

A Different Kind of Power whitewashes Jacinda Ardern's right-wing, pro-imperialist government

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Few books have received as much global publicity and fawning praise from the corporate media as *A Different Kind of Power*, the memoir by New Zealand's former Labour Party Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, published in June by Penguin Books.

Ardern has been interviewed by major outlets in Britain, Australia, New Zealand and especially the United States. She has appeared on CNN, NPR, CBS, PBS, in the *New York Times*, on "The Late Show" with Stephen Colbert, and in a mind-numbing 70-minute interview with Oprah Winfrey.

The memoir's publication coincided with the release of an American-made documentary about Ardern, titled *Prime Minister*, produced by Magnolia Pictures, HBO and CNN.

Significant resources, in other words, have been devoted to glorifying Ardern and her years as prime minister from 2017 to 2023.

What is behind this phenomenon? Ardern is being elevated amid an historic crisis of the capitalist system, centred in the United States. The ruling class has brought the fascist Donald Trump back into power in order to escalate imperialist wars throughout the world while shredding democratic rights and eviscerating workers' living standards at home.

The Democrats, and similar bourgeois parties internationally, are terrified that these developments are fuelling the leftward movement of workers and layers of the middle class, especially young people, who are increasingly opposed to capitalism and all of its political representatives.

In this context, the embrace of Ardern is part of increasingly desperate efforts to reassure people that all is not lost, that the capitalist system can be saved if only it is given a kinder, more sympathetic face. As one of Ardern's interviewers, Katie Couric, said, "In a time of extreme disillusionment, she reminds us that optimism isn't naïve, in fact it's necessary."

According to Penguin's publicity material, Ardern "changed our assumptions about what a global leader can be" and her story provides "a model for anyone who has ever doubted themselves or has aspired to lead with compassion, conviction, and courage."

A Different Kind of Power reads like a mediocre Young Adult novel sprinkled with "self-help" platitudes, such as: "The difference between what we are and what we could be is the greatest waste;" "kindness has a power and strength that almost nothing else on this planet has;" "if you are thin-skinned and sensitive, if criticism cuts you in two, that is not weakness; it's empathy;" and so on.

It is structured as a story of feminist empowerment, designed to appeal to identity politics-obsessed upper-middle class layers. A clever, sensitive girl overcomes her self-doubt and enters politics; her earnestness and empathy result in her becoming prime minister and leading New Zealand through the trauma of the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack and the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, while striving to eliminate poverty.

Ardern accomplished all this, readers are constantly reminded, while having a baby, becoming only the second world leader in history to give birth in office.

This simplistic, feel-good narrative is based on numerous falsifications, distortions and glaring omissions. By any objective standard, Ardern led a pro-imperialist, right-wing government.

In 2022 and 2023 the working class turned sharply against Labour amid collapsing living standards, attacks on immigrants, and a surge in COVID-19 hospitalisations and deaths after the government's switch to a policy of mass infection. Ardern's election promises in 2017 to end child poverty and homelessness, to build 100,000 "affordable" houses, and to bring back free tertiary education, were exposed as completely fraudulent.

In October and November 2023, when Labour was still in power, it endorsed Israel's murderous bombardment of Gaza, and Chris Hipkins, Ardern's successor as prime minister, smeared opponents of the slaughter as antisemitic.

Ardern resigned as prime minister at the start of 2023 to pursue a career in the United States, where she has become a celebrity in Democratic Party circles. She is a fellow at Harvard University and also heads the Field Fellowship, a political leadership training program that is part of the Center for American Progress, a major imperialist think tank in Washington DC.

Ardern spoke during last year's Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in support of Kamala Harris's presidential campaign. She attempted to portray Harris as a symbol of "hopefulness" and "empathy."

Nothing exposes the cynical fraud of Ardern's "compassionate" persona more than her embrace of the Biden-Harris administration as it carried out the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, which is aimed at crushing opposition to imperialist control over the Middle East. There is no mention of this historic crime in her memoir.

