from Indonesia to the eastern Pacific. One commentator warned in the *Herald*: “In nations close to our shores, including New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands similar sources of discontent exist. They include ethnic rivalry, corruption, economic problems, nationalism and constitutional problems. They vary in intensity and need not escalate into violent uprising—but Fiji and the Solomons have demonstrated to Wellington and Canberra that they might”.

Alarm over the effects on business activity was never far from the surface. A report published by the South Pacific Forum in 2000 predicted that unrest in Fiji and the Solomons would cost the island economies hundreds and millions of dollars and plunge them into recession for many years. The “worst case” scenario drawn by the report had Fiji’s economy declining by \$NZ4 billion with the loss of 40,000 jobs and a five-year recession. The figures for the Solomons were economic costs of over \$440 million, the loss of 6,800 jobs and a 7-to-10 year recession. Industries were predicted to collapse and foreign investment withdrawn. The key concern was not the fate of the oppressed Solomon Islanders but the prognosis for businesses. With Australia and New Zealand being the Solomons’ first and third-ranked suppliers of imports, the disruption to trade would have considerable impact.

In the case of the Solomons, these predictions were rapidly borne out. The country’s export sector collapsed, forcing the closure of its oil palm and fishing industries and major gold mine. Foreign investors fled, leaving the country bankrupt—with a foreign debt equal to its GDP. The major commercial banks all closed following months of government inaction over a failed pyramid scheme. When the Central Bank governor Ric Hou stepped down in 2001, he decried the fact that after 25 years of political independence, “the country is poorer, with more than half the population struggling to meet their basic needs”. According to another report, economic activity is no greater than it was 27 years ago—and in fact has deteriorated over the past three years.

Labour’s Associate Foreign Affairs Minister Marian Hobbs said recently that the Solomons were “not poor in resources”, but “poor in

governance". In other words, the New Zealand and Australian governments are now intensifying the draconian requirements of the IMF and the World Bank to open up its markets, labour force and resources to competition, trade and investment regimes dictated by the regional powers on behalf of international business and finance. As a sign of things to come, a New Zealand mining company last week announced its intention to seek to wrest control of the Gold Ridge goldmine from its current Australian owners.

Beyond immediate business matters, there are rising concerns in New Zealand political circles over broader strategic issues in the Pacific region. The New Zealand ruling class, which has long regarded the Pacific as its own "turf", has always been acutely sensitive to the activities of other powers in the region. The country's anti-nuclear policy of the past several decades has very much been tied up with combating the influence of France in the Pacific. Rivalry between the two powers came to a head with the bombing of the Greenpeace ship the "Rainbow Warrior" in the port of Auckland by the French secret service in 1985 and has never been completely buried.

Prompted by a fresh political crisis in Tonga, which saw an Auckland-based newspaper briefly banned by the authorities, New Zealand commentators have now voiced concern over the expanding influence of China in the region. The appointment last month of former New Zealand National government minister Doug Graham as a "special envoy" to Tonga by Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon, is an attempt to boost New Zealand's authority in that country.

The display of unilateralism by Howard over the Solomons has caused something of a problem for the New Zealand ruling class. In the lead-up to the last month's meeting of the Pacific Forum in Auckland, considerable editorial discussion appeared over how New Zealand should respond to what the *Dominion Post* described as the spectre of "ugly Australian" aggressiveness in the region.

Prime Minister Clark was moved to profess minor "differences" with Australia, while, at least for the time being, positioning New Zealand in the role of willing junior partner. It has served Labour to keep a degree of diplomatic distance from the Australians, particularly for domestic consumption, just as it did in respect of the Bush administration for a period over Iraq.

The Labour government's role as an essential prop for Australia's open neo-colonialism was, however, soon spelt out by the *Herald*. "The task for New Zealand" it editorialised, "is to try to soften the offence that Australia can give when it bestrides the region like the world-ranking power it would like to be. Nothing is to be gained by telling the islands they are barely viable microstates, accurate as that may be. Size and economic viability are relative qualities, as New Zealand can attest."

Foreign Minister Phil Goff obliged by setting out a number of "principles"—in effect the required "spin"—which would be used to sell the colonial venture. Among these was that the military personnel there were to "engage and work with local people as equals". According to Goff, the name given to the exercise, "Helpen Fren" (pidgin English for a helping friend), "sets the tone for the operation". Further, he cautioned, there was "a need to engage multinational donors in the exercise. The EU, which includes France and Britain, Japan and bodies such as the World Bank will need to be key players".

With these provisos, the Clark government is, at least for the moment, in accord with Howard on the essential questions. At the previous Pacific Forum meeting in Kiribati—Clark's first—the passing of the Biketawa Declaration gave the green light for forum countries, following the coups in 2000 in Fiji and Solomons, to intervene in each others' crises. Biketawa was the instrument used by Australia to gather the support of Forum members for the multinational force in the Solomons. Clark explicitly rejected suggestions that UN approval be sought for the operation, saying that because the Solomons government had "invited"

the troops, the situation was not at all analogous to the invasion of Iraq.

With the unprecedented election of an Australian as its top official and a decision to review the secretariat, the Pacific Forum has now been transformed into a more overt instrument of the major powers. Clark used New Zealand's role as the chair for the Auckland meeting to defend Australia against charges that it had "overplayed its hand". "It's always possible for perceptions to arise that big states are throwing their weight around," Clark said. "It's incumbent on big states to address perceptions and it's incumbent on smaller states to look at the merits of the issue, and I think we are achieving a balance between the two."

Claims, repeated in your letter, that New Zealand has a fundamentally different agenda to that of Australia, and has involved itself in the Solomons in order to save it from "anarchy" are entirely false. The Australian-New Zealand expedition in the Solomons indicates that a new state of affairs exists internationally. The war of colonialism carried out by Bush and the "coalition of the willing" in Iraq, including Australia and now New Zealand, has established a situation where longstanding imperialist ambitions can now be openly pursued.

In opposition to this, the WSWS rejects all so-called "solutions" based on New Zealand's "national interest" or the demands of business and affirms the right of the peoples of the Solomon Islands and the Pacific to resist the Australian-led military intervention. It calls on the working class in Australia, New Zealand and internationally to demand a halt to the takeover of the Solomons and the establishment of an emergency program of humanitarian and economic aid for the people of the Solomon Islands and other impoverished Pacific states.

More fundamentally, the crisis confronting the tiny and fragile Polynesian states cannot be resolved either by their subjugation to the interests of the local imperial bullies, or by maintaining the unviable divisions imposed by the colonial powers in the nineteenth century. The only progressive solution to the deteriorating cycle of poverty, ethnic violence and repression is for working people throughout the Pacific to unify their struggles with those of the working class in Australia, New Zealand, Asia and internationally to put an end to the profit system and establish societies based on genuine social equality.

Yours faithfully,
John Braddock



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