New Zealand: tensions erupt over “preferential” policies for Maori

John Braddock
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A recent speech by New Zealand’s opposition leader, Don Brash, opposing “preferential” policies for Maori, the country’s indigenous inhabitants, has triggered a far-reaching shake-up within the official political establishment.

Brash, who was only recently installed as leader of the National Party, gave a keynote address to an Auckland Rotary Club in January, demanding an end to all forms of “ethnic separatism” and “exclusive rights”. Insisting on “one rule for all”, he committed his party to a series of policies, including closing the “non-performing” Maori Affairs ministry, abolishing the seven Maori electorate seats in parliament and scrapping the ministerial position.

On the back of an overwhelmingly favourable media response, Brash promptly expanded on his theme. In employment matters, he said, racial “equity” policies and special rights, such as extended leave provisions for Maori *tangi* (funerals), should be ignored or over-ridden. He went on to criticise the provision of dedicated seats for Maori on statutory bodies such as local councils and health boards and demanded that affirmative action quotas for tertiary education be done away with.

Brash’s speech followed an announcement by the New Zealand Labour government late last year that it would legislate to nullify a decision by the Court of Appeal that the Maori Land Court could hear claims relating to the recognition of Maori customary interests to the foreshore and seabed. Responding to media alarm that such claims might eventually form the basis of establishing legal title, Prime Minister Helen Clark proclaimed the need to guarantee “open access and use” of the foreshore “for all New Zealanders”.

A series of specially convened “consultation” meetings with Maori leaders before Christmas revealed deep hostility to the proposed government legislation among Maori. The press stirred up the spectre of beach occupations by angry Maori “radicals” and predicted widespread demands for exclusive Maori ownership over the foreshore.

The moves by both Labour and National signal the end of a 20-year period in which the ruling class has pursued policies of “biculturalism”. These were promoted as the means for overcoming the extreme social and economic deprivation among Maori, who make up nearly 20 percent of the population. The main vehicle for this program was the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 by the main Maori Chiefs and the British colonial governor to formally established British rule in New Zealand.

The treaty, which ostensibly promised Maori the right to maintain their lands and customs and to govern their own affairs, had been all but ignored for nearly 150 years, as Maori were subjugated by force of arms and systematically dispossessed. However, in the mid-1980s the Labour government exhumed it, elevating it to the status of the country’s “founding document”. The treaty was promoted as the basis of a social “partnership” between the present-day heirs of the original Maori inhabitants and European settlers, which would see the historical grievances of Maori resolved.

The government opened up a “treaty claims” process, whereby Maori tribes could claim compensation for the alienation of their lands by the early colonial authorities. Laws were enacted to ensure Maori representation on official bodies covering all aspects of state operations. In health and education, affirmative action programs were established, the Maori language received official status and Maori religious observances given pride of place on formal occasions. A host of Maori consultancies emerged to advise on treaty “obligations” in business, the public sector and the arts.

Brash is now challenging this entire process by signalling a major of revision of the status of the Treaty of Waitangi, declaring that it is not an “adequate substitute for a constitution”. Further, according to Brash, it is a “serious mistake” to imply the treaty involves “an on-going partnership between two parties as though Maori were a distinct group of New Zealanders and the rest of us were, of some sense, exactly equal weight”.

The tensions generated by Brash’s speeches erupted to the surface on February 6 during state observances for Waitangi Day, New Zealand’s national holiday. Prime Minister Helen Clark was jostled by a large crowd as she entered one of the two *marae* (meeting grounds) that form the traditional venue for the proceedings. Members of her entourage received blows from angry demonstrators as they sought to protect her from the milling crowd.

In a separate incident, furious protesters denounced Brash as a racist, while one protester threw a lump of dirt, hitting Brash across the face. The main celebrations saw a large protest crowd gather at a flagpole outside the meeting house, with scuffles breaking out between protesters and police, resulting in several arrests.

Clark initially responded by accusing Brash of playing the “race card” and “fomenting division” in order to elevate his party’s poll ratings. The media, however, commended Brash for opening up

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the issue, claiming it had been left to fester, causing popular resentment. “Dr. Brash’s approach ... has been based on rational argument that has struck a chord with a sizeable section of the community”, proclaimed the *New Zealand Herald*. The National Party immediately surged in the polls, leaping 17 points and, for the first time since its loss to Labour in the 1999 election, opening up a lead over Labour by a margin of 45 to 38 percent.

