

# New Zealand government continues to stoke racism

Tom Peters  
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On March 17, New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters, leader of the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, delivered a tirade against the previous Labour Party-led government, which he ludicrously referred to as "far left." He accused Labour of embracing "woke cultural Marxism" and "race-based theory, where some people's DNA... made them somehow better than others."

While the highly-publicised "state of the nation" speech was directed against Labour, which led the government from 2017 to 2023, Peters' statements were centrally aimed at stoking animosity towards indigenous Māori, as well as immigrants. He described the current level of immigration as "uncontrollable" and "the most awful thing to happen" to New Zealand.

In his most inflammatory outburst, Peters compared the last government's co-governance arrangements, aimed at elevating the role of indigenous Māori tribes, to the racist policies of the Nazis. Peters linked the Labour Party's race-based identity politics to the racist statements by Labour's ally Te Pūti Māori that Māori have superior DNA. "I've seen that sort of philosophy before. I saw it in Nazi Germany, we all did," Peters declared.

The speech served to divert media attention from increasingly brutal austerity measures of the ruling coalition—the National Party, NZ First and ACT Party. With the economy in recession and living costs soaring, the government is slashing funding for public services, including school lunches and disability services, while giving billions of dollars in tax cuts to landlords and the rich. The government intends to sack thousands of public sector workers, while private companies are also making or preparing mass layoffs.

New Zealand's ruling class is deeply concerned that the social crisis—for which the Labour government and the current National-led government are equally responsible—is pushing workers to the left and fuelling hostility towards all the established political parties. The government's support for US imperialism against Russia and China, and the US-backed genocide in Gaza, is also radicalising workers and

young people; outside his speaking venue in Palmerston North, Peters was confronted by a group of protesters demanding an immediate end to Israel's war on Gaza.

In this context, the government is promoting xenophobia and racism in an effort to divide the working class and to steer social anger and frustration in the most reactionary directions.

NZ First was founded in 1993 with a platform based on opposition to Asian immigration. It is deeply unpopular and barely got into parliament last year with 6 percent of the votes. Despite this, NZ First and ACT (which got just 8.6 percent) are determining the far-right agenda for the coalition government, with their leaders Winston Peters and David Seymour in many ways playing a more prominent role than the National Party's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon.

Peters' speech sought to exploit widespread opposition to the Labour-Greens government's identity politics. Contrary to Peters' semi-coherent statements, Labour's policies were not "far left" let alone "Marxist," but were intended to benefit a small number of the elite Māori tribal capitalists while dividing the population based on race.

A particular target for NZ First is Labour's policy of Māori tribal "co-governance" of water infrastructure—the so-called Three Waters scheme—which would have given unelected tribal representatives a say in the running of valuable water resources. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained, this plan was anti-democratic, had nothing to do with strengthening infrastructure, and would have expanded the opportunities for private corporations, including those linked to the tribal elite, to profit from water.

In addition, the Labour-led government supported the creation of reserved Māori seats in local councils; created a new Māori Health Authority (now being disestablished by the National-led government); and defended the use of racial criteria to ration treatment in the public health system.

NZ First, ACT and National misrepresented these policies to imply that they gave *all* Māori a privileged status based on their ethnicity. In fact, the vast majority of Māori, who

are about 15 percent of the population, are among the poorest sections of the working class and face lower life expectancy, worse health outcomes and discrimination in the judicial system.

Peters' attempt to posture as a champion for equality is staggeringly hypocritical. He told Radio NZ on March 18: "The moment you argue that someone's got superior DNA to someone else, you're leading to awful racial consequences, and I'm opposed to it and have been all my career... I want everybody in this country, no matter whether [they've been] here for a thousand years or here yesterday legally, to be treated the same, equally, as one people."

In fact, NZ First's coalition agreement with National contains blatantly chauvinist policies, including the removal of Māori names from government departments and a ban on the use of Māori language by public servants.

NZ First also has a long record of demonising immigrants, particularly those from Asia and the Middle East. In an infamous speech in July 2005 entitled "The End of Tolerance," Peters said Muslim immigrants were like "the mythical Hydra, a serpent underbelly with multiple heads, capable of striking at any time and in any direction."

After the March 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack, in which the fascist Brenton Tarrant killed 51 Muslims at two mosques, Peters explicitly defended his 2005 speech. In 2019 and 2020, senior NZ First member Shane Jones delivered a series of tirades against Indian immigration, claiming—in a version of the racist "Great Replacement" theory—that they posed "a threat to our identity and status" because they diminished "our percentage [of the population] as Māori."

Following Peters' latest speech, Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins compared him to "a drunk uncle at a wedding... Using racism and anti-media rhetoric to divide our country."

However, NZ First's blatantly racist politics have not prevented the party from being included in four coalition governments over the past three decades, including Helen Clark's 2005-2008 Labour-led government and Jacinda Ardern's 2017-2020 Labour-led coalition government, which also included the Greens.

In 2017, Ardern appointed Peters as both deputy prime minister and foreign minister, and NZ First member Ron Mark as defence minister. NZ First played a leading role in integrating New Zealand more closely into the US-led military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region, in preparation for war against China—a role that the party continues to play in the current National-led government. Labour also adopted NZ First's demands for greater restrictions on immigration.

Since 2020, when NZ First failed to get enough votes to return to parliament, the party has attacked Labour for overseeing a crisis in public services, including crumbling

healthcare infrastructure and soaring living costs. In his latest speech, Peters pointed out that during the past six years of Labour-led governments, the number of children experiencing material hardship increased, despite Ardern's false promises to reduce child poverty. Working people turned decisively against Labour, which suffered a landslide defeat in last year's election.

NZ First, however, is entirely complicit in the Ardern government's anti-working class policies, including the transfer of billions of dollars to big businesses in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. NZ First is a fixture of capitalist politics in New Zealand, whose special role is to foster nationalism and militarism, and to deflect anger over deteriorating living standards onto immigrants, Māori and other minority groups including transgender people.

The divisive racial and gender politics promoted by Labour and its allies, including the Māori nationalists of Te Pāti Māori and various middle class pseudo-left organisations, plays directly into the hands of NZ First and ACT. In both cases, the aim is to cover up the widening class gulf between rich and poor—including within the Māori population itself—and to derail any unified struggle against austerity and war.

There can be no real fight against racism without a decisive political break from all the parliamentary parties, all of which uphold the capitalist system that is the root cause of social inequality, exploitation and ethnic and nationalist divisions. Working people of every background and nationality must unite, based on their shared class interests, in an international movement aimed at abolishing the profit system and establishing a socialist society.



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