

# New Zealand academic witch-hunted for criticising military boot camps for young offenders

Tom Peters  
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New Zealand's far-right government and sections of the media this week launched a furious witch-hunt against an academic who criticised plans to cut spending on school lunches and to establish military boot camps for teenage offenders.

The outpouring of vitriol against Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) Professor Joanna Kidman, including demands that she resign or be sacked, is meant to intimidate all academics and anyone else who opposes the National Party-led government's vicious austerity measures, its promotion of militarism and draconian "law and order" policies.

Kidman, the director of VUW's Centre of Research Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, wrote on X/Twitter on March 6:

"There is so much evidence that military-style youth boot camps don't work and are expensive, that I can only assume that this government hates children, most of whom will be poor and brown. Plus it wants to snatch children's lunches. Is this a government or a death-cult?"

The post reflected the widespread anger and opposition to the government's reactionary agenda.

As part of several "tough on crime" policies, the National Party campaigned in the October election to reintroduce boot camps as a sentencing option for young people aged 15 to 17 convicted of serious crimes. National leader Christopher Luxon, now the prime minister, repeatedly hailed the military as "our best leaders and mentors," claiming that they would turn young people's lives around.

The policy was embraced by National's far-right coalition partners, New Zealand First—which has previously promoted military training for unemployed youth—and the ACT Party, whose member Karen Chhour is involved in establishing the boot camps as minister for children.

The camps have nothing to do with stopping crime, which is fuelled by rising unemployment and poverty, let alone helping young people from impoverished backgrounds. As Kidman correctly indicated, numerous experts have pointed out that the previous National-led government's boot camp program from 2010-2016 did not significantly reduce recidivism.

Lawyer Amanda Hill, who has represented abuse in state care survivors, told TVNZ that such military-run programs were used as "dumping grounds for all sorts of kids" and inevitably led to "a lot of physical and verbal abuse." The disability organisation IHC warned in a statement that boot camps "will unfairly target young people with intellectual disability" as well as indigenous Māori youth.

In a vicious attack on Kidman, ACT Party public service spokesman Todd Stephenson called her post "deranged garbage" and demanded that the VUW Centre "move immediately to sack the extremist in their midst." He called on Luxon to defund the Centre, which was established with funding from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) under the previous Labour government, to conduct research into extremism following the 2019 terrorist attack by fascist gunman Brenton Tarrant in Christchurch.

The government's National Security Group executive director Bridget White told *Newshub* that the DPMC had "conveyed to the university... Professor Kidman's comments may bring the centre into disrepute."

VUW's deputy vice-chancellor research professor Margaret Hyland told *Stuff* that Kidman was being spoken to and "Some of the language used in Professor Kidman's social media post does not support an inclusive conversation." Kidman's academic profile has been removed from the university's website, without explanation.

In an interview with the right-wing *Platform* website's Sean Plunket, ACT leader David Seymour made clear that the attack on Kidman is meant to send a message to anyone receiving government funding that if they step out of line, they will be defunded. "As we put together a budget, I think some of these people may find that we can only afford to do so many things that really matter to the average person, and they've ruled themselves out of that," he said.

Plunket provocatively called for a "pogrom" against "fifth columnists" in the public sector. Seymour said he would not use the term, but agreed with the sentiment.

The government is seeking to slash between 6.5 and 7.5 percent from 39 government department budgets, threatening

thousands of jobs. Even as billions of dollars are allocated to expand the prisons, the police and the armed forces, deep cuts are being prepared to social welfare programs.

Seymour, as associate education minister, is in charge of cutting back the school lunches program, which provides meals to many schools in low-income areas. This takes place amid a cost-of-living crisis: according to World Vision, the price of 10 common food items in New Zealand soared by 56 percent in the past year, and charities are reporting a comparable surge in demand for food parcels.

The military boot camps, the first of which is set to open in mid-2024, are part of a broader agenda of the ruling class to boost the role of the armed forces in society. The government, backed by the opposition Labour Party, intends to increase military spending from about 1.4 to 2 percent of gross domestic product. It is also desperately trying to recruit more young people into the military, which has seen high attrition rates in recent years.

No criticism of this agenda can be tolerated, hence the hysterical response to Kidman and others.

Winston Peters, leader of NZ First, who is also the deputy prime minister and foreign minister, told *Waatea News* that the government was seeking to “do something to help youth turn their lives around, and the usual cacophony of clowns calling themselves experts say this won’t work. They’ve never talked to [Brian] Poananga. They’ve never talked to the Māori who were the heads of the military in this country.”

Poananga was the first Māori to be appointed as chief of general staff. Prior to that, he joined imperialist wars in Korea and Borneo and played a significant role in organising New Zealand troops to join the barbaric US-led war in Vietnam in 1967. This is the model presented for today’s youth, including Māori, amid an historic upsurge in imperialist violence.

The US and its allies are charging towards world war against Russia and China, in a reckless bid to resolve their economic crisis at the cost of millions of lives. As a minor imperialist power in the Pacific, and a member of the US-led Five Eyes intelligence network, New Zealand is completely integrated into the US war plans.

The previous Labour-Greens government sent more than 100 troops to Britain to help train Ukrainian conscripts for the US-NATO war against Russia. The current government has sent military personnel to the Middle East to assist the US-led bombing of Yemen, to stop Yemeni forces from disrupting supplies for Israel’s genocidal war against Gaza.

New Zealand is also cementing its alliance with Australia and the government is considering joining the AUKUS (Australia-UK-US) military pact, a major component of war preparations against China. The Labour Party—notwithstanding some hypocritical reservations expressed about AUKUS by some of its MPs—strengthened the US alliance and repeatedly expressed support for the warmongering against China.

While Labour criticises boot camps as ineffective—with police

spokesperson Ginny Anderson saying they will “produce fitter, faster, more well-connected young criminals”—the party has said nothing in defence of Kidman. Nor have the pro-capitalist trade unions, including the Tertiary Education Union, issued any statement defending her right to free speech.

The 2017–2023 Labour government, which included NZ First and the Greens, promoted militarism to Māori, through the construction of a World War II museum at Waitangi, and expanded police training programs in schools along with the Limited Service Volunteers—a military training scheme aimed at unemployed youth.

There is widespread opposition to war and militarism among young people, students and workers, as seen in the protests against the Gaza genocide, which have continued for more than five months. The entire political establishment is terrified of this development and is seeking to politically neutralise the protests, with the assistance of the middle class pseudo-left groups that fraudulently promote Labour and its allies, the Greens and Te Pati Māori, as an alternative to the National government.

At the same time, the attacks on Kidman and others are aimed at instilling fear and obedience, including on the campuses and among young people.

In order to resist these attacks, the anti-war movement must break from Labour and all the established parties and adopt an explicitly socialist program, aimed at putting an end to capitalism, which is the source of war and inequality. This includes defending democratic rights and free speech, and opposing the promotion of militarism in schools and universities, as well as the reactionary boot camps.

Above all, the fight against war must be fused with the struggles of the working class, which is facing an historic assault on its living standards, both in New Zealand and internationally. This is the only force that can put a stop to the genocide in Gaza and the developing third world war, in a rebellion against the pro-imperialist trade unions, by carrying out political strikes and other militant actions to shut down the production and shipment of weapons.



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