US raises stakes over New Zealand's foreign policy "differences"

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The US ambassador to New Zealand, Charles Swindells, last week prepared a major speech intended to intensify the Bush administration's interference and bullying over the country's foreign policy positions.

The speech was to have been delivered to a special function at Victoria University in Wellington. It was abandoned after a large group of antiwar protesters, refusing to give the ambassador a quiet hearing, drowned him out with speeches and chanting. His notes were subsequently made available to the press, having earlier been presented to Prime Minister Helen Clark and Foreign Minister Phil Goff.

The speech was notable in that for the first time with reference to New Zealand, the Bush administration explicitly spelled out its determination to require "friendly" countries to forgo any independence in foreign policy and bow to Washington's demands, or face the consequences. The occasion was significant—just two weeks before the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders' summit in Thailand, which is being attended by both President Bush and Prime Minister Clark.

According to press reports Swindells had, on a recent trip to Washington, been given a blunt message the administration was "frustrated" that its positions on Iraq and free trade were not being portrayed in sufficiently trenchant terms. The ambassador was told he was required to launch a diplomatic offensive to have New Zealand "review" both its 19-year-old anti-nuclear policy and its commitment in Iraq. The speech was vetted at the highest levels in Washington, including the State Department, National Security Council and the White House.

The notes show that, after a few suitably diplomatic introductory remarks claiming the "prognosis" for US-New Zealand relations was "very, very, very good," Swindells—a top Republican fundraiser at the last presidential election—was to aim for the jugular. He noted that New Zealand exports $NZ3.4 billion in goods to the US each year, and receives almost as much in return—making the US the country's second biggest trade partner.

He then warned that "bilateral issues" over Iraq and the anti-nuclear legislation could not be isolated from trade. Swindells wrote bluntly that the US government was "not prepared" to entertain New Zealand's interest in a free trade deal "at this time" and it was not helpful to "unduly raise expectations" about such an agreement.

The ambassador went on to deny any direct link between a trade agreement and the 19-year ban on visits by nuclear-armed or propelled warships. However, he immediately declared that the legislation placed "limits on our relationship" and impeded "closer co-operation in some areas". With the admonition that "friends and allies are not the same thing," Swindells demanded an end to "this bilateral disagreement," saying that the US would never "just get over it". New Zealand should not, he continued, be under any illusion that the issue was "not cost-free" and that its continuance would inevitably "colour" future policy decisions.

In the same context, Swindells turned his attention to New Zealand's failure to send troops to Iraq. "I tell you frankly" he said, "we were saddened by New Zealand's decision not to participate in the Iraq war". Claiming to be commenting "in sorrow," he underlined that New Zealand's distancing itself from its "traditional allies"—the US, Britain and Australia—over Iraq made it feel as if there were "someone missing when we finally moved against Saddam Hussein".

Swindells acknowledged the Labour government's

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commitment of troops to Afghanistan, and decision to send 60 army engineers to join in the "reconstruction" of Iraq. However, he warned that neither of these moves are now deemed sufficient to qualify New Zealand as a full participant in the "war on terrorism". Without being specific, Swindells declared that the bilateral relationship needed to go "to another level". For this to happen, "difficult decisions will have to be made" and "compromises must be reached". In other words, New Zealand must be prepared to bow to all Washington's ultimatums, or the cost in terms of trade and economic relations will be severe.

Clark and Goff responded to the release of the ambassador's notes by saying that they contained nothing new, and rejected the suggestion that there was any attempt to interfere in New Zealand's affairs. Clark said the nuclear-free policy was part of the country's identity as a sovereign nation and would not be reviewed. However, newspaper editorials were less sanguine. The *Dominion Post* labelled the policy an "expensive anachronism" and said the US was justified in wanting it "back on the agenda". *New Zealand Herald* deputy editor Fran O'Sullivan used her column to propose, given the importance of the countries' trading relationship, that it "made sense" for the government to show its readiness to "listen to the messages being sent its way, even if they are unpalatable".

The US ambassador's proposed speech follows earlier attempts by the Bush administration to use the threat of trade access to influence New Zealand's foreign policy decisions. In April, pressure had been applied to try to dissuade New Zealand from its continuing attempts to have the US work through the United Nations over Iraq. What was new in Swindells' speech, however, was the overt linking of trade, the anti-nuclear policy, and the demand for more direct support of US policy as it becomes deeply mired and isolated in Iraq.

On this, New Zealand is not only faced with pressure from Washington. There is increasing evidence that the Australian authorities are becoming impatient with what they see as New Zealand's reluctance to commit itself to new defence and "security" demands being promoted in the wake of the Bali bombing 12 months ago. Swindells' speech comes hard on the heels of a warning by the Australian high commissioner, delivered on behalf of Prime Minister Howard, that relations between the countries are at a "turning point" and that the two traditional allies are in danger of "drifting apart".

The new exercise of pressure from Washington and Canberra is a sign of the developing tensions internationally over where each country—no matter how small—lines up in the so-called "war on terror". In the past, the position of the New Zealand Labour government has been that, as a small state, its interests required the international "rule of law" administered through the United Nations. It has not, however, been diverted from acting as a junior imperialist partner in Afghanistan, Iraq or the South West Pacific.

The Bush administration's use of gangster methods—ultimatums, "consequences", intimidation and standover tactics—in the daily pursuit of its international policy interests, is evidence of rapidly deepening desperation and recklessness by the major imperialist powers.

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