Ardern's early career

Much of Ardern's book deals with her unremarkable, conservative upbringing, in a family with no connection whatsoever to the struggles of the working class. She was raised as a Mormon in the small rural towns of Murupara and Morrinsville. Her father, who she depicts as a role model, was a police officer.

Despite leaving the Mormon Church in her twenties—which was necessary to advance her political career—Ardern praises this deeply reactionary institution as "loving and kind, focused on service and

charity.” The church has intimate connections to far-right politicians in the US, and was estimated in 2023 to have a net worth of \$US265 billion, with huge investments in real estate and other business assets.

Ardern began campaigning for the Labour Party in 1999 while still in high school and was quickly identified as a potential candidate. She worked in parliament during the early 2000s as an assistant to Labour government ministers including Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff and Prime Minister Helen Clark.

Ardern states that the Clark government “achieved a lot,” citing identity politics-related initiatives—including the legalisation of same-sex civil unions—and small increases to the minimum wage and welfare, which did nothing fundamental to address poverty and social inequality.

The memoir falsely states that Labour “opposed” the criminal US-led invasion of Iraq. In September 2003 the government sent 61 army personnel to join the imperialist occupation of Iraq.

Ardern also doesn’t tell readers that New Zealand troops participated in the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. This had a dramatic impact on New Zealand politics, leading to the implosion of the pseudo-left Alliance party, Labour’s coalition partner, after its MPs voted in favour of joining the war.

As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand has consistently backed US wars throughout the world, in exchange for Washington’s support for its own neo-colonial domination over parts of the Pacific region. For two decades, successive governments, including Ardern’s, redeployed troops to Iraq and Afghanistan.

In 2006 Ardern moved to London. She writes casually that she “got a job as a policy adviser in a unit of the Cabinet Office called the Better Regulation Executive,” that is, in the office of UK Prime Minister Tony Blair. Ardern says next to nothing about this period, when she worked for one of the chief war criminals responsible for the destruction of Iraq.

In 2008, in response to the global financial crisis, businesses in New Zealand began making mass layoffs. The Clark government protected the profits of the banks and implemented austerity measures, provoking significant strikes, including by doctors and truck drivers. Labour lost the election that year, but Ardern entered parliament, becoming the youngest sitting MP at the age of 27, after being given a high placement on the party list. She was being groomed for a prominent role.

The 2017 election: Ardern’s coalition with the far-right NZ First

After nine years in opposition, Labour remained deeply discredited in the eyes of workers, as a party of big business and imperialist war, just like the National Party-led government. Labour was on-track for a fourth consecutive election defeat when Ardern was catapulted into the leadership in 2017 in a desperate attempt to avoid a complete electoral wipeout.

Ardern was heavily promoted by the media, which coined the term “Jacindamania” (echoing the “Obamamania” of 2008). Her election campaign was backed by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organisation and Socialist Aotearoa, which made baseless claims that Labour was turning to the left and presented Ardern’s election pledges as good coin.

Only the Socialist Equality Group warned that Ardern’s rhetoric could not be trusted and that a Labour-led government would accelerate the assault on the working class, including immigrants, and strengthen New Zealand’s alliance with US imperialism.

The manufactured enthusiasm for Ardern had a limited effect, with Labour getting just under 37 percent of the votes on September 23—less than the National Party. Neither of the major parties was in a position to

govern alone. Both spent weeks in negotiations with the right-wing nationalist New Zealand First Party, which ultimately chose to form a coalition government with Labour and the Greens.

Ardern writes affectionately about NZ First, calling it a “populist, centrist party” whose leader Winston Peters “was a huge political personality—charismatic and blunt, with a reputation for being a maverick.” She adds that her grandmother “definitely had a soft spot for him.”

NZ First was founded in 1993 on an explicitly anti-immigrant platform. Peters was well-known for racist demonisation of Muslims, as well as Asian and Pacific island immigrants.

