

Australia, New Zealand to maintain brutal deportee policies

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Australia's Labor Party Foreign Minister Penny Wong visited her New Zealand counterpart, Nanaia Mahuta, in Wellington last Thursday, before heading to the Solomon Islands the next day.

Wong's trip was her fifth since assuming office in May, including to five countries across the Pacific, aimed at bolstering Canberra's position in the region following an eight-nation tour by China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

Wong told Radio NZ the new Australian government was seeking to be more engaged in the Pacific. She voiced "concerns" about security arrangements being drawn up between Pacific countries and countries "outside of the Pacific family"—a reference to China.

Mahuta and Wong told a joint press conference that the "Pacific is a contested space." Mahuta referred to "an increasingly uncertain and risky geostrategic environment." The ministers said they would be "working together" with Pacific Island nations "as they define their priorities," including climate change.

Coming from the local powers that have maintained colonial control across the highly exploited region for more than a century, references to the "Pacific family" are entirely hypocritical. Solomon Islands foreign affairs official Collin Beck tweeted that the term should be "redefined" because unnamed states (i.e. Australia and NZ) had "cast aside" the "principle of non-interference."

A week earlier New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had visited Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. While that meeting and Wong's visit to Wellington focused on furthering the US-led military build-up against China, a major issue on the agenda was Australia's controversial "501" deportations.

Under section 501 of Australia's Migration Act, passed in 2014, the government can cancel someone's visa if they are convicted of a crime or crimes that carry a cumulative sentence of more than a year in prison—regardless of the nature of the offences or how

long the person has lived in Australia. It can cancel visas on "character" grounds—often due to gang links or if they are deemed a risk to national security.

New Zealanders are disproportionately affected, because of the large number who live in Australia—more than 650,000—and who face almost insurmountable obstacles to gaining citizenship. A total of 2,572 people were deported to New Zealand between 2015 and February this year—more than double the number expected when the policy began.

New Zealand governments have repeatedly lobbied Australia to ease the policy. Former Prime Minister John Key and current Prime Minister Ardern both urged Australia to stop exporting "their problems" and to only deport those with clear connections to New Zealand. Ardern described the policy as "corrosive in the trans-Tasman relationship."

Canberra has bluntly refused to yield. Peter Dutton, the previous home affairs minister and now Opposition leader, boasted it was a matter of "taking the trash out" to "make Australia a safer place."

The consequences are brutal. Many people have served prison sentences, only to be re-arrested and thrown into immigration detention centres to await deportation. Families have been ripped apart, with parents permanently separated from their Australian-born children. Deportees often arrive in New Zealand with no home to go to and no family connections.

One of those deported last year was a 15-year-old boy, whose deportation was a clear breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. NZ police figures indicate that a third of deportees left New Zealand before they were 18 years old and 41 percent had lived overseas for more than 10 years. The Ministry of Health estimated in 2019 that up to 90 percent had mental health or addiction issues that often stemmed from traumatic childhoods.

Following his meeting with Ardern, Albanese declared Australia would retain the 501 policy. Albanese said he had agreed to “look at” the issue, adding “we do recognise concerns have been raised, those deserve consideration.” In Wellington, Wong said the government would “consider” NZ’s concerns, and “we will work through them together in an orderly way.” This will simply mean reviewing how Canberra handles visa cancellations, with limited cosmetic changes.

Ardern, and New Zealand media commentators, however, seized on these comments to declare a “significant shift” and a “reset” in the trans-Tasman relationship.

In fact, the governments on both sides of the Tasman will continue to operate harsh deportation policies, bound up with their anti-immigrant and anti-refugee agenda, upheld by the NZ Labour and Australian Labor parties since their founding.

As the economic situation deteriorates, with living costs dramatically outstripping wages, governments throughout the world are responding by intensifying nationalist and anti-immigrant measures.

The Ardern government’s criticism of Australian policy is entirely hypocritical. While Ardern was in Australia discussing the 501 policy, Immigration NZ was serving deportation papers on a former prison inmate who left Samoa as a preschooler. Mose Vaipapa, now 29 years old, served 15 years in jail for two serious rapes he committed when he was 14 years old. While in prison he was involved in a riot at Hawke’s Bay Prison’s Youth Unit and assaulted two guards.

Vaipapa’s sentences were served in full, without parole. However, he is now being returned to Samoa, where he has not lived since he was four, doesn’t speak the language and has no family or other connections. Mike Sceats from the Porirua Community Law Centre told the *New Zealand Herald*: “We institutionalised him. We made him. It seems wrong to now just foist him off onto Samoa.”

In another case an Indian couple, Amanpreet Kaur? and Simranpreet? Singh, are about to be deported after Kaur, who lived in Auckland, illegally hid in a truck during the city’s COVID restrictions last year to cross the city’s boundary and be with her husband who was working in Rotorua.

The couple were taken to court but discharged without conviction. A judge declared that the consequences of any conviction would be “out of all proportion to the gravity of the offending.” The deportation is nevertheless

proceeding after their humanitarian appeal failed.

Open Justice reported earlier this year that New Zealand sent 400 designated criminals back to Pacific nations between 2013–2018—a move that is contributing to growing crime and drug addiction in those countries. Comparing the New Zealand policy with Australia’s, Timothy Fadgen of Auckland University said: “It’s a difference without a distinction” and “creates the same sorts of problems in those communities that the Australian policy is creating here.”

Since assuming office in 2017, Ardern’s Labour-Green government has sought to scapegoat migrants for the housing crisis, social inequality and pressure on public services. Throughout the pandemic, it has continued deportations, including for people who “overstay” their visa or who commit trivial breaches of their visa conditions. During the two year-period 2020–21, 854 people were either deported or “self-deported” to India, Fiji, Malaysia and the UK.

New Zealand’s political establishment also tacitly supports Australia’s inhumane and criminal persecution of refugees, which the Keating Labor government initiated in the 1990s by introducing mandatory detention of all asylum seekers arriving by boat.

The attacks on migrants, in Australia and New Zealand, are aimed at dividing the working class, to prevent a unified movement against austerity, militarism and the homicidal “let it rip” COVID policies. The working class must come to the defence of refugees and immigrants, and fight for freedom of movement between Australia, New Zealand and internationally, with migrants given the same democratic and social rights as everyone else.



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