

US ambassador to New Zealand continues public attacks on China

Tom Peters
12 October 2018

In an October 3 appearance on RadioLIVE, Scott Brown, the US ambassador to New Zealand, urged New Zealanders not to trust China. For almost an hour Brown discussed his personal interests, including gun ownership and rock music, praised New Zealand's military-intelligence alliance with the US, and defended the Trump administration's trade war measures and belligerence against China.

Brown, a former Republican Party Senator for Massachusetts, was appointed ambassador by President Donald Trump last year. He spent 35 years in the military and is known for defending waterboarding, a method of torture. He is also reportedly an admirer of Trump's "alt-right" advisor Steve Bannon.

Unlike most ambassadors, who work behind the scenes and keep a relatively low public profile, Brown has made numerous public comments on New Zealand's foreign and defence policy.

Most provocatively, after New Zealand's inconclusive election a year ago, Brown criticised the then-National Party government's hesitancy to fully endorse Trump's threats to "totally destroy" North Korea. He also indicated that Washington wanted the next government to align more firmly with the US military encirclement and threats against China. Following Brown's statements, the right-wing, anti-immigrant New Zealand First Party, which received just 7 percent of the vote, announced it would form a coalition government with the Labour Party rather than the Nationals.

In the past year, the Labour-NZ First-Greens government has significantly strengthened military ties with the US. Last month it announced a decision to keep troops in Afghanistan and Iraq and sent an air force plane to Okinawa in Japan to join the military build-up against North Korea.

During his RadioLIVE interview, Brown praised the Ardern government's Strategic Defence Policy, adopted in July, which for the first time specifically identified Russia and China as the main "threats" to the "international community." This directly echoed the language of the Pentagon, which is preparing for war against both nuclear-armed countries unless they bow to US demands for geo-political hegemony. China is seen by the Trump administration as the main obstacle to US domination over the Asia-Pacific region and the global economy.

Brown has previously hailed the Labour-NZ First government's "Pacific reset," a diplomatic strategy to push back against China's influence in the Pacific and cement New Zealand's neo-colonial interests in the region.

There is widespread anti-war sentiment in New Zealand and hostility to the country's membership in the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, which spies on the world's population.

Significantly, a listener who called in during Brown's radio segment asked why New Zealanders should trust the US given its "track record of interfering in regimes and democracies all around the world for the past 100, 150 years." He added that, by comparison, China "seems to be a lot less interfering in other countries."

Brown replied with a ludicrous defence of US imperialism, describing it as a "philanthropic" enterprise. He declared: "We're not taking people's lands, we're usually going in because there are issues around the world." The ambassador made no attempt to justify the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, launched on the basis of lies about weapons of mass destruction and fighting terrorism, or the wars for regime change in Libya and Syria.

Brown then launched into a tirade against China,

saying “we have freedom and democracy,” whereas “if you don’t agree with some of the things they’re saying in China, well, they may put you in a camp and you may not see the light of day, or they may change their electoral system and have a president for life.”

Interviewer Mark Sainsbury avoided mentioning Brown’s support as a senator for waterboarding prisoners in the US military prison at Guantanamo Bay, where “enemy combatants” are held for years without trial. Nor did Sainsbury raise the brutal detention and deportation of thousands of immigrant families, the epidemic of killings by police and censorship of the internet by Google, Facebook and other giant corporations—to name only a few of the most blatant attacks on democratic rights in the US.

Brown accused China of “stealing our intellectual property” and “manipulating” its currency, as well as “destroying” coral reefs and “militarising islands” in the South China Sea. “That’s why we are traversing through with our Navy those areas to make sure they stay free and open,” he said.

In fact, beginning with former President Barack Obama’s “pivot to Asia” strategy, the US has heavily militarised the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea, in order to threaten China’s trade routes at a series of “choke points” in the event of war.

The drive to war is escalating under Trump. On October 4, Vice President Mike Pence gave a bellicose speech, accusing Beijing, without any evidence, of “interference” in US elections to try and bring down Trump. He attacked China’s military spending and threatened that the US would maintain its dominance through “modernising our nuclear arsenal.”

Washington is also strengthening its military alliances with Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

The US ambassador’s radio rant was aimed at ramping up the anti-Chinese campaign already being waged by the New Zealand government and sections of the media. For years, the Labour Party and New Zealand First have scapegoated Chinese and other immigrants for the housing crisis, unemployment and low wages. In August, the government passed laws to ban foreigners from buying houses. The aim is to deflect anger over the social crisis and overcome public hostility to the alliance with the US.

So far the effect of this propaganda has been limited.

On August 30 the New Zealand China Council published a survey of 1,001 New Zealanders, showing 43 percent were positive about New Zealand’s relationship with China, which is the country’s biggest trading partner. Only 14 percent felt negatively about China, while 38 percent were neutral.

Increasingly determined efforts are being made to demonise China. NATO-funded NZ academic Anne-Marie Brady, who is heavily promoted in the media, last year accused National Party MP Jian Yang of being a Chinese Communist Party “agent,” without producing any evidence. NZ First leader Winston Peters, who is foreign minister and deputy prime minister, has repeatedly called for an investigation into the Chinese-born politician by the Security Intelligence Service.

A report by National Public Radio in the US on October 2, titled “Australia and New Zealand are ground zero for Chinese influence,” quoted Peters saying there was “growing public interest” in the allegations against Yang. “I would think intelligence interest as well,” he asserted, “plus the shared intelligence from our closer allies.” He said a decision about Yang’s fate “will soon have to come.”

The escalating anti-China campaign, carried out in close collaboration with the US embassy, demonstrates the right-wing, pro-imperialist character of the Ardern government and demolishes the lies of liberal and pseudo-left commentators that the Labour Party is in any way progressive. It underscores the urgent need for a new anti-war movement, completely independent of all the capitalist parties, and based on a socialist perspective to unite the working class internationally.



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