

# Furore over New Zealand Green MP's criticisms of police

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Over recent weeks New Zealand Green Party MP Tamatha Paul has been embroiled in a political and media furore over comments she has made raising criticisms of the police.

The beat-up against Paul has been running alongside another right-wing campaign, led by the NZ First Party which is part of the governing coalition, making baseless insinuations, without a shred of evidence, that Green MP Benjamin Doyle is a paedophile.

The campaign is part of the sharp turn by political establishments internationally to the far right. Like the Trump administration in the US, New Zealand's government and compliant corporate media are attacking the purportedly "left wing" Greens to divert attention from soaring social inequality and the country's integration into US-led war preparations against China.

Paul, a former Wellington City councillor and Wellington Central MP since the 2023 elections, was a guest speaker at a panel hosted by the University of Canterbury's Greens and Peace Action ȧtautahi groups last month, discussing the topic "systemic issues in the police system" and "radical alternatives to policing."

In a TikTok video, Paul described this as an event "to talk about the police and what alternatives we could have to the police and what radical kind of police abolition could look like in real terms."

Paul said she was hearing "nothing but complaints" about police beat patrols. "Wellington people do not want to see police officers everywhere, for a lot of people it makes them feel less safe, because... it's that kind of constant visual presence that tells you that you might not be safe, therefore here's heaps of cops," she declared.

Paul added "all they do is walk around all day waiting for homeless people to leave their spot, packing their stuff up and throwing it in the bin." The increase in patrols was not changing anything as "crime hasn't decreased in Wellington city." The patrols were, she said, "taking

resource away from actual genuine family violence callouts and sexual violence callouts."

Paul said there were other "really good alternatives" to the patrols such as Māori wardens. She also said multidisciplinary teams could respond to incidents. "You could have paramedics and mental health specialists and they all go together and go to those callouts."

There was a ferocious push-back by political spokespersons and across social media. Police Minister Mark Mitchell said it was "pretty divorced from reality," claiming the comments were "along the lines of disestablishing the police," an inference Paul rejected. Mitchell posted on X that it was "alarming that the Green Party's position is that the Police should have less discretion."

The Sensible Sentencing Trust, a far-right lobby group that advocates for harsher prison sentences, funded billboards in Wellington and Auckland ridiculing the Greens' alleged call to "defund da police." The Trust is supported by the Act Party, another coalition partner.

Prime Minister Christopher Luxon called Paul's comments a "load of rubbish." The police, he said, "are out on the beat, but doing what they're asked to do, which is to keep the community safe. And I think she's on a completely different planet." Luxon said the Greens were "in La-La Land."

Opposition Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins also joined the pile-on. He bluntly declared, "Tamatha Paul's comments were ill-informed, were unwise, in fact, were stupid." Asked specifically what was stupid, Hipkins said "she was saying that people felt safer with seeing gang members, patched gang members on the street, compared to seeing police on the street."

Amid its onslaught on living standards, the National Party-led government last year began implementing a sweeping "law and order" agenda. This included outlawing the wearing of gang regalia in public,

promising 500 more police officers, an expanded prison building program and military-style “boot camps” for teenage offenders.

In the face of the attacks, Paul doubled down. “I’m not surprised that people are upset that a young brown woman is being critical of an institution that has let her and her communities down for a very long time,” she told RNZ. Paul declared her comments were “based on legitimate experiences of people that I am supposed to represent.”

Paul referenced two recent policing incidents, one in which an 11-year-old girl was handcuffed, taken to a mental health facility, and injected with antipsychotics after police misidentified her as a 20-year-old. Another case involved police use of force against a man who lost his life.

“My view is they [police] are not the best people to be responding to instances where people are in mental distress, in drug psychosis, those high level situations that require specialist response—that’s not your average police officer,” Paul explained.

Statistics show police have killed over 40 people since 1990, at a rate 11 times that of police in England and Wales, per head of population. Many victims had received mental health treatment and others had undiagnosed or untreated mental health issues.

New Zealand police do not carry firearms but can access weapons locked in patrol cars and at police stations. Newly appointed Police Commissioner Richard Chambers declared last week he is open to discussing the routine arming of officers, a move long advocated by the Police Association.

An “Understanding Police Delivery” report, co-produced last year by researchers and the police themselves, affirmed that Māori are seven times more likely than European New Zealanders to be victims of police violence. Research conducted in West Auckland showed that Māori and Pacific peoples overwhelmingly preferred other measures to increased police patrols.

While racism is certainly a factor, the main reason these groups are more likely to be targeted is that Māori and Pacific people are predominantly among the poorest and most oppressed layers of the working class.

Criminologist Roger Brooking wrote in the *Listener* that comments made by Paul in a TikTok video on March 6—in which she said the majority of people incarcerated in prisons were there for non-violent offences—were correct. Paul declared: “They are being punished for being disabled... for being poor, for being Māori... for the system that we have in this country.”

Brooking noted that of about 10,000 inmates, 4,000 were on remand “waiting for their cases to slowly work their way through the court system” and half of these would not deserve a prison sentence. Of 29,000 people imprisoned each year, most are “low risk” offenders, given a sentence of two years or less and released half-way through, he wrote.

Despite Paul’s limited criticisms, her contention that minor reforms and “alternatives” to the police are possible within the current system is bankrupt. The police, courts and prisons are a fundamental component of class oppression under capitalism. Police brutality is moreover a universal phenomenon. As governments lurch towards authoritarian and fascistic forms of rule, they rely ever more on these arms of the state.

The Greens, far from being “left wing,” are a pro-capitalist party of the political establishment acting on behalf of the more affluent social layers. While Paul presents herself as a “young brown woman” advocating for the poor, the Wellington electorate she represents is one of the wealthiest in the country.

Moreover, the Greens should be judged not on their pseudo-radical rhetoric but on the party’s actual record. The Greens were part of the 2017–2023 Labour Party-led coalition government, which also included the right-wing, anti-immigrant NZ First until 2020. That government significantly expanded police numbers, as well as police training programs in schools.

The role of the Greens is to present a phony “progressive” façade centred on identity politics of race and gender. This reactionary agenda is designed to trap workers and young people who are moving to the left and seeking an alternative perspective, in order to chain them to the forces responsible for the crimes of capitalism. To defend basic democratic rights the working class must take up a political struggle against the entire capitalist system and all its parties.



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