

# New Zealand government exploits Christchurch shooter's letter to push for censorship of prisoners

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New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told a press conference on August 19 that her government is likely to impose new restrictions on prisoners' rights to send letters. She said the law could be changed in "weeks."

The announcement followed reports that Brenton Tarrant, accused of killing 51 people in the March 15 Christchurch terrorist attack, sent a letter from Auckland's Paremoremo Prison to a far-right admirer in Russia who publicly shared it on the 4chan website.

The short letter reiterated Tarrant's racist views and admiration for British fascist leader Oswald Mosley. The gunman predicted a "great conflict" in Europe with "a great amount of bloodshed," and urged the recipient, "do not forget your duty to your people." The letter received international media attention and was widely interpreted as a "call to action" for fascists to carry out similar attacks.

The Labour Party-led coalition government is exploiting this episode as a pretext for legal attacks on the democratic rights of nearly 10,000 prisoners. It wants to be able to block anything deemed to contain "hateful messages," while stripping prisoners of any right to appeal such decisions.

The circumstances in which Tarrant was able to send the letter remain murky. *Newsroom* reported that Tarrant's mail was being checked by an "intelligence analyst" and signed off on by the prison director. The Corrections Department vets all prisoners' mail except communications with lawyers. The department's head Christine Stevenson said Tarrant's letter should not have been allowed under the current law and was allowed through "by mistake," with no further explanation.

Media commentators have portrayed the letter's publication as a major debacle and generally supported a crackdown. *Dominion Post* columnist Duncan Garner declared that it "blows my mind" that Tarrant was allowed to send any letters. On August 15, *Newshub* reported that it had received letters from Tarrant's supporter, jailed neo-Nazi Philip Arps, including violent threats against Ardern. Far-right ACT Party leader David Seymour declared that Corrections had been "party to a crime" of inciting violence by allowing the letter.

Lawyer Nigel Hampton, from the Howard League for Penal Reform, academic Kris Gledhill and prominent barrister Graeme Edgeler have publicly opposed any law change, saying prisoners' letters can already be blocked if they promote or encourage the commission of an offence. Two other letters sent by Tarrant have reportedly been blocked under these criteria. Gledhill and Edgeler also criticised Corrections for its decision to suspend Tarrant's mail privileges, pending a review of its processes. Edgeler told *Newsroom*, "I don't think that's lawful."

Ardern, however, made clear that the law must go further because "the current grounds may not take into account mail being published to a wider audience, nor capture broad hate speech." In addition, the prime minister called for changes to "ensure that there isn't the ability to contest the decisions that are being made by Corrections."

In other words, the government wants the ability to block letters containing "broad hate speech," and to remove prisoners' ability to challenge such censorship.

Asked how the government would reconcile suppressing "hate speech" with the principle of free

speech, Ardern said that “common sense” criteria would apply similar to those used to ban “objectionable” publications or broadcasts. Such decisions are made by state-appointed censors with extraordinary powers to suppress films, books and other material.

The working class should oppose such police-state laws, which have nothing to do with halting fascist and white supremacist propaganda. The powers proposed by Ardern can easily be used to prevent inmates from exposing the conditions inside prisons, and to silence political prisoners objecting to war and other crimes committed by the state.

Ardern is leading a global campaign to exploit the Christchurch massacre to censor the Internet. The Australian government has already introduced steep fines for social media executives who fail to remove content deemed “extreme” and “violent”—terms that could easily apply to reports on war atrocities, terrorist attacks or videos exposing police brutality.

The New Zealand state has already censored Tarrant’s fascist manifesto and the video of his attack. Anyone caught in possession can face up to 15 years in prison. Following a request from Ardern, the corporate media agreed to self-censor their coverage of Tarrant’s upcoming trial to avoid reporting any fascist statements made by Tarrant, or references to his manifesto.

A royal commission of inquiry, ostensibly investigating why the Christchurch attack was not stopped by police or intelligence agencies, is being held in secret.

These extraordinary, anti-democratic measures have nothing to do with stopping terrorism. The aim is to prevent the working class from understanding the political roots of the attack. The manifesto hailed US President Donald Trump as a “symbol of white renewal” and contained anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant language similar to that used by major parties, including NZ First, which is part of Ardern’s coalition government.

The manifesto also highlighted Tarrant’s hostility to Marxism and his sympathy with the armed forces. The ruling elite, which is seeking to strengthen New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism, wants no discussion about the link between Tarrant’s fascist views and the militarism, extreme nationalism and anti-socialism that is increasingly promoted by the political

establishment in the US, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

While denouncing Tarrant’s letters, Ardern has made no criticism of Trump’s blatantly racist and anti-immigrant rants, which inspired Tarrant and several mass shooters in the US. The media, for its part, is promoting the fundamentalist Destiny Church, which held an anti-Muslim protest outside one of the mosques targeted by Tarrant.

The attack on prisoners’ rights is part of preparations—including the strengthening of the police, the army and intelligence agencies—to confront popular opposition to war and soaring social inequality. The same week that controversy erupted over Tarrant’s letter, the media reported a plan to increase the number of CCTV cameras in Auckland from about 5,000 to as many as 8,000 in a few years. Police are keen to make use of new facial recognition software with the new cameras, greatly expanding surveillance of ordinary people.

The New Zealand government has been shaken by nationwide strikes by nurses, doctors and teachers over the past year-and-a-half. It is nervously watching the international upsurge of working class struggle, including the yellow vest protests in France, and mass protests in Puerto Rico and Hong Kong, to name just a few examples.



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