

Furore over bilingual road signs dominates New Zealand pre-election positioning

John Braddock
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Last week, media coverage in New Zealand was dominated by a contrived controversy over a proposal by the NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi (NZTA) to produce new road signs in both English and Māori languages.

A package of 94 bilingual signs has been released for public consultation, including destinations, bus stops, walking and cycling signs, warning signs and motorway advisories. NZTA is working with “language revitalisation entity” Te Mātauranga to “normalise” Māori language.

A furore erupted after opposition National Party transport spokesperson Simeon Brown declared that the party did not support the move. He told a journalist on May 26: “We all speak English, and they should be in English. Place names are okay, but when it comes to important signs saying things like ‘Expressway,’ they should be in English, as it’s going to be confusing if you add more words.”

On May 29, Prime Minister Chris Hipkins seized on Brown’s statements to accuse National of “outright dog whistle” politics. The next day he told Newshub that the opposition was trying to appeal to a “racist underbelly” in the population.

National’s campaign chair Chris Bishop sought to “clarify” the party’s stance, telling the media it had no issue with the bilingual signs but they should be in the “nice-to-have category” with the immediate focus instead on “fixing potholes and upgrading our roads.” These statements, echoed by National leader Christopher Luxon, did not prevent mounting accusations of racism.

Chair of the Whānau Ora social welfare agency, Merepeka Raukawa-Tait, told Newshub that National was “trying to pitch Māori as being public enemy no.1.” Newshub produced a 13-minute compilation of reporters grilling National MPs over the twists and turns of their position, including criticisms by the party’s own Māori

members.

The manufactured outrage over what is a comparatively insignificant issue points to the reactionary character of all the capitalist parties. As they position themselves ahead of the October 14 general election, Labour, National and their allies are all engaged in stirring up divisions over “cultural” and racial issues, largely in order to divert attention from the right-wing agenda that is shared by the whole political establishment.

Both sides agree on brutal austerity measures—including cuts to workers’ wages and drastic underfunding of public health and education—and the closer alignment of New Zealand with US imperialism, as it lurches towards war with Russia and China.

No doubt, elements in or close to the National Party and its ally, the far-right ACT Party, are seeking to use the road signage debate to try to foment racial animosity. At the same time, the false insinuation by Hipkins that a substantial portion of the non-Māori population constitutes a “racist underbelly” is likewise aimed at stoking divisions. The last thing that both parties want is a unified working class movement against the capitalist onslaught.

The Māori nationalist Māori Party, an ally of Labour, is playing a critical role in this regard. Its co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer denounced Brown’s comments as “ignorant and alarmist,” saying he should “go back to school.” “It’s important that we embrace our nationhood, including our indigenous people and our language,” she told Newshub.

In a similar vein, Claire Breen from the University of Waikato wrote in *Stuff* that bilingual signs “show us where we are and where we’re heading as a people and a culture.” Newsroom political editor Jo Moir declared the language “is not only official on Aotearoa’s shores, but a proud part of this country’s story.” On Twitter, Māori academic Rawiri Taonui railed against the “bonds of self-

imposed monoculturalism” inherent in single-language signage.

As such statements indicate, the Māori language is being promoted as part of an ideology of “national unity,” which aims to obscure the deepening class divide in New Zealand, as well as within the Māori population.

Adding Māori words to road signs will serve little or no practical purpose. Across the population as a whole, just 4 percent can speak Māori, all of whom also speak English, according to the 2018 census. Of the Māori population, which makes up about 15 percent of New Zealanders, only 18 percent speak the language.

In the country’s major city, Auckland, nearly 30 percent of residents identify as Asian. In fact, there are more Chinese speakers, who make up 4.25 percent of the NZ population, than Maori speakers. Needless to say, there is no campaign for Chinese characters to be added to road signs; instead, the media and the government are increasingly focused on demonising China as a “threat” to New Zealand and the Pacific, in line with US war propaganda.

After almost being wiped out by colonisation, Māori was made an official language in 1987 as part of the 1984–1990 Lange-Labour government’s promotion of “reconciliation” and “biculturalism.” The myth was promoted that New Zealand was founded, with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, as a “partnership” between the European and Māori races.

According to the Māori Language Commission, the government’s Māori language strategy is based on upholding its responsibility under the Treaty. Its use is being “normalised” across 200 ministries and agencies. In some cases, staff can be paid more if they speak Māori. Official government functions, as well as key education, business and trade union meetings, almost always begin with a Māori karakia, a prayer purportedly invoking “spiritual” guidance and protection. Failure to do so has been known to result in protests.

As the WSWS explained, the Treaty of Waitangi was revived in the mid-1980s during Labour’s historic assault on the working class, including Māori workers. Racial identity politics was used in order to create a wealthy layer of Māori entrepreneurs, politicians, lawyers, academics and bureaucrats committed to defending the capitalist establishment.

Multi-million dollar pay-outs to tribes and their business arms have been used to buttress the state and prevent a unified struggle of workers of all races against attacks on jobs and living standards. None of this benefited ordinary

Māori, who remain one of the most impoverished sections of the working class.

The clamour over bilingual road signs stands in stark contrast to the prevailing silence over issues that profoundly affect the daily lives of ordinary people. The same week the signage brouhaha dominated the media another 49 people died from COVID, bringing the official death toll to nearly 3,000. There are no longer any signs or public warnings from health officials relating to the pandemic. Hipkins has characterised the repeated waves of infection and death from COVID-19 as a new “normal.”

The two main parties on which New Zealand capitalism has rested since early last century—Labour and the conservative National Party—lack popular support. Neither has any significant differences, a fact not lost on the broad population.

A Roy Morgan poll posted on May 30 had National on 31.5 percent and Labour just 31 percent, down from 50 percent in 2020. Of the minor parties, the far-right, big business ACT led with 13.5 percent, with the Greens on 12 percent and Te Pāti Māori (Māori Party, TPM) on 4.5 percent.

None of the parties has put forward a program to address the urgent issues facing working people: a deepening cost of living crisis, the pandemic, escalating involvement in the Ukraine war, tensions with China and the climate crisis.

Above all, the global crisis erupting over war will be almost totally suppressed in the election campaign. According to any media coverage, which includes frequent commentaries by a raft of academic foreign policy “experts,” the Labour government’s escalating commitment to the Ukraine war is not up for debate. On China, while there is nervousness over a potential threat to New Zealand’s most important trading partnership, the fact that the world is tobogganing towards a potentially catastrophic conflict with Beijing, led by the US, barely rates a mention.



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