

New Zealand government snubs Cook Islands' 60th anniversary celebration

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11 August 2025

In a clear and deliberate diplomatic snub, the New Zealand government boycotted celebrations in the Cook Islands on August 4 marking 60 years of “self-government in free association with New Zealand.” Constitution Day, or Te Maeva Nui, is held annually to recognise the Pacific nation’s adoption of its constitution, which established formal self-government.

It was the first time in recent history that senior NZ government politicians failed to attend such an event. Governor-General Cindy Kiro was sent in their place. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon made an official visit to Papua New Guinea, while Foreign Minister Winston Peters lectured Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown from Auckland about the Cooks’ supposed obligations to New Zealand.

New Zealand maintains neo-colonial domination over the Cook Islands as one of its so-called “Realm” countries, along with Niue and Tokelau. While the Cooks, with a population of just 15,000, has limited self-government, Wellington provides oversight in foreign affairs and defence. Like all the impoverished countries of the region, it depends on international aid and loans, of which New Zealand is the principal contributor.

In February, New Zealand’s political and media establishment erupted in outrage over a decision by the Cook Islands government to sign a wide-ranging strategic partnership agreement with China without consulting Wellington. Brown agreed to collaborate with Beijing on economic development, including fisheries, infrastructure and potentially undersea minerals. The two countries also agreed to increase diplomatic relations, and to support each other’s membership of multilateral bodies.

Peters declared that Brown had flouted the “responsibilities and obligations” under the “free association” arrangement, which he declared required the Cook Islands to consult with the NZ government before making major foreign policy and security-related decisions.

In 2001, New Zealand and the Cook Islands signed a Joint Centenary Declaration, which broadly states that the two

governments must “consult regularly on defence and security issues.” However, the declaration explicitly affirms the Cook Islands’ right to enter independently into “treaties and other international agreements” with any government or international and regional organisations.

The near six-month breakdown in relations points to the extremely sharp geopolitical tensions in the Pacific, created by the advanced US-led preparations for war against China. The ruling classes in New Zealand and Australia—both imperialist allies of the US—are seeking to block China’s growing economic and diplomatic influence in the region and are presenting Beijing in increasingly hysterical terms as a military threat.

The fragile and impoverished Pacific Island states—including Samoa, Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu—are increasingly turning to Beijing for financial support.

In a speech in July, Brown defended the Cook Islands’ strategic partnership with China, citing the need for “diverse” international partners to fund a \$NZ650 million infrastructure plan that New Zealand alone could not support. “If we can’t get help from NZ, we will go somewhere else,” he stated.

New Zealand’s belligerent confrontation with the Cook Islands has become increasingly bitter. Wellington has halted nearly \$NZ20 million (\$US11 million) in funding to the territory, with a spokesperson for Peters declaring in June that new funding will not be considered “until the Cook Islands government takes concrete steps to repair the relationship and restore trust.”

Brown told his parliament that NZ’s punitive decision would impact health, education and infrastructure. “It also disrupts long-term planning and the sustainability of vital public services,” and would “harm the country’s most vulnerable citizens,” he said.

Speaking to a Pacific audience at a Constitution Day event in Auckland, Peters delivered a menacing message. Under the “free association” model, he declared, Cook Islanders retained New Zealand citizenship and passports but this

entailed a “degree of New Zealand involvement in Cook Islands affairs.”

This meant, he continued, that “if the Cook Islands government passed laws or took actions that were offensive to New Zealand’s governing norms, or were injurious to Cook Islanders, then New Zealand had a duty to act on behalf of its citizens in the Cook Islands.” He did not elaborate on what other action might be taken against the Brown government, in addition to the cutting off of funding.

Peters repeated earlier assertions that if the Cooks wanted full independence, New Zealand “wouldn’t stand in the way.” A NZ Foreign Affairs spokesperson last month challenged Brown, telling the *Cook Islands News* that “he ought to respect the Cook Islands people enough to test their views and call a referendum on independence from New Zealand.”

Peters is likely seeking to engineer a change of government on, or before, elections due next year. A right-wing populist, Peters is aware that most Cook Islanders, including 80,000 who live in New Zealand, regard NZ citizenship as a basic right.

The opposition Cook Islands United Party is using the dispute with NZ to stir up discontent with the Brown government. Party leader Teariki Heather has flatly declared: “We should never forget the hand that has fed us all these years.” So far, Brown has faced down the opposition, having defeated a no-confidence vote in February by 13 votes to nine.

Speaking at the official Constitution Day ceremony, Brown rejected talk of a “strategic shift,” insisting that the Cook Islands had “no intention of leaving its special relationship with New Zealand.” He played down the rift as “a bump in the road,” adding that the bilateral relationship is “too strong that even disagreeing governments will not break it.”

More pointedly, former Cook Islands prime minister and ex-secretary general of the Pacific Islands Forum, Henry Puna, told media it was “improper” for Wellington to involve itself in the “domestic affairs” of the Cook Islands. Puna, now president of Brown’s Cook Islands Party, condemned NZ’s withdrawal of aid as like being “whipped or beaten with a broomstick because we’ve been misbehaving.”

China’s ambassador to New Zealand, Wang Xiaolong, meanwhile personally delivered President Xi Jinping’s congratulations. Wang stated that he and Brown reviewed progress on the partnership deal, including on marine economy, seabed minerals research, funding for a vital purpose-built inter-island passenger/cargo ship and the donation of e-buses, e-motorbikes and solar lighting to help address the threat of climate change.

New Zealand’s ruling elite is not concerned about the needs of the impoverished Cook Islands people. The median income on the main island of Rarotonga was just \$NZ18,000 in 2021, and in the outer islands a mere \$11,000 a year. The country was devastated by its isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020?22.

The Labour Party has not opposed the funding freeze. Pacific spokesperson Carmel Sepuloni wrote on Facebook that “the Cook Islands signing the agreement with China was out of step with our free association agreement.”

Te P?ti M?ori (M?ori Party) co-leaders Debbie Ngarewa-Packer and Rawiri Waititi attended the Rarotonga celebrations. In a convoluted statement, they said they stood for “a sovereign Pacific demilitarised, decolonised, and determined.” Their presence was “not an endorsement of any government.”

In fact, Ngarewa-Packer had previously attended an anti-Brown protest called by the opposition Cook Islands United Party. Te P?ti M?ori has no objection to New Zealand’s imperialist operations in the Pacific, so long as the M?ori business elites it represents are involved in decision-making.

Declaring that the interests of the New Zealand imperialism were at stake, *New Zealand Herald* correspondent Audrey Young wrote last week that it was “perfectly in order” for Luxon and Peters to boycott the celebrations. She declared that NZ’s influence within the Pacific was “pivotal” to its global reputation. “To have the leader of your closest Pacific partner thumb his nose at New Zealand was not just a disagreement; it was a humiliation,” she wrote.

The newspaper’s right-wing columnist Matthew Hooton earlier this year suggested deploying New Zealand troops to the Cook Islands in a regime change operation, should the Brown government refuse to fall into line.



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