

International media hails New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's re-election

Tom Peters
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The world's corporate media has responded to the re-election of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government for a second term with a wave of adulation.

Ardern's Labour Party won 49 percent of the votes in Saturday's election, putting it in a position to govern without a coalition partner. The sweeping victory is partly due to the internal chaos in the opposition National Party, with three different leaders this year alone. The party has been destabilised for years due to its advocacy of stronger economic ties with China at a time when the US, New Zealand's main ally, is demanding unwavering commitment to the build-up to war with China.

A second major contributor to the election result is the local and international media's incessant glorification of Ardern. Few, if any, other political leaders around the world have received as much positive coverage since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. (See also: Media glorifies New Zealand government's pro-business response to the pandemic).

The pandemic has triggered a public health, economic and social crisis of unprecedented proportions which is discrediting the capitalist system in the eyes of millions. More than 40 million people have become infected and 1.1 million are dead as a result of the wilfully negligent and homicidal policies by governments, above all in the United States, where 225,000 people are dead.

Hundreds of millions of people have lost their jobs and poverty is soaring, while governments hand out trillions of dollars to the corporate and financial elite. The danger of imperialist war is increasing, with threats by the US against China and other countries, as the ruling classes seek to project social tensions outwards. Meanwhile, the Trump administration and other governments are resorting to increasingly authoritarian methods to suppress the working class at home.

Under these conditions, the media and politicians throughout the world are portraying New Zealand as an exception, a beacon of hope and a haven from the chaos sweeping the planet. The aim is to persuade working people

that the colossal problems they face can be resolved within the present system if only "kind" and "compassionate" leaders like Ardern are elected.

Ardern received public messages of congratulations on her victory from a host of leaders, including right wing figures such as UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Canada's Justin Trudeau hailed Ardern for supposedly "addressing the health and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring a sustainable economic recovery that includes everyone, fighting climate change, and empowering women and girls around the world." Tibet's Dalai Lama tweeted: "I admire the courage, wisdom and leadership, as well as the calm, compassion and respect for others, [Ardern] has shown in these challenging times."

Similar praise was heaped on Ardern after the March 2019 far-right terrorist attack in Christchurch for her supposed empathy towards the Muslim community. Fawning tributes in the New York Times and elsewhere ignored the Ardern government's anti-immigrant policies, New Zealand's participation in the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the Labour Party's coalition with the racist NZ First, which espouses positions not very different to those of the fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant.

The depiction of Ardern's response to the coronavirus is likewise a fraud. New Zealand did impose a relatively strict lockdown in late March, before anyone had died of COVID-19 (the country has recorded a total of 25 deaths from the virus). But this was not because of any special wisdom or benevolence on Ardern's part. Her government acted in the face of mounting pressure in the working class, which emerged independently of the trade unions, including online petitions initiated by doctors and signed by tens of thousands of people demanding a lockdown.

The *New York Times* summed up Ardern's approach to the pandemic as a combination of "science and solidarity." In reality, her government repeatedly eased lockdown restrictions, in April and May, going against the advice of its

own scientific advisors. The health benefits of a longer lockdown, Ardern said on April 21, had to be “traded against the huge economic impact.” Testing rates then plummeted, paving the way for a second outbreak in August.

The description of Ardern as progressive or even “socialistic,” as she was dubbed in the BBC comedy show “Spitting Image,” is a lie. Social inequality has continued to soar under her government and is being exacerbated by the pro-business response to the pandemic.

Tens of billions of dollars in public money have been handed out to big business in the form of tax cuts, bailouts and wage subsidies. Corporations have meanwhile sacked tens of thousands of people, with the assistance of the trade union bureaucracy. The median income has fallen 7.6 percent in the past year, almost one in four children live in poverty and there is a severe housing crisis, with at least one in 100 people officially homeless.

Although Ardern is referred to as “the anti-Trump” in numerous articles, she has promised to continue working with Trump if he remains president after the US election. Ardern said nothing about Trump’s open threats to carry out a coup to remain in power. Labour’s coalition deal with NZ First and the Greens in 2017 had the full support of the Trump administration and the government strengthened New Zealand’s integration into US war preparations against China.

The Labour Party ran its election campaign as a referendum on the government’s handling of the pandemic, making no substantive policy pledges. The aim was to avoid any discussion of the government’s real plan to ramp up austerity measures in order to repay the debt accumulated from bailing out the rich, while continuing to pour billions into the military.

It is precisely because of the pro-war and pro-business politics behind Ardern’s “empathetic” and “inclusive” persona that she is being held up as a model for British Labour Party leader Keir Starmer and US presidential contender Joe Biden.

Sean O’Grady’s article in the UK *Independent*, “What Keir Starmer can learn from Jacinda Ardern,” notes approvingly that in 2006, two years before entering the NZ parliament, Ardern worked in the office of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair—a war criminal who bears responsibility for the destruction of Iraq. O’Grady touts the Ardern government’s right-wing nationalist policies, including “a quota on refugees claiming asylum; no nationalisations; no estate duty; no capital gains tax and major support for small private business.”

The *Nation*’s John Nichols, in an article similarly entitled “What Joe Biden can learn from Jacinda Ardern,” noted that Ardern’s victory speech contained “a nod to voters in the

United States” with its warnings about “polarization,” “uncertainty and anxiety” and the need to “bring people together.”

Ardern assured conservative voters who had switched from the National Party to Labour, viewing it as the more stable party of big business, that she would “govern for all New Zealanders.” This recalled the Democrats’ appeals for support from Republicans in their campaign against Trump. As if to underscore the similarity between their campaigns, Ardern borrowed one of Biden’s slogans, declaring: “We will build back better from the COVID crisis.”

NZ Labour, like the Democrats, fears the radicalisation of the working class far more than the rise of the extreme right, which was emboldened by Labour and NZ First’s anti-immigrant policies.

Time magazine also praised Ardern for her “coalition-building skills,” and for prizing “stability over revolution, or even large policy initiatives.” It highlighted Ardern’s “remarkably market-friendly” platform, including her decision to rule out any tax on wealth. It noted the positive response to the election from investors: “the stock and real estate markets, after dipping in March, are both going gangbusters.” House prices have gone up 7.6 percent in the past year and 27 percent over Labour’s first term.

The picture of New Zealand as a stable society, which *Time* called “a calmer democracy,” does not reflect reality. Workers have already been involved in major struggles against the Ardern government’s austerity policies, including mass strikes in 2018 and 2019 by nurses and teachers, which were betrayed by the unions.

The ruthless pro-business restructuring underway in New Zealand will provoke a further resurgence in class struggles and shatter any illusions that exist in the Labour Party-led government and Ardern.

Likewise, in the United States, Britain and everywhere else, class tensions have reached an explosive level and will not be alleviated by installing Democratic or Labour governments. The only viable alternative for workers and young people who want to fight against social inequality, war and the far-right is to break entirely from these capitalist parties, and take up the fight for the international unity of the working class and the socialist reorganisation of society.



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