

New Zealand's Waitangi Day promotes nationalism and militarism

Tom Peters
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Every year, New Zealand's national day attracts wall-to-wall media coverage of events at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds in Northland, where government ministers, other political leaders, tribal leaders and religious figures give speeches, ostensibly summing up the state of the nation.

Waitangi Day, held on February 6, commemorates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840 between several Māori tribal chiefs and representatives of the British Empire. The treaty made false promises that the British would respect Māori sovereignty over their land. By the end of the century, following the 1845-1872 New Zealand Wars, most land had passed into the ownership of the colonial power.

Successive governments since the 1970s have elevated the treaty to the status of a founding national document, which supposedly began a “partnership” between two cultures: Māori and European. Some Māori tribes have transformed into profitable businesses thanks to receiving hundreds of millions of dollars in treaty settlements from the government. This has created a layer of Māori capitalists whose wealth has grown rapidly in the past three decades, and who are represented politically by the Māori Party and the Mana Party.

The settlements were justified on the basis of racial identity politics: the payments to tribal elites would supposedly compensate for the damage done to all Māori by colonisation. In fact, settlements accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s precisely at the point where Labour and National Party governments carried out a sweeping assault on the working class, including privatisations and mass redundancies. The vast majority of working-class Māori people continue to live in poverty and have far higher rates of incarceration, discrimination in the justice system, healthcare and other areas, and lower life expectancy compared with non-Māori.

This year's Waitangi events, following the announcement of the September 19 election date, were

essentially a media-backed campaign rally for Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party and its coalition partners, the Greens and the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First. The main political aim of the proceedings was to divert attention from the fact that social inequality and poverty—for Māori and non-Māori alike—has continued to worsen under Labour.

According to the UK *Guardian*, “Māori leaders said the mood at Waitangi had been the most optimistic and positive they could remember.” Similar statements were repeated throughout the NZ media, largely reflecting the fact that the Māori Party is hoping to return to parliament in an alliance with Labour. It suffered an electoral wipeout in 2017 after being part of the previous right-wing National Party-led government and supporting its austerity policies.

Ardern's speech contained numerous half-truths and misleading statements: “We've helped more than 2,000 more Māori families into public housing,” she declared. “We've increased the minimum wage. We've put food in schools. We've increased paid parental leave. We've created increases in support for *whanau* [families].”

In fact, all these increases are grossly inadequate. The public housing waiting list has ballooned in the past two years from 5,844 to a record 14,500 families, driven by sky-rocketing rents in the private housing market. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Development says homelessness is an “increasing and serious issue” in six key regions: Auckland, Wellington, Northland, Napier/Hastings, Hamilton and Rotorua.

Small welfare and wage increases are not enough to keep pace with the cost of living. About one in four children lives in poverty, unchanged since the Labour-NZ First-Greens government took office in 2017.

Andrew Little, minister of justice and treaty negotiations, received an avalanche of media praise for delivering a short speech entirely in Māori language.

Significantly, he began by praising the Māori politician Āpirana Ngata, who played a critical role in recruiting Māori to fight in World War I and World War II. Little declared that in 1940 Ngata “spoke of ‘the price of citizenship’ for Māori as the 28th Māori Battalion prepared to go to war.”

Māori participation in imperialist war was a central feature of Waitangi Day commemorations. An elaborate ceremony was conducted by the Defence Force to open a new museum dedicated to the Māori Battalion. According to the *Northern Advocate* the “central theme” of the museum, called Te Rau Aroha, is that fighting in World War II was “the price of citizenship” for Māori.

The completion of the museum, which cost the government \$14.6 million, was a key part of the coalition deal between Labour and NZ First, the most militarist party in parliament. In a NZ First press conference in October 2017, after the formation of the government, party leader, Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters praised Ngata for “telling young Māori soldiers going off to their death that that’s the price of being equal in New Zealand.” NZ First’s Shane Jones added: “that’s the narrative that should be built into the Māori identity of New Zealand... it’s going to be elevated.”

Unlike the false promises to alleviate poverty and homelessness, the pledge to “elevate” militarism has been kept.

Speaking at the opening of Te Rau Aroha, Peters glorified Māori soldiers in WWII for showing “loyalty, determination, and a willingness to fight” and “readily accept[ing] they might lose their lives fighting for this country and what it stood for.” Ardern said the museum would “honour the spirit of all those who, without the pressure of conscription, willingly took up arms for their country, many making the ultimate sacrifice.”

In fact, New Zealand’s ruling class joined the two World Wars to defend the British Empire and NZ’s own neo-colonial interests in the South Pacific, including its brutal and dictatorial rule over Samoa, which it had seized from Germany in 1914. About 140,000 New Zealanders fought in WWII and nearly 12,000 were killed. In the 28th Māori Battalion, the casualty rate was almost 50 percent higher than the average for NZ infantry battalions: of 3,600 soldiers, 649 were killed and 1,712 wounded.

This appalling waste of lives is now being promoted to prepare young people, including Maori, to make the same “sacrifice” in future wars. The Ardern government is spending billions of dollars on upgrading the military and expanding the size of the army. It has further strengthened

the alliance with US imperialism as the Trump administration threatens war against Iran, China and Russia.

Along with glorifying war, the tribal elites in Northland provided a media spotlight for Brian Tamaki, leader of the Christian fundamentalist Destiny Church. During an interdenominational service at the Treaty Grounds, Tamaki gave a 25-minute speech in which he viciously scapegoated immigrants for poverty and the housing crisis.

Destiny Church, which will stand in the 2020 election as the political party Vision NZ, has staged numerous xenophobic and anti-Islamic provocations. Following the March 15, 2019, massacre of 51 Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, the church held an anti-Muslim rally opposite one of the mosques targeted by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant.

At Waitangi, Tamaki described migrants as “termites and parasites” that “totally consume the host.” He denounced the government for allowing immigrants to access welfare, saying “we should be looking after our own,” and attacked successive governments for encouraging foreign investment, particularly from China.

Tamaki’s rhetoric echoed NZ First and Labour, which have agitated for years against Chinese investment and immigration. The Ardern government has imposed class-based restrictions to slash immigration and has followed the US in denouncing Russia and China as the main “threats” to the international order.

The Waitangi Day events set the stage for an election campaign that will be dominated by nationalism, anti-immigrant xenophobia and warmongering.



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