

New Zealand government refuses to condemn Trump's anti-immigrant bans

Tom Peters
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New Zealand prime minister Bill English has repeatedly refused to condemn US President Trump's ban on people from seven majority-Muslim countries—Syria, Yemen, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Sudan—entering the United States.

Hundreds of thousands of people have protested against the ban in the US and throughout the world, including thousands in New Zealand.

English told Radio NZ that in his first telephone conversation with Trump on Monday he told the president “we don't agree with the policy, it's not something we'd put in place.” He described Trump as “warm, civil and very thoughtful”—in an apparent contrast with Trump's browbeating of Australian prime minister Malcolm Turnbull.

While saying he “disagrees” with Trump's anti-immigrant measures, English has pointedly refused to call the policy “racist.” Asked by a TVNZ newsreader on January 31 if he would denounce Trump's actions as “horrificing [and] anti-Islamic,” English replied flatly: “In the end [the US] make decisions about their policy.”

English told the media on February 3 that his priority was “to maintain a good relationship with the US. They're a very powerful economy, important to security and stability across the Asia-Pacific.”

Foreign minister Murray McCully similarly stated on January 30 that there was “widespread confusion and considerable concern” about Trump's ban, but “we respect the right of the US administration to determine US immigration policy.”

Trump's aggressive “America First” stance has shaken New Zealand's political establishment. In December, John Key resigned as prime minister and was replaced by English. Key had strongly supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement, which

involved 12 countries, including the US, Japan, New Zealand and Australia. The Obama administration promoted the TPP as an economic bloc that would enable the US to write the rules of trade and investment in Asia at the expense of China.

Trump has withdrawn from the TPP and will instead implement “America First” trade war measures against China and other countries. This has caused considerable alarm in New Zealand's ruling elite, which depends on exports to China, its second-largest trading partner after Australia. The National Party government's attempts to strengthen military and intelligence ties with the US, while maintaining close economic relations with China, are no longer sustainable. Trump is accelerating the drive to war against China and is demanding unequivocal support from US allies.

The opposition Labour and Green parties, have criticised English's meek response to Trump's anti-immigrant bans. Labour leader Andrew Little wrote a column for Fairfax Media calling the ban “abhorrent” and “a massive leap backwards for humanity.” He called on English to “honour our tradition of standing up to bullies by publicly condemning Trump's Muslim ban ... New Zealand must stand up and be counted amongst the mature and civilised nations who know the only way forward is tolerance.”

Green Party immigration spokesperson Denise Roche stated: “France and Germany have condemned Trump's Muslim ban, and Canada has said it is open to those who need refuge. Sadly, New Zealand is missing from this conversation and looks weak by not standing up.”

The two parties have sent representatives to recent anti-Trump rallies and have called for New Zealand to increase its annual refugee intake, but only by a meagre 750 people.

Such appeals for “tolerance” and humanitarianism are profoundly hypocritical. Labour and the Greens fully support New Zealand’s alliance with Washington, including the US navy visit following Trump’s election victory. Little has declared that Labour can work with Trump if it wins the New Zealand election in September.

Both parties have repeatedly stressed that they are willing to work in a coalition government alongside the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First, whose leader Winston Peters has defended Trump’s anti-Muslim ban, repeating the lie that it is a “security” measure.

Speaking to Radio Waatea on February 1, Peters denounced criticism of Trump, saying: “There was an election in America. He won. [The media] should get over it.” NZ First has repeatedly sought to incite racism and xenophobia by demonising Muslim immigrants as potential terrorists.

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Labour and the Greens, while calling for a tiny increase in the refugee intake, have joined New Zealand First and the trade union bureaucracy in demanding cuts to immigration. Labour, NZ First and the Maori nationalist Mana Party have scapegoated Chinese people, in particular, for soaring house prices and for placing pressure on public services.

The criticism of Trump by Labour and the Greens is mainly an attempt to deflect and contain growing outrage over Trump’s policies, including his attacks on immigrants, and fears over the growing danger of war.

Both parties are also concerned that Trump’s unilateral approach to foreign policy threatens the interests of New Zealand capitalism, which has benefited from a close strategic alliance with the US since the end of World War II.

Following Trump’s inauguration, Little told the *New Zealand Herald*: “He talked about America First and not entering into fights that aren’t America’s fights. But the US plays an absolutely crucial role in world peace and world order and if he is going to fundamentally change that, then who knows what is going to happen and which tyrants in other parts of the world are going to consider that they have a licence to do even worse.”

On November 10, Labour’s foreign affairs spokesman David Shearer told Radio NZ he was

worried that “the more that the US turns inward, the more that their rival powers, Russia and China in particular, look at this as an opportunity for themselves.”

These comments make clear that the Labour Party is not concerned about the growing danger of war between nuclear-armed powers, but that Trump’s administration could sideline traditional allies.

Far from “standing up” to US bullying, the 1999–2008 Labour government fully restored the military alliance between the two countries. It sent NZ troops to join the criminal invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. The party fully supported Obama’s renewed interventions in Iraq and Syria, the 2014 anti-Russia coup in Ukraine as well as the build-up to war against Russia and China. The Labour Party and NZ First have demanded that the National Party government spend more on upgrading the military, especially the navy, to integrate it into US war plans.



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