

New Zealand ruling elite whitewashes its “contribution” to Afghan war

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The New Zealand government this week dispatched an Air Force Hercules plane with 40 military personnel to Afghanistan to evacuate over 100 NZ citizens, plus foreign nationals and Afghans who collaborated with the allied occupation of the country.

Following the ignominious collapse of the US-backed regime in Kabul, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told a press conference that the “security situation” in the beleaguered country had deteriorated far more quickly than could have been predicted. “What will matter,” Ardern intoned, “is the actions, particularly around human rights, and particularly from New Zealand’s perspective, we’ll be looking to see how women and girls under a Taliban regime will be treated.”

The comment underscores the attempt by the government, media and entire ruling elite to whitewash the country’s near 20-year involvement in the US-led imperialist invasion and occupation involving 3,500 New Zealand troops and 10 combat deaths.

Asked to reflect on New Zealand’s role, Ardern bluntly declared that it would be “a complete disservice to go back and rewrite history.” Decisions were made at the time, she said, “that we could make a contribution for the better.” New Zealand’s “contribution” was not a “failure,” she added, baldly claiming: “It made a difference for those living in Afghanistan and their daily lives.”

Defence Minister Peeni Henare concurred, declaring: “our contribution was a positive one.” The *Dominion Post* also assured readers that New Zealand’s “peacekeeping presence” in Afghanistan was essentially a “human story,” that had brought “advances like education and plumbing to the community.”

The invasion and occupation of the impoverished country was in reality a filthy criminal enterprise from

the start that ensured the virtual destruction of an entire society. New Zealand’s Labour-Alliance government had joined the invasion primarily to fully restore relations with the US following the Labour-led “anti-nuclear” posturing in the 1980s, and as a quid-pro-quo for Washington’s endorsement of its own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

On October 3, 2001, the NZ parliament approved a motion presented by Prime Minister Helen Clark that it endorse Labour’s despatch of Special Air Services troops and “totally” support the US in Afghanistan. The record shows Labour in favour with 49 votes; its “left wing” coalition partner the Alliance with 10 votes for, and the conservative opposition parties ACT and National both in favour. The Greens with 7 votes opposed the deployment, but would later justify NZ’s role in the ongoing occupation as “peacekeeping.”

The media hailed the operation. The *Evening Post* in December 2001 excoriated “doubters” who dared to make any comparison with Vietnam. “In the space of little more than two months,” the *Post* insisted, “America, with the support of opposition Afghan forces, has routed the Taliban... President George W Bush’s war against terrorism has been far more decisive than his critics ever imagined.” The newspaper brushed aside concerns about “civilian casualties,” asserting that “the world is a safer place” because of the invasion. It added that America was sending a “blunt message” to “countries such as Yemen and the Sudan”: “If you follow Afghanistan’s example, we will come after you too.”

Speaking to media this week Clark decried the “surreal and devastating” outcome, but declared she had “no regrets” about the decision to join the occupation. She told *Stuff*: “There’s so much effort gone on to investing in human development, and

people's rights, and better governance. And it's just gone up in smoke." The US should have played the role it had after the Korean War, Clark said, i.e., deploying 50,000 soldiers in the country for decades.

Tens of thousands of civilians were killed during nearly two decades of war. Drone strikes, bombings, assassinations and torture were routinely used to instill terror in the population. The NZ military, which received a unit citation from Bush, was complicit in serious war crimes. A royal commission of inquiry into Operation Burnham, a night-time raid on a village by the SAS in 2010, confirmed that a child and at least seven other people were killed. Labour's Attorney-General David Parker defended the killings, saying they were "undesirable" but "legal."

Several civilians, including children, were also killed by unexploded ordnance left behind by NZ troops.

Green Party co-leaders James Shaw and Marama Davidson have issued a statement condemning "the new surge in terror by the Taliban." Employing the nostrums of "human rights" imperialism, they declared: "It is heart-breaking to know that Afghans face the prospect of living under Taliban rule once again, with women and girls at the greatest risk of sexual and gender-based violence." The pair called on "allies and partners" to ensure the Taliban has no more funding and resources, "even if that means standing up to our trading partners"—thus inviting a confrontation with China.

Meanwhile, the pseudo-left fraternity who in 2001 gave their imprimatur to Labour's imperialist venture are now scrambling to wash their hands of any culpability. Writing in the *Daily Blog* on August 16, Liz Gordon, one of the 10 Alliance MPs who voted in support, described how the party leader, Jim Anderton, "for some reason that is still not clear," was "set on" sending the troops. Gordon described how she was later pressured against her "instincts and beliefs" to speak in defence of the party's pro-war position. "Not a moment of great glory in my life. I hope you can all forgive me now," she wanly pleaded.

Others simply engage in blatant lying and historical falsification. Laila Harre, at the time a cabinet minister and another hand-raiser in parliament, tweeted on February 17, after the announcement of NZ's troop withdrawal in May: "20 years since the Alliance stood against this predictably destructive deployment. 20

years wasted on war."

Alliance operative and former Pabloite Mike Treen also posted on Facebook this week: "We can collectively be proud that ultimately we stood up against war and empire and were proved right." The word "ultimately" betrays the fact that Treen has nothing to say about this bourgeois party's abject capitulation in parliament. Treen then moved to cover his tracks by reposting a December 2001 letter to the Labour Party, written on behalf of the so-called "Antiwar coalition," in which he unsuccessfully appealed for it to reverse course.

The horse had, by then, well and truly bolted. In April 2002 the Alliance split, just seven months out from a general election, and after six months of internecine warfare, brought on by the rightward, anti-working class trajectory of the coalition government and its craven support for the US-led war in Afghanistan. The Alliance is now defunct, a case study in the dead-end of opportunist, pro-capitalist politics.



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