

Australia eases citizenship requirements for New Zealanders as countries strengthen military ties

Tom Peters
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Last weekend Australian Labor Party Prime Minister Anthony Albanese announced a policy change that will remove long-standing barriers for New Zealanders living in Australia to gain citizenship.

In 2001, the right-wing Australian government led by Prime Minister John Howard introduced strict criteria making it much harder for New Zealanders to gain permanent residence and citizenship. As of 2016, New Zealanders could only apply if they had worked consecutively in Australia for five years, earning at least \$53,900 a year, an insuperable barrier for hundreds of thousands of working class people.

Any New Zealander moving to Australia after 2001 could live and work there indefinitely under a temporary Special Category Visa (SCV), with no access to welfare benefits, public housing, student loans, disability support and no right to vote. Around 670,000 New Zealand citizens live in Australia (more than a tenth of the NZ population) and roughly half have no residence or citizenship. In recent years, Australia has deported hundreds of New Zealanders for often minor offences, including many who grew up in Australia.

Under the new rules, New Zealanders on SCVs will be able to apply for citizenship from July if they have lived in Australia for four years, and the income threshold has been removed.

The discrimination against New Zealanders was one component of the anti-immigrant measures enforced by successive Labor and Coalition governments, including the ongoing imprisonment of refugees in detention centres. New Zealand, for its part, has similar discriminatory policies, including frequent deportations of migrants from the Pacific, Asia and elsewhere. These broader anti-immigrant measures will remain unchanged.

The announcement of the new policy for New

Zealanders in Australia has been exploited for maximum political advantage both by the Albanese government, as well as Chris Hipkins' Labour Party-led government in NZ, which faces an election in October. In both countries, the established parties are increasingly discredited by the cost of living crisis, soaring social inequality and a catastrophic situation in public hospitals and aged care facilities caused by the decision to let COVID-19 rip.

One motivation behind the relaxation of citizenship criteria, which had been opposed by successive governments in Australia for more than two decades, is that the Albanese government is desperate to encourage immigration to fill labour shortages across all sectors of the economy. The tight labour market, caused in part by never-ending waves of illness from COVID-19, is an obstacle to the ruling elite's plan to intensify exploitation by pushing up unemployment and reducing wages and conditions.

The timing of the deal and the rhetoric surrounding it, however, makes clear that it is part of a more fundamental push for closer strategic and military ties between Australia and New Zealand as both countries integrate themselves into US-led war preparations against China. The less restrictive citizenship rules, while they will undoubtedly be welcomed by working people in both countries, are not being done out of humanitarian motivations.

The changes were in fact negotiated last year, but Hipkins, who visited Australia over the weekend, said the announcement was "deliberately timed to be on the closest weekend to Anzac Day... [to] reaffirm our incredibly strong Anzac mateship." Anzac Day, April 25, is a public holiday in Australia and NZ that marks the entry of both countries into World War I in the Allies' disastrous invasion of Gallipoli in Turkey.

The day is characterised by patriotic military parades and political speeches that glorify all the wars that Australia and NZ troops have fought in, including the bloody invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

At a joint press conference in Australia Hipkins said the “historic” citizenship agreement “will make an enormous difference to the lives of so many people making Australia home.” He immediately added that he and Albanese had “discussed the geostrategic challenges in our region and how, as allies, Australia and New Zealand can continue to work together to advance our common interests and values.”

Albanese was asked by one journalist whether he considered Australia and New Zealand to be “close allies when it comes to responding strategically in our region, in particular [in response to] China?” He replied: “We are absolutely close allies and will remain that in perpetuity.”

Hipkins endorsed the AUKUS military pact between Australia, the UK and United States, which will supply Australia with nuclear-powered attack submarines and ramp up collaboration between the imperialist powers throughout the Indo-Pacific region, as they gear up for war with China.

“New Zealand agrees with the AUKUS partners that the collective objective needs to be the delivery of peace and stability and the preservation of an international rules-based system in our region,” Hipkins said. Defending the “rules-based system” established by US imperialism following World War II is the pretext for an unprecedented military build-up in the Indo-Pacific and continual military provocations against China.

New Zealand is a minor imperialist power, allied with Australia and part of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network. Successive NZ governments have, however, been reluctant to say anything that might threaten the lucrative trade relationship with China, which takes about 30 percent of New Zealand’s exports.

This is now changing, as it becomes ever more clear that Washington is intent on provoking a Third World War against both Russia and China, to secure its domination over the world’s resources and markets.

The Hipkins government has indicated that it is prepared to join some aspects of AUKUS, including the sharing of military and intelligence technology.

Earlier this month, the Australian and New Zealand armies signed Plan ANZAC, an agreement to closely integrate their operations and share resources in anticipation of new conflicts. Chief of Australian Army Lieutenant General Simon Stuart said the plan would

enhance “interoperability, capacity, ability to jointly support combat operations” and “will see both armies better prepared to work together to support security and stability missions.”

After signing the deal, Stuart and the head of the New Zealand Army, Major General John Boswell, travelled together to Fiji and Vanuatu to strengthen ties with military forces in the small Pacific island countries. Australia and New Zealand are seeking to push back against growing Chinese influence across the Pacific, which the ruling elite in both countries view as their colonial backyard.

A significant aspect of the new pathway to citizenship is that it will give hundreds of thousands of New Zealanders in Australia the “right” to enlist in the Defence Force, which is carrying out its biggest recruitment drive since the Vietnam War, and its biggest expansion in spending since the Second World War.

The *New Zealand Herald*, meanwhile, has marked Anzac Day by lamenting the “unbelievable surge” in people leaving the military. With just 9,000 active personnel and attrition rates of more than 15 percent, journalist Pete McKenzie stated that “if [the Defence Force] was asked to do a long-term peace-keeping mission in the Pacific, for example, it probably wouldn’t be able to do that, according to the people I spoke to.”

Amid the escalating US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine, and declarations by the US that war with China is likely within the next two years, the Australian and New Zealand ruling elites are scrambling to build up their military forces and to place their countries on a war footing.

The invocations of the “Anzac spirit” and enduring “mateship” by Australian and New Zealand politicians serve the crucial ideological function of glorifying the “sacrifices” made by working people in past wars, in order to condition the population for even more devastating wars in the future.



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