Ardern writes that “New Zealand First had a reputation for being harsh on migrant communities, and this was not a message I wanted to see reinforced through any kind of concession.”

The Labour Party, however, repeatedly joined NZ First in scapegoating migrants, especially Chinese people, for overstretched public services and the housing crisis. The Ardern government imposed increasingly brutal anti-immigrant measures, in line with NZ First’s demands. It froze the processing of thousands of residency applications; prevented visa-holders from returning to NZ during the pandemic; imposed income-based restrictions on new migrants; kicked unemployed migrants off welfare; and oversaw brutal “dawn raids” to detain and deport so-called “overstayers.” In 2022, after migrants protested against such policies, the state forced the shutdown of the popular Migrants NZ Facebook group.

The days leading up to the 2017 election were dominated by a vicious anti-China campaign, led by pro-Washington academic Anne-Marie Brady and backed by NZ First, as well as the Labour-aligned *Daily Blog*. Without any evidence, Brady accused National Party MP Jian Yang of being a Chinese spy, while the *Daily Blog* railed against National’s encouragement of close business ties with China.

In her retelling of events, Ardern mentions none of this. She claims to have had no foreknowledge that Peters would form a coalition with Labour until he publicly announced his choice on October 19. Peters announced his decision with the warning that capitalism was being discredited and that it “must regain its human face.”

Ardern is silent about the most important, perhaps decisive, episode during the coalition talks, when US ambassador Scott Brown publicly made clear that Washington preferred a Labour-NZ First coalition government. In extraordinary statements to the media, Brown criticised the incumbent National Party government for being too soft on China and for failing to back President Trump’s threats to annihilate North Korea.

The Ardern government aligned New Zealand more closely with US warmongering. It declared Russia and China the main “threats” to global stability, and supported a stronger US military presence in the Pacific. In 2022, Labour sent New Zealand troops to the UK to train Ukrainian conscripts for the US-NATO war against Russia.

Despite NZ First getting just 7.2 percent of the votes, its leader Peters was made deputy prime minister and foreign minister, while NZ First deputy leader Ron Mark became the defence minister. The Greens also played a significant role, working closely with NZ First to produce a document justifying a significant increase in military spending.

The 2019 Christchurch terror attack

On March 15, 2019 the fascist Brenton Tarrant massacred 51 people and injured dozens more at two Christchurch mosques. It was the worst mass shooting in New Zealand’s history and horrified the entire world. Many questions remain about how Tarrant was able to carry out the attack and why state agencies failed to act on numerous warnings about his activities

and the dangers to the Muslim community.

Ardern gives a superficial account focusing on her own response on March 15 and her meetings with the victims' families, which was celebrated by the corporate media internationally as evidence of her kindness and empathy.

At one point she wonders whether Tarrant could have been stopped, but concludes that this was impossible: "It had all happened so fast, everyone responding exactly as they should, and it still hadn't been enough."

In fact, Tarrant had been reported to police in Australia for making death threats on social media. In New Zealand, a member of the public warned police about anti-Muslim comments he overheard at the gun club where Tarrant was a member. Tarrant published numerous comments online about his intentions, more than a year before the attack. He had links with Australian fascists who were monitored by police and intelligence agencies, as well as far-right networks internationally.

Despite all this, a royal commission of inquiry concluded that there was no way Tarrant's attack could have been prevented. The inquiry was a whitewash of the state agencies. It was held in secret and most of its evidence, including statements from police, security agencies and Tarrant himself, has not been made public.

Emphasizing Tarrant's Australian nationality, Ardern writes: "he'd moved to New Zealand—he chose us—because he knew that New Zealand openly welcomed people of all faiths. He wanted to destroy that. He wanted us to turn against one another. So, he came here, and he attacked our Muslim community."

This depiction of New Zealand as a society free from discrimination and prejudice is a fantasy. For decades, successive governments stoked anti-Muslim sentiment to justify New Zealand's participation in the illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

NZ First leader Winston Peters—Ardern's deputy PM—infamously declared in a 2005 speech entitled "The End of Tolerance" that the Muslim community had a "militant underbelly... like the mythical Hydra, a serpent underbelly with multiple heads, capable of striking at any time and in any direction."