Not all commentators have lined up behind Brash. Some regard his positions as a reckless manoeuvre that will exacerbate racial tensions. Nevertheless, Labour—until now regarded as virtually unassailable—has been given an unequivocal message that its place as the favoured party of New Zealand’s ruling elite is under threat.

The prime minister has responded with signs of panic, announcing a number of major concessions to Brash in an effort to ward off mounting criticisms. She recently declared that the prevailing “consensus” over Maori issues had been “shattered”, and that a “new balance” on Maori policy must be found. The government has promised an independent review of its spending on Maori initiatives to ensure they are meeting “needs”, and not purely driven by race criteria.

In an attempt to arrest the drop in the polls, Clark has ordered all ministers to address policy areas where the government is “exposed”. As a result, a massive school closures program has been temporarily halted and a meagre rise granted in the minimum wage, from $8.50 to $9 per hour. The government has also announced “extra help” will be forthcoming for all low and middle-income earners in the budget.

Brash is directly articulating the new requirements of a section of the financial elite that is most determined to further integrate itself into global capital markets. Special rights and observances, particularly continuing multi-million dollar land claims, are increasingly regarded as an unnecessary fiscal burden. The difficulties faced by Labour in reigning in compensation payments—brought to a head by the court’s finding on the foreshore—is seen as a barrier to prosecuting a renewed assault on the living conditions and social position of the working class.

In parliament for little more than a year, Brash was recruited from his position as Reserve Bank governor just before the 2002 elections. He was elevated almost immediately to opposition finance spokesman and then, last October, to party leader in an internal coup. His entire career has been devoted to implementing the demands of global finance capital. A professional economist, Brash worked in the World Bank in the late 1960s, before returning to New Zealand to a series of private sector directorships and as head of a number of government authorities. He was appointed Reserve Bank governor in 1988 and played a pivotal role in administering the “pro-market” economic program launched by the Lange-Douglas Labour government.

Brash is notorious in the working class for advocating the stifling of wage rises in order to meet the bank’s inflation targets of less than 2 percent per annum, and insisting that unemployment be pushed over 5 percent to aid economic “recovery”. His deeply reactionary views include support for work-for-the dole schemes, the sale of state assets, the return to vouchers and private provision in health and education, and a reduction in taxes for the wealthy.

Brash has launched his attack on Maori “privileges” with the slogan that all New Zealanders should be treated on the basis of “need”, not “race”. His populist demagogy is aimed at setting non-Maori workers—whose living standards and access to social facilities have continued to deteriorate under Labour—against their Maori counterparts and thus diverting deepening resentment and anger away from the real culprits: the New Zealand ruling class and the entire official political establishment.

The beneficiaries of “biculturalism” were never ordinary Maori, but a small layer of petty bourgeois entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and political leaders who were specifically cultivated to placate and suppress the legitimate strivings of the majority of the Maori population. Most Maori, along with other oppressed sections of the working class, received no special “preferences” at all.

After two decades of “bicultural” policies Maori deprivation remains as entrenched as ever. Unemployment among Maori is officially 10 percent, twice the national average, while Maori continue to figure disproportionately in every social statistic relating to low household income, poor health, low levels of education and high levels of crime. Figures released recently by the Social Development Ministry show that of 18 key social indicators comparing the position of Maori with the rest of the population, six areas had recorded no change, five had “no clear trend”, while seven showed the chasm widening.

Like all forms of identity politics, which fundamentally accept the framework of the capitalist profit system, seeking to elevate one or other secondary characteristic such as race, sex, skin colour or ethnic origin above class interests, the politics of “biculturalism” and Maori “self determination” have proven to be a dead-end.

Having been utilised throughout the 80s and 90s to weaken and divide the working class, they are now being jettisoned in favour of a far more direct offensive against the last remaining remnants of national reformism and the welfare state—an offensive that will affect the wages and conditions of every worker.

A decent and secure life for all, with the right to well paid jobs and full access to high quality health care, education, housing and care for the aged can only be ensured through the development of an independent and unified movement of the working class as a whole—white, black, Maori, Islander—in a common struggle against the profit system itself.

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