

New Zealand prime minister ingratiates herself with Bush White House

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New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark used meetings with US President George Bush and members of his administration on March 20-21 to ingratiate herself with the White House and further align her government with the criminal policies of militarism and neo-colonialism being carried out under the rubric of the “war on terror”.

Clark emerged from her audience with Bush to declare that the United States valued “friends like New Zealand”. For his part, Bush praised the prime minister’s “leadership role” in the Pacific and promised US help in regional “trouble spots”. Clark boasted: “I think there is quite an acute appreciation in Washington DC of the things New Zealand does which are very much in tune with US values, the role we play in the Pacific, the way we’ve dealt with counter-terrorism issues, the strong support on counter-proliferation.”

This was Clark’s second visit to the White House. In 2002 she went as the first NZ Labour prime minister to be invited there in 20 years, since the mid-1980s when defence ties between the two countries were broken over the passage of New Zealand’s anti-nuclear legislation. On the previous occasion, Clark spent just an hour with Bush. However, at the conclusion of that trip, an effusive Colin Powell—then secretary of state—declared that the US and New Zealand were now “very, very, very good friends”.

On this occasion, underlining the rapprochement nurtured by Clark during her seven years in office, meetings were scheduled with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Defence Robert Gates. Clark met with Bush and Vice President Cheney for a half-hour private meeting and posed for photographs in the Oval Office. The two leaders then conducted a joint press conference, followed by a working lunch with senior members of the administration. Clark then received a full honour guard on the steps of the Pentagon, before laying a wreath at Arlington Cemetery—the official burial ground

for US soldiers killed in action.

Behind the friendly reception is the Clark Labour government’s ongoing military commitment to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Just a week before departing on her trip, Clark announced that the deployment of a 120-strong so-called “Provincial Reconstruction Team” and other military postings would be extended for at least another 12 months, and that a navy frigate would be dispatched to the Arabian Gulf. This coincided with Bush’s announcement that the US would send an additional 3,500 troops to Afghanistan and 4,700 more to Iraq.

Clark went to the US planning to remain silent over Iraq. Before leaving, she indicated the war in Iraq would only be discussed if Bush raised it. “I’d be surprised if the President didn’t mention it because it’s very much on his mind. We’re an observer, a member of the international community and we’re always interested to hear their views on it,” she said.

The topic proved impossible to avoid, since her visit coincided with the fourth anniversary of the invasion. The morning Clark met with Rice, the secretary of state defended the criminal war on the television program “Good Morning America”, saying “nothing of value is ever won unless there is sacrifice”. While Clark admitted discussing the Middle East and “the path to stability” in Iraq, the main thrust of the discussion was to solicit Rice’s help in strengthening the New Zealand-United States relationship.

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq, the New Zealand government initially dispatched army engineers to operate alongside British forces in Basra. But, with public sentiment overwhelmingly opposed to the Iraq war, Clark attempted to distance herself from the unfolding catastrophe. At the same time, in order to remain on good terms with the Bush administration, she has maintained a deafening silence on the occupation and, in particular, the

recent US troop “surge”.

After her talks with Rice, Clark met Democratic Party House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, another politician attempting to posture as a critic of the war, and reportedly received praise for her government’s decision not to join the “coalition of the willing”. Whatever differences Clark and Pelosi may profess to have with Bush over Iraq, they are purely of a tactical character. Accordingly, Clark would not be drawn into openly discussing precisely what Pelosi said, and Pelosi refused to speak to the media.

Clark would only say that Pelosi had “registered New Zealand’s position” on the war. Questioned as to what the house speaker’s reaction was, Clark said: “She would, of course, have some sympathy with it. That’s the part of the political spectrum she comes from.” Asked whether she was being “circumspect” because she did not want to harm relations with the Bush administration, Clark said New Zealand troops were not in Iraq. “We weren’t part of the invasion. We did our bit with engineers and reconstruction.”

There was no substantive discussion with Bush on Iraq. Clark later said that the pair talked only about the region’s “stability” and that she had expressed her hope that “peace and a better life will eventually prevail”. The focus of the discussion, however, was alluded to by Bush at the joint press conference. He said that their meeting covered US-NZ co-operation in Afghanistan and “counter terrorism and nuclear proliferation issues in North Korea and Iran”. In other words, preparations for widening the “war on terror”—and New Zealand’s role in it—were the priorities.

This agenda dovetailed with Clark’s own ambitions for the visit—to get a mandate for New Zealand’s neo-colonial ventures in the Pacific.

On the eve of her meeting with Bush, Clark used a speech to the Asia Society to call for more US support in the Pacific. She claimed the region faced “serious challenges,” including weak or corroded governments, health and population issues, calls for democratic reform and vulnerability to natural disasters. Without producing any evidence, she went on to claim that “security threats” had arisen in the Pacific from “terrorism” and nuclear proliferation.

Clark said New Zealand was a major provider of “security” in a region where a number of countries teetered on the brink of civil war and anarchy. “The work we are doing on stability with our Pacific partners is, we believe, just as relevant to the US as it is to us.” She went on to say that the behaviour of Fiji’s military in particular

was “unacceptable” and the recent coup there had created a climate of fear and repression.

Both Rice and Bush warmed to Clark’s entreaties. After posing for photographers alongside Rice following their meeting, Clark told reporters they had discussed the NZ-US relationship and joint co-operation in “counter-terrorism,” as well as increasing US involvement in the South Pacific. Bush gave his imprimatur to New Zealand’s “leadership” in the Pacific and said the US appreciated New Zealand’s “help” in the region. “We understand some of the countries there have got some difficult issues that require New Zealand’s leadership, with US help, to help solve the problems, with Australian leadership as well,” Bush declared.

The exact meaning of this endorsement was made explicit with an announcement from Wellington the same day that New Zealand’s military commitment to East Timor would be increased. Two additional airforce helicopters will be sent, along with the deployment of 32 more defence force personnel, taking the total number of NZ troops involved in the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) with the Australians to 180. A senior NZ officer will take up the appointment of deputy commander to the CJTF.

The troop increase follows an incident in early March, when Australian troops shot dead five rebel soldiers in East Timor. The deaths came just over a week after Australian soldiers killed two internally displaced refugees in the island’s capital, Dili. The mounting death toll, amid heightened social unrest and growing anti-Australian sentiment, testifies both to Canberra’s determination to step up its repression of the local population in order to consolidate its neo-colonial occupation, and to New Zealand’s willingness to act as the leading accomplice.



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