NZ First ramped up its anti-immigrant demagoguery following the Christchurch attack, echoing some of Tarrant's statements. All of this was ignored in the media's adulation of Ardern.

Ardern recounts how, in a phone call with President Trump after the March 15 attack, she absurdly asked him to "show sympathy and love for all Muslim communities." She does not mention that Trump was a major inspiration for Tarrant, whose manifesto hailed him as a "symbol of white renewal." Ardern's book does not contain a single reference to Trump's mass deportations and other fascist policies.

The state censor made it illegal to possess or distribute Tarrant's manifesto, thereby suppressing public discussion of his fascist views and their similarity to those of Trump and far-right parties like NZ First. Ardern urged the media not to report on Tarrant's views and declared that she would never say his name.

The Ardern government's main response to the Christchurch attack was to ban the military-style rifles used by Tarrant and to push for greater internet censorship. Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron established the Christchurch Call to Action, an initiative supported by numerous governments and tech and social media companies, she says, "to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online."

Its real aim was to provide additional tools to clamp down on political opposition and dissent, as governments throughout the world lurched towards dictatorship and imperialist war. It is not the far-right, but left-wing, socialist and anti-war publications, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, which are facing censorship by Google, X and Meta—all signatories to the Christchurch Call.

Ardern and the COVID-19 pandemic

In a 337-page book, Ardern devotes fewer than 30 pages to her government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a deeply dishonest account.

Describing how the government decided to implement a lockdown of schools and workplaces in late March 2020, Ardern says she was guided by experts including her chief science advisor Juliet Gerrard and Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield. "Every decision was hard," she says. "We moved as quickly and decisively as we could, knowing if we got it wrong, the virus could get away on us."

In fact, the decisive factor that triggered the lockdown was the ruling elite's fear of an uncontrollable movement in the working class. In parts of the United States and Europe thousands of workers had walked off the job to protest the state's refusal to stop the spread of COVID. They did so in defiance of the pro-capitalist unions.

In New Zealand, tens of thousands of healthcare workers and others signed a petition demanding an immediate lockdown. This was organised independently of the union bureaucracy, which opposed school closures and downplayed the risks of COVID.

The nationwide lockdown was successful: within a few weeks transmission of COVID-19 dropped to zero in New Zealand and daily life largely returned to normal, with the border closed and quarantine measures in place for returning residents. Because of this, Labour was re-elected in 2020 with 50 percent of the vote. Near the end of that year, while hundreds of thousands of people had died around the world, there were only 25 COVID deaths in New Zealand, "and I knew the stories and circumstances of almost all of them," Ardern says.

The policies adopted in New Zealand, China, and to some extent Australia and other countries in South-East Asia, proved that COVID could be completely eliminated. Had the same strategy been implemented on a global scale, the pandemic would have ended in a few months. Such a strategy, however, was incompatible with the demands of the profit system.

Ardern provides no explanation for her government's decision, in late 2021, to suddenly abandon its "zero COVID" policy. She merely states that by October, amid an outbreak in Auckland, "I increasingly believed that this time we would not stamp out Covid."

This belief was not backed by science. Against the advice of some of its own public health advisors, the government repeatedly relaxed the temporary lockdown in the largest city, allowing the highly infectious Delta variant to get out of control.

The government was acting on the demands of the corporate media for an end to lockdowns and for New Zealand to follow the US and Europe in allowing COVID to spread. This plan—which placed profit ahead of the lives and health of workers—was implemented with the crucial support of the trade unions, which prevented any organised opposition to the dismantling of public health measures.

From the beginning, in response to the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the Ardern government prioritised the interests of the corporate and financial elite. Like governments in the US and internationally, it transferred tens of billions of dollars to the rich. Property values and corporate and bank profits soared as businesses received bailouts, subsidies and tax concessions, and the Reserve Bank distributed billions more through quantitative easing measures.

Ardern repeats the lies that the Omicron variant, which became dominant in 2022, was "less lethal" than Delta and that, with vaccination, the population could "adjust to our new normal: living with Covid." Vaccines, while essential to minimise the effects of the coronavirus, do not prevent transmission and significant levels of severe illness.

Commenting on the far-right, anti-vaccination protesters who camped

on parliament's lawn in Wellington for three weeks in February 2022, Ardern states: "It was a challenge the world over—people now couldn't agree on what was fact and what was fiction." The truth is that her government had emboldened the extreme right by bowing to the demands to replace the elimination policy with a policy of mass infection.

Ardern does not explain what "living with COVID" actually meant. The catastrophic spread of COVID-19 in 2022 overwhelmed the country's grossly under-resourced public health system. By the end of July, New Zealand's total deaths from COVID had risen to 2,000, with more deaths per million on a weekly basis than any other country. To date, there have been more than 4,600 total COVID deaths, and thousands more people are suffering from debilitating Long COVID.

Ardern's resignation

A Different Kind of Power provides no real explanation for Ardern's resignation as prime minister on January 19, 2023, at the start of an election year. She refers lamely to "sleepless nights" and feeling "always stressed" and worn out. She claims her decision was unrelated to Labour's declining support, that "polling at the time had just a few points between us and our opposition" and she believed Labour could still win.

This is disingenuous. Of the 42 polls taken during 2022, listed on Wikipedia, three-quarters had the Labour Party behind the opposition National Party. Labour was presiding over soaring living costs, a worsening housing crisis, and the public health disaster fuelled by the out-of-control spread of COVID-19.

Ardern's promises of a "kinder" government had been discredited. To cite one further example: Ardern writes that in 2018 she launched a "child poverty reduction law, which set targets to halve child poverty over the next ten years... to ensure that every New Zealand child could live in a home where they were safe and loved and had what they needed to thrive." Ardern made herself the Minister for Child Poverty Reduction.

Ardern neglects to inform her readers that from 2017 to 2023, the number of children living in material hardship—in families without access to basic necessities—increased by 6.4 percent from 135,000 to 143,700 (about 1 in 8 children).

In the absence of a socialist alternative, disillusionment and anger with the Labour government's right-wing policies paved the way for the electoral victory of the conservative National Party and its extreme right-wing allies, the libertarian ACT Party and NZ First. The latter had failed to return to parliament in the 2020 election, but scraped back in in 2023 with just over 6 percent of the votes and was welcomed into the National-led coalition.

ACT and NZ First, both extremely unpopular parties, are setting the agenda for the government, which is slashing taxes for the rich and presiding over soaring unemployment. About half a million people, one in 10, are relying on food banks to survive, and more than 100,000 people are severely housing deprived.

With the Labour Party's support, the government intends to double spending on the military, to bolster New Zealand's alliance with US imperialism and join the insane preparations for world war. This will be funded with even deeper cuts to public healthcare and other vital services.

Political lessons must be drawn from these experiences. The record of the Ardern government exposes the utterly right-wing character of the Labour Party and the political bankruptcy of all those who present Labour as a "lesser evil," including the Greens, the union apparatus, and pseudo-left organisations.

This embrace of Ardern by the "liberal" establishment in the US and internationally is a warning to the working class. As the capitalist crisis

drives the imperialist powers towards war and fascism, Ardern's Field Fellowship program is training politicians in the US and Europe to use the rhetoric of "kindness" and "pragmatic idealism" to disguise their anti-working class, pro-imperialist agendas.

Workers and young people cannot allow themselves to be duped by such phrase mongering. The only way to stop the descent into barbarism is for the working class to establish its complete political independence from all capitalist parties and to take up the fight for international socialism.

This means joining the International Committee of the Fourth International and, in New Zealand, the Socialist Equality Group, which is fighting to build a section of the Trotskyist movement.



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