

Media frenzy over New Zealand PM's pregnancy distracts attention from inequality

Tom Peters
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Following the announcement on January 19 that Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is pregnant, New Zealand was inundated with fawning media coverage. Newspapers were crammed with congratulatory messages from local and foreign political leaders. Columnists offered parenting advice for Ardern and her partner Clarke Gayford, and speculated about the baby's gender, possible names and whether the parents would get married.

Further choreographed gushing can be expected in June, when Ardern is due to give birth.

This nauseating campaign resembles the frenzy that accompanies royal pregnancies in Britain and has the same basic aim. It is to divert public attention from issues of far greater concern: soaring social inequality, poverty and the growing danger of world war.

Ardern, 37, was installed as Labour Party leader just weeks before the September 23 election and widely promoted by the media in an attempt to save the party from electoral collapse. The party scraped into office by forming a coalition with the Greens and the right-wing New Zealand First. Now a new wave of “Jacindamania” is being whipped up as the government prepares to boost the military and impose pro-business austerity measures on the working class.

Ludicrously, several commentators asserted that Ardern's pregnancy sends an “empowering” message to working women. One headline called the prime minister “an inspiration for a generation.” Another labelled her pregnancy “a landmark for women's rights.” Former Prime Minister Helen Clark tweeted: “Every woman should have the choice of combining family and career.” Gayford was hailed for setting a positive example as a “full time dad.”

Green Party leader James Shaw, a member of the coalition government, applauded Ardern's decision to

take six weeks' leave when the baby is born, then resume her post. “That a woman can be the prime minister of New Zealand and choose to have a family while in office says a lot about the kind of country we are and that we can be—modern, progressive, inclusive, and equal,” Shaw declared.

Such claims are absurd and false. Ardern and Gayford, a former radio and TV presenter, make at least \$500,000 a year and inhabit a different universe from the vast majority of New Zealanders.

For working people, the main obstacle to raising a family is entrenched and widespread poverty, for which successive Labour and National Party governments are responsible. Median incomes have stagnated for decades, while the cost of living has soared.

Few families can afford for either parent to give up work. The Labour Party has promised to extend paid parental leave, but only from 18 to 26 weeks. The most a new parent can get during this period is \$516 a week before tax—less than the full-time minimum wage.

Labour will keep the former National Party's draconian policy of forcing single parents to look for work once their youngest child turns three, pushing thousands more people off welfare.

Claims that the government will address poverty are being discredited rapidly. Ardern's pregnancy announcement overshadowed a report two days earlier that the Labour Party's election promise to halve child poverty by 2021 was based on inaccurate Treasury calculations.

Treasury secretary Gabriel Makhoul said a previous estimate of 88,000 children being lifted out of poverty by Labour's increases to family payments was the result of a “coding error.” A new, lower figure will be released in late February.

The Labour Party's pledge was always highly

dubious and based on a lower poverty line than that used by Children's Commissioner Andrew Becroft, appointed by the previous National Party government. He estimated last year that 290,000 children lived in poverty, about one in four.

The gulf between rich and poor is widening. On January 22, Oxfam reported that 28 percent of the wealth created in New Zealand in 2017—\$42 billion—went to the richest 1 percent of society. The super-rich have benefited from the global stockmarket boom and New Zealand's out-of-control property bubble.

The poorest 30 percent—1.4 million people—gained just 1 percent of the wealth generated in the past year. Household debt at the end of 2017 stood at 168 percent of disposable income, up from 159 percent before the 2008 financial crash. The Salvation Army told the *Dominion Post* it distributed more food parcels in 2017 than ever.

Ardern's government has promised big business no increase in corporate tax and committed to keeping core government spending below 30 percent of gross domestic product, the same as the previous National Party government. Hundreds of millions of dollars will be diverted to upgrade the military to prepare for war.

Days before Ardern's pregnancy announcement, Foreign Minister Winston Peters attended a meeting of 20 foreign ministers in Canada to escalate US threats of war against North Korea. Peters demanded that "maximum pressure" be placed on North Korea to disarm. Labour has indicated it would support an attack on North Korea.

Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party, will become acting prime minister when Ardern takes her parental leave. Ardern told Radio NZ Peters was "fantastically supportive" and she was "grateful" he would take on the role.

NZ First promotes anti-Chinese xenophobia and anti-Muslim bigotry, deep cuts to immigration and increased spending on the police and military—policies Labour has largely adopted. Peters has repeatedly demanded an "investigation" into Chinese-born National Party MP Jian Yang, who has been witch-hunted by the media as a security threat. The anti-China campaign dovetails with Washington's plans for war against China.

Labour handed disproportionate power to NZ First,

which received only 7.5 percent of the votes last September, after Peters decided on October 19 to form a coalition with Labour rather than the incumbent National Party. Peters was made deputy prime minister and foreign minister, and NZ First's Ron Mark became defence minister.

Ardern learned she was pregnant on October 13, while coalition negotiations were underway, but claims she told no one except her partner. She made Peters her deputy, however, knowing that he would take over her role for six weeks.

During the coalition talks, which were held in secret, US Ambassador Scott Brown publicly criticised the National Party government for failing to fully endorse Trump's threats to obliterate North Korea. He indicated that Washington expected a more overtly pro-US and anti-China stance from the next government. This was undoubtedly a major factor in Peters' decision to form a coalition with Labour.

The prospect of the NZ First leader's elevation to acting prime minister has not drawn any criticism from the Labour Party's supporters in the media and trade unions.

The trade union-funded *Daily Blog*, which published at least six posts congratulating Ardern, paints China as a threat and supports NZ First's agitation against Chinese "interference" in New Zealand. None of Labour's cheerleaders criticised Brown's intervention during the coalition talks because they all support the military alliance with the US and the build-up to war against China.



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