

Britain pressures New Zealand government to join anti-Russian sanctions

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In an extraordinary intervention, Britain's High Commissioner to New Zealand, Laura Clarke, fired a public warning shot at the Labour-led government over its plans to seek a free trade deal with Russia. Following the Skripal poisoning in the UK, Clarke successfully pressured NZ to join the sanctions that Britain and its allies have imposed on Russia.

War tensions in Europe have spiked as the UK government has escalated accusations that Moscow attempted to kill British spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Julia, on March 4 in Salisbury. European Union (EU) foreign ministers last week pledged "unqualified solidarity" with the UK in condemning the "reckless and illegal" poisoning.

The case hinges on the unsubstantiated assertion that Moscow targeted the Skripals with a "Novichok"-style nerve agent "developed" in the former Soviet Union. Britain expelled 23 Russian diplomats and is promising "further measures" against the Kremlin.

There are, however, divisions within European ruling elites over Russia. UK Prime Minister Theresa May has pressed European leaders to expel Russian agents, in a bid to dismantle "Kremlin networks" across Europe. Britain is pushing allies such as New Zealand—which, along with the UK, is part of the US-led "Five Eyes" intelligence network—to fall into line.

Speaking on Radio NZ on March 15, Clarke warned that efforts to pursue a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Russia would jeopardise future deals with both the EU and the UK. Clarke declared that New Zealand had to "prioritise" its FTAs, and trade negotiations with the EU and UK "never happen in a vacuum."

The high commissioner earlier invited a group of selected journalists to a private briefing on the issue. According to journalist Richard Harman's POLITIK web site, the meeting was intended to "soften up New

Zealand public opinion to join in any sanctions Britain might try and impose on Russia." Harman concluded that "the British felt they needed to make a strong case in Wellington."

The day after Clarke's radio interview, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the government had rescinded moves to restart trade talks with Russia. The government had intended to resume the talks, which were suspended in 2014 over the annexation of Crimea.

Ardern said "the situation [with Russia] has changed." She and Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters now agree that efforts to restart negotiations should be suspended. Ardern added that "in the light of the Salisbury incident" she did not know when, or if, the government would be in a position to resume trade talks.

Ardern supported the joint statements by British, US, German and French leaders on the nerve agent attack. "Outrage at the brazen and callous use of chemical weapons in a UK town is fully justified," Ardern declared. She agreed with the British government's claims that there was "no plausible explanation" the attack could have come from "anywhere other than Russia" and Russia had "serious questions to answer."

The about-face came after months during which Peters, who is also deputy prime minister and leader of the right-wing New Zealand First Party, had reiterated his plans to develop Russian trade. He claimed this was necessary to reduce New Zealand's economic reliance on China, the country's second most important trading partner. A commitment to pursue a FTA with the Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan customs union was included in NZ First's coalition agreement with Labour following last September's election.

In a television program on March 10, Peters declared

New Zealand was “deadly serious” about a free trade deal and defended Russia. He said there was “no evidence” Russia had a hand in shooting down flight MH17 over the Ukraine or that it meddled in the US election. “We have a lot of allegations, but we do not have the facts laid out clearly,” he said. “When you start talking about those moral judgments, you might not be trading with anybody,” Peters added.

Ardern downplayed Peters’ comments, telling the media he was simply making the point that other countries had been trading around sanctions applied to Russia, and New Zealand deserved “fair access relative to other countries.” She declared that a free trade deal with the EU had always been New Zealand’s “top priority.”

Clearly, there are tensions between Labour and NZ First. *Dominion Post* political reporter Stacey Kirk wrote on March 18 that it took Ardern “more than a week to pull rank on her foreign minister and suspend efforts to restart trade talks with Russia.”

According to Kirk, once Britain’s ultimatum to New Zealand was “black and white,” Peters finally put out his own strongly-worded statement condemning the chemical attack, calling it “repugnant.” He said NZ shared the concerns expressed by other nations and he would continue to “consult with the UK and other partners.”

The move to join the build-up to war against Russia follows Ardern’s statement in November that New Zealand was prepared to support a US attack on North Korea, and an intensifying anti-Chinese campaign by the government and intelligence agencies.

The Labour-NZ First coalition government was formed following US ambassador Scott Brown’s public intervention after last September’s election. Brown criticised the previous National Party government for failing to fully endorse Trump’s threat to annihilate North Korea, and indicated that Washington wanted greater NZ support for its build-up to war against China.

Ardern’s pro-war stance against China, Russia and North Korea exposes the fraud perpetrated by a layer of petty bourgeois “peace” groups, pro-Labour commentators such as the *Daily Blog* and pseudo-left outfits like the International Socialist Organisation, that the new government represents a progressive alternative to National.

While anti-war sentiment has strong traditions within the working class, the ruling class in New Zealand, a minor imperialist power, always has been ready to join the major powers in inter-imperialist wars and neo-colonial military ventures. The alliance with Britain, the US and Australia is the quid pro quo for their support for New Zealand’s own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific region.



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