

New Zealand PM visits Australia, confirms Labour government's support for war

Tom Peters
9 November 2017

New Zealand's Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern visited neighbouring Australia on November 5. It was her first overseas visit since Labour's coalition government with the Greens and the right-wing NZ First Party was officially sworn into office on October 25.

Ardern and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull emphasised that the change of government in New Zealand, after nine years of conservative National Party rule, would not alter the close relationship between the two countries, above all their military alliance. Turnbull told the media the fact the two leaders came from "different political traditions" was "irrelevant."

Ardern's warm discussion with Turnbull was particularly significant because Canberra has established itself as one of Washington's most strident allies. It has supported the US encirclement of China, as well as President Donald Trump's threats of war against North Korea. The visit further confirms that the Labour-NZ First-Green government represents a shift toward more open support for US warmongering.

The anti-Asian populist NZ First Party decided to form a coalition with Labour, rather than National, following extraordinary public comments by US ambassador Scott Brown, who criticised the National government's hesitancy to fully endorse the US drive to war. The Labour-led government is already seeking to whip up anti-Chinese xenophobia, nationalism and militarism.

NZ First, backed by much of the media, has demanded an "inquiry" into Chinese "influence" in New Zealand politics, similar to what Australia's intelligence agency ASIO has advocated.

Turnbull opened a joint press conference by glorifying the two countries' shared military history.

He declared: "We've been partners in freedom's cause for ever. We saw in Israel just a few days ago the commemorations of the Battle of Bersheeba, the way in which Anzacs [Australian and New Zealand forces] fought in freedom's cause there, bringing to an end the Ottoman domination of the Middle East."

The bloody World War I campaign, in which tens of thousands of Australian and New Zealand soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Ottoman forces died, had nothing to do with freedom. It was part of the effort to cement British imperialist rule over the Middle East.

Turnbull praised the Australian and NZ forces currently in Iraq as part of the US-led war to dominate the region. Ardern has committed to keeping more than 100 New Zealand soldiers there for at least another year.

Turnbull said he and Ardern "reconfirmed our commitment to ensuring the North Korean regime ... stops its reckless and illegal destabilisation and threats of nuclear war." In reality, it is Washington that is threatening nuclear war.

Ardern made no criticism of the Australian government's embrace of Trump's threats to "totally destroy" North Korea with "fire and fury like the world has never seen."

During the New Zealand election campaign, the danger of war was barely discussed and Ardern refused to say whether Labour would support a US attack on North Korea. Her posture alongside Turnbull, and her commitments to New Zealand's military relations with the United States, leave little doubt about that.

Media coverage of Ardern's visit focused on New Zealand's standing offer to resettle 150 refugees from Australia's detention centres on Nauru and Papua New Guinea's Manus Island. The Australian government's brutal treatment of asylum seekers on Manus Island

provoked significant protests over the weekend.

Ardern's attempt to project a "humanitarian" concern for refugees fell flat. She made clear that her government supports Australia's flagrant violation of legal and democratic rights through its "border protection" regime.

Ardern raised no objection to Turnbull's preposterous claim that Australia was "a very generous nation when it comes to refugees." Instead, she defended Canberra, telling Radio NZ: "New Zealand is not in this situation. We are not having to deal with boat people making it to New Zealand."

After Turnbull rejected New Zealand's offer, Ardern ruled out bypassing Australia to take refugees directly from Papua New Guinea. She said: "I absolutely understand the priority being placed around the agreement with the United States." The Obama administration agreed with Canberra to resettle some refugees in the US, subject to "extreme vetting." One year later, only about 50 have been accepted.

A *New Zealand Herald* editorial praised Ardern's stance, stating: "While it is easy to sympathise with people so desperate to escape poverty and perhaps personal danger, it is not as easy to suggest solutions that would not compromise Australia's immigration control."

The Green Party, a partner in the Labour-led government, made no criticism of Ardern's support for Australia's anti-refugee policies. As recently as October 30, Green MP Golriz Gharhraman hypocritically denounced the former National government for being "complicit" by its silence in "one of the worst human rights violations... indefinite detention which is defined as torture in international law."

Self-styled "left" columnists, such as Bryce Edwards and Chris Trotter, lamented Ardern's "capitulation" to the Turnbull government. This undermines the "progressive" image they sought to cultivate for Labour during the election campaign. Trotter nevertheless defended Ardern on the *Daily Blog*, asking rhetorically, "what, realistically, could she have done?"

Successive governments, led by Labour and National, have been complicit in Australia's "border protection" regime. In 2013, the National government signed an agreement with Australia's Greens-backed Labor government for asylum seekers intercepted while trying

to reach New Zealand to be taken to Australia's detention centres.

Labour has promised to gradually increase New Zealand's tiny annual intake of refugees, but only from 750 to 1,500 by 2020. Ardern emphasised that any refugees taken from Nauru and Manus Island would be taken out of this quota.

In June, the United Nations refugee agency reported that the number of people displaced by war and persecution throughout the world almost doubled from 33.9 million in 1997 to 65.6 million in 2016, the highest number ever recorded.

The Ardern government intends to cut immigration by as much as 40 percent, or 30,000 people per year. For years Labour and NZ First have waged a nationalist campaign to scapegoat immigrants, especially Chinese people, for the housing crisis, low wages and underfunded public services. The chauvinist campaign has dovetailed with a push for more open alignment with Washington against China.

In line with the global trend of governments stoking nationalism, the once relatively free movement across the Tasman Sea has been restricted. Since 2001, New Zealanders living in Australia have lost access to welfare services and the path to Australian citizenship has become more difficult. Now the Turnbull government is threatening to dramatically increase university fees for New Zealand students. Ardern responded with a threat to increase fees for Australians studying in New Zealand.

Ardern's visit to Australia underscores the fraud perpetrated by Labour's liberal and middle class pseudo-left supporters, who hailed the new government as an emissary of "hope and change." This layer is politically complicit in the Labour-NZ First-Green coalition's right-wing policies, including its attacks on immigrants and the boosting of the military in preparation for war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact