

New Zealand: Iraq charter flights underline Labour's "antiwar" hypocrisy

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A major row broke out in New Zealand earlier this month over an airline contract to transport 600 Australian troops to the Middle East. The issue has served to highlight what a political liability the war in Iraq has become, as well as the Labour government's duplicitous involvement.

"Furious" government ministers went on prime time television on August 15 demanding answers from Air New Zealand after it admitted ferrying the Australian troops to commercial airports in Kuwait and United Arab Emirates—the staging posts for entry into Iraq. The airline, which is 78 percent government-owned, organised the two charter flights in May, using its regulation passenger aircraft in company livery.

The airline has made \$18 million from its charter operations over the past year, including the troop flights. General Manager of Air NZ operations and planning, Glen Sowry, said his company had made no secret of these flights, which had been "widely publicised within the company" and discussed in the international aviation marketplace. He said government officials were advised before the charter operations were committed to and operated.

However, Prime Minister Helen Clark, Defence Minister Phil Goff and Foreign Minister Winston Peters declared that they knew nothing of the flights until revelations published in *Investigate* magazine and other media. Clark's spokesman said she was "appalled and furious" by the airline's actions. Goff told parliament that under the Companies Act, the government could not direct the airline in its commercial decisions, but its actions were "contrary to the views of the government" and probably to the majority of parliament. He said he would tell the airline's board that the government deplored the carrier's actions and found them "totally inappropriate".

The revelations stung the Labour government because they highlighted its two-faced stance towards the war in Iraq. Having tacitly backed the criminal US-led invasion and contributed to the occupation of Iraq, Clark and her ministers have been trying to distance themselves from the ongoing catastrophe, which has generated deep public revulsion throughout New Zealand.

In parliament the previous week, Goff and other ministers repeatedly attacked opposition National Party leader John Key for statements he made in 2003 as a junior backbencher, indicating support for the Bush administration's "Coalition of the Willing". The parliamentary salvo was part of a premeditated and rather desperate campaign to discredit Key, who has opened up a substantial lead over Labour in the polls.

Labour's ploy was thoroughly cynical. Its objections to US and Australian policy over Iraq have always been purely tactical—such as Clark's call for a UN resolution to give a veneer of respectability to the US invasion. During a visit by Australian Prime Minister Howard in 2004, however, she emphasised that while there was a "difference of opinion" between herself and Howard over the "timetable and the means", there was "no daylight" between the two leaders on the essential objective—to see Iraq "effectively disarmed and contained".

The Labour government made two material contributions to the war in Iraq. It sent two frigates on rotating tours of duty in the Gulf region and deployed a troop of 60 army engineers, who operated alongside British troops in Basra. While these deployments were depicted for domestic purposes as non-military "peacekeeping" exercises, they provided much-needed political support, just as the Bush administration was becoming increasingly isolated internationally.

Former Pentagon official Paul Wolfowitz deemed the New Zealand military support to be “contributing forces” to the post-invasion occupation of Iraq. As a reward, New Zealand was put on the US list of countries eligible for commercial contracts in the country. Clark only withdrew the army engineer unit as a precautionary measure after it was clear the troops had served their political purpose.

Moreover, the Labour government maintains a substantial military presence in Afghanistan, which it exploits to curry favour with the Bush administration. Clark was recently a participant in a ceremony marking the presentation of the Victoria Cross, the British Commonwealth’s highest military honour, to a Maori member of the Special Air Service (SAS) for action in Afghanistan. The SAS, a specialist top-secret unit that was sent to support US troops on combat missions during the invasion, performed their job so effectively that they received a rare US presidential citation.

The SAS was replaced after two tours of duty by the New Zealand army’s so-called “Provincial Reconstruction Team”, which is still operating in Bamiyan province. While the government again presents this as a benign deployment engaged in constructing schools and hospitals, the team is integral to the imposition of a neo-colonial military occupation that is widely detested by the Afghan people.

The bogus nature of the government’s protests over the Air NZ contracts was demonstrated by Foreign Minister Peters, who said that there would have been “no problem” if the Australian troops had been bound for Afghanistan, or had been engaged as “peacekeepers” in Iraq, rather than in direct combat roles.

Moreover, after several days of “antiwar” posturing, Air NZ was permitted on August 18 to carry 55 Tongan soldiers to the US en route to Baghdad, without any government protests. The Tongans will provide security at Camp Victory, a US base accommodating more than 10,000 troops and civilians where the Multi-National Force is headquartered. Peters excused this transport operation on the basis that the soldiers were travelling as regular passengers on a normal commercial flight.

As the furore over the charter flights began to die away, it was eventually revealed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFaT) had been told in advance of Air NZ’s plans and asked to be advised on

the matter. Ministry officials, however, did not think it necessary to alert the government, indicating once again that they did not regard the flights as contrary to government policy.

MfaT head Simon Murdoch became the scapegoat and was forced to apologise after admitting he had told Air NZ as early as January that the flights posed no foreign policy or other concerns. Top officials from police, defence, the Security Intelligence Service, the Government Communications Security Bureau, Foreign Affairs and the Office of Prime Minister and the Cabinet were all told. But none, it appears, thought the matter serious enough to contact any minister.

The increasingly beleaguered Australian government reacted with hostility to the Clark government’s antiwar posturing. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer called in New Zealand Ambassador John Larkindale for a dressing down and expressed Australia’s “extreme displeasure” to New Zealand. Australia has now forbidden its military to use Air NZ under any circumstances, including scheduled commercial flight travel.

Pointing to the New Zealand government’s hypocrisy, Downer noted that Clark had sent troops to Iraq after the fall of Baghdad. In her retort, Clark did not dispute the claim, simply declaring that Downer should keep his nose out of New Zealand’s political affairs.



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