

Memorial service used to divert attention from inadequate relief for New Zealand earthquake victims

Tom Peters
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The New Zealand government cynically used a memorial service last Friday, featuring Britain's Prince William, to smother rising discontent over the grossly inadequate relief given to those whose homes have been damaged or who have lost their jobs as a result of the earthquake that hit Christchurch, the country's second largest city, on February 22.

The precise death toll from the disaster is still not known. So far, 166 people have been confirmed dead, but this number is expected to rise to about 182. Police Superintendent Dave Cliff told the media on Friday that it could take "several months" before all the bodies were identified because many were only "fragments of human remains".

The two-hour service, organised by the National Party government, was held in Christchurch's Hagley Park, close to the city centre where most lives were lost in the quake. More than 30,000 people gathered for the event, including many friends and families of those who died. Hundreds attended services in Wellington, Auckland and other towns. People across the country watched the service on television and paused for two minutes of silence to honour the quake victims.

The large audience at the service was a sign of the solidarity felt by ordinary working people toward the grieving families of the earthquake victims. Images were shown on large screens of the damage to the city centre, as well as footage of rescue and volunteer workers, who received a prolonged standing ovation.

Speeches were delivered by Prime Minister John Key, opposition Labour Party leader Phil Goff, Christchurch Mayor Bob Parker and Prince William. The tone was set by Key, who declared that the country had "rallied

magnificently" to help the earthquake survivors. He claimed that "the assistance which has been given to the people of Christchurch has been of enormous practical benefit".

While praising the "resilience" of Christchurch residents, none of the speakers mentioned the desperate situation still facing thousands whose houses have been ruined and who have spent weeks without basic services such as water, sewerage and electricity.

The corporate media likewise paid scant attention to the plight of ordinary working people. Instead, it produced non-stop coverage of the two-day visit by Prince William, with fawning headlines such as "William wows crowds with easy manner". The prince visited parts of the devastated city as well as the West Coast town of Greymouth, where 29 miners died in an explosion at the Pike River Coal mine last November.

Christchurch residents are increasingly angry about the government's relief efforts. Dozens of comments posted on Thursday on the web site of the *Press*, the major local newspaper, criticised the government for holding the memorial service while people were still without basic services. Nigel wrote: "If you have no power, no phone, no water, no sewerage, beat-up roads, no bus and no car—well you won't have any clean clothes either. Who wants to go to Mayor Bob's Event in a shirt you've worn for 10 days." Others said it was "insensitive" to hold the memorial when dozens of bodies had not been identified and some could still be lying under piles of rubble.

Tim wrote: "We lost a loved family member [in the Pike River mine disaster] and were subjected to a similar memorial service" with "long emotional and predictable speeches". He said Prime Minister Key had promised to "look after us" but the operation to recover the miners'

bodies had been abandoned and the government was now “busily talking up [the mine’s] potential and hawking it on the open market”. No assistance had been provided for more than 200 people who lost their jobs when the mine went into receivership. Tim concluded that the memorial was “all about being seen to do what is right and making everyone feel good”.

The government’s pledges to assist Christchurch residents are just as empty as its promises to support the West Coast mining community. A month after the quake, few houses have had any repairs. Thousands of homes have no sewerage and in many areas, particularly in the badly damaged eastern suburbs, there is a shortage of portable toilets. While the Christchurch City Council claims to have restored water to 95 percent of the city, many properties have damaged water pipes that have not been repaired.

As temperatures continue to fall after the end of summer, people living in damaged homes with collapsed chimneys and damaged walls, windows and roofs are unable to heat themselves.

TVNZ yesterday reported that Christchurch faces a “housing crisis” as 60,000 people who had fled the city after the quake began to return home. The government has provided practically no emergency accommodation, leaving tens of thousands to live in shattered houses, overcrowded conditions with friends or family, or makeshift accommodation such as garages and tents.

Housing Minister Phil Heatley told TVNZ that the army was currently establishing a camp ground with 150 campervans, and 300 more were on standby. Prime Minister Key said the government was negotiating with companies to build up to 2,500 modular homes, but construction would take “months”. Even if these projects were completed, they would not provide anywhere near enough housing. The government itself estimates that as many as 10,000 houses may need to be demolished.

Working people are being plunged ever deeper into poverty. According to a 3 News report on March 15, “20 percent of the city’s workforce are now relying on some form of government assistance”. This includes over 3,000 people who have lost their jobs and tens of thousands more who are temporarily unable to work because of earthquake damage.

Under a government scheme, workers made redundant are receiving just \$400 (\$US293) a week—less than the

minimum wage—while local employers are being paid subsidies of \$500 a week to keep staff on. These meagre payments are available for six weeks, after which laid off workers will be put onto the unemployment benefit, which is less than \$200 a week. Speaking to TVNZ yesterday Key indicated that the government would move to tighten eligibility for the scheme, which he contemptuously described as “extremely generous”.

Further evidence has emerged that the government failed to take adequate steps to minimise the damage and loss of life from earthquakes.

A 1996 television documentary, an edited version of which has been viewed more than 90,000 times on YouTube since March 10, addressed the possible outcome of an earthquake in Christchurch. The documentary interviewed Bryan Bluck, then a Christchurch City Council building engineer, who pointed out several old building facades in the city centre that needed strengthening to withstand a quake. Some of these facades collapsed in the February 22 disaster, crushing people below.

Grant Dixon, who directed the documentary, told the *Press* on March 11 he had uploaded the film to highlight the danger of soil resonance, which “occurs when a building and the soil beneath it vibrate at the same frequency, magnifying its ‘destroying effect’.” He said the collapse of the Pyne Gould and Canterbury Television (CTV) buildings, which killed more than a hundred people, could have been due to soil resonance. A seismic test could have determined which buildings were susceptible, he said, adding: “Lives would have been saved if this simple procedure went ahead. People knew about it, but nobody did a thing.”

Expert warnings of the potential for major earthquake damage in the flat eastern suburbs were also ignored. Sir Kerry Burke, former chairman of Environment Canterbury (ECan), a regional council body, told the *Star Canterbury* on March 11 that property developers had successfully lobbied to develop on land that they knew was prone to liquefaction (when the ground turns to silt following a quake). He said: “One of the lessons of the earthquake is perhaps we should pay more attention to science rather than to legal arguments from guys with deep pockets.”



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