

New Zealand politicians express outrage over Trump's Afghanistan accusations

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In a televised interview on January 23, US President Donald Trump denigrated NATO allies by claiming that, while they “sent some troops to Afghanistan,” these forces “stayed a little back” from the front lines, casting doubt on whether the alliance would stand by the US in a future war. The interview was broadcast amid escalating tensions with Europe over Trump’s bald attempts to annex Greenland.

The comments provoked a wave of outrage among Washington’s traditional partners, particularly in Britain and Europe, where governments and sections of the military rushed to defend their record over the two decades of occupation. UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer rebuked Trump’s “insulting and frankly appalling” remarks and called for an apology.

According to media reports, following an intervention by the UK’s King Charles via “appropriate back channels,” Trump backtracked, declaring that UK troops were “among the greatest of all warriors” and acknowledged that 457 British service personnel were killed in the conflict.

The uproar resonated in New Zealand, which participated as a US ally in the invasion and 20-year occupation of Afghanistan. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon called Trump’s comments “incredibly disrespectful and wrong,” noting that with 3,500 Defence Force (NZDF) personnel deployed, and 10 combat deaths, NZ was among the nations which contributed most. Defence Minister Judith Collins declared that NZ “took great pride” in the professionalism, courage and commitment of the NZDF operating “alongside our partners” in “challenging and often dangerous conditions.”

The invasion was an illegal war of conquest aimed at securing US domination over a strategically important area in Central Asia. New Zealand’s Labour-led coalition government—which included the pseudo-left Alliance

Party—was among the first to join the invasion in 2001, in a bid to fully restore relations with the US following the Labour-led “anti-nuclear” posturing in the 1980s, and as a quid-pro-quo for Washington’s endorsement of its own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific.

The brutal occupation of the impoverished country was a criminal enterprise from the start that ensured the virtual destruction of an entire society. Tens of thousands of civilians were killed. Drone strikes, bombings, assassinations and torture were routinely used to instill terror in the population.

The NZ special forces (SAS), which received a rare unit citation from US President George W. Bush, was complicit in serious war crimes. A commission of inquiry into Operation Burnham, a night-time raid on a village by the SAS in 2010, confirmed that a child and at least seven other people were killed. In 2020, the then-Labour government’s Attorney-General David Parker defended the killings, saying they were “undesirable” but “legal.”

The current furore around the deployment has centred on the blunt refusal of Foreign Minister Winston Peters to join the condemnation of Trump’s comments. Peters, leader of the right-wing populist NZ First Party in the ruling coalition, has avoided any criticism of Trump’s actions, including the US-Israeli genocide in Gaza, illegal takeover of Venezuela and threats against Greenland and Iran. In parliament last week, Peters tacitly endorsed the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, labelling him a “terrorist” and “appalling for his own people.”

The strident defence of the NZDF’s role in Afghanistan is being led by the opposition Labour Party, which is seeking to defend its own contemptible record and steer widespread opposition to the government in a right-wing, “patriotic” and militarist direction.

Leader Chris Hipkins said Trump’s comments were “absolutely offensive.” NZ troops had “contributed

enormously” in Afghanistan and other theatres, he said, and “they deserve to be respected for that.” On Peters, Hipkins declared: “I’m absolutely astounded that our foreign minister, who describes himself as a patriot, hasn’t lifted a finger to defend our troops.”

A particularly foul role in glorifying the illegal neo-colonial war has been played by Phil Goff, a longtime party apparatchik and Labour’s Foreign Minister and Defence Minister in the period 1999–2005. Goff played a key role overseeing the Afghanistan deployment, along with New Zealand’s imperialist military and police interventions in the Solomon Islands and East Timor (Timor-Leste).

In a Facebook post, Goff lambasted Peters, saying his silence “has been deafening.” Goff condemned Trump’s comments as “disgraceful” and an “affront” to NZ’s “sacrifice.” He denounced the US president as having “dodged the draft five times,” with no right to belittle those who “came to the assistance of the US after 9/11.” He invoked Victoria Cross recipient Willie Apiata, a member of the SAS who was “behind the front line when he won his VC, deep in enemy territory.”

Goff emphasised that he had attended funerals of several NZDF personnel killed in Afghanistan, including that of his own nephew, and “saw the grief and pain of their loved ones.” Yet his criticism of Trump was framed entirely within the false narrative that NZ’s intervention was a selfless act of “peacekeeping” aimed at combatting terrorism. He expressed no remorse over the fate of the real victims, the Afghani population.

Goff repeated the charges in numerous media interviews. The “progressive” BHN podcast posted a gushing interview with him on January 27. Goff attacked the government for not being sufficiently patriotic and pro-war, while the two BHN podcasters nodded and agreed with his nationalist, militarist tirade.

Martyn Bradbury, editor of the pro-Labour and Greens *Daily Blog*, also expressed outrage about “Trump smearing the honour of those we lost in Afghanistan” and declared “Phil Goff has more mana [honour] in his little finger than the entire NZ First Party combined.”

The fact that the cheerleaders for Labour and the Greens are beginning the year by embracing Goff, ahead of an election in November, is notable. While they have criticised the Gaza genocide, their defence of the war in Afghanistan demonstrates that they have no principled opposition to imperialism.

Labour agrees with the current government’s decision to double military spending and recruitment, which is

aimed at strengthening the alliance with the US and military ties with NATO. Both major parties aim to integrate New Zealand further into the war against Russia and far-advanced US preparations for war with China.

Goff speaks for a now wealthy upper middle-class layer that entered politics protesting the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s but then shifted to the right. As mayor of Auckland (2016–22) and then high commissioner to London (2023–25), Goff vociferously supported the US-NATO war against Russia. He posted numerous photos on social media of his visit to NZ troops in the UK training Ukrainian conscripts. Many of his posts were signed off with the fascist slogan “Slava Ukraini!”

In March 2025, Peters sacked Goff as high commissioner for publicly criticising Trump’s negotiations with Russia to reach a ceasefire in Ukraine.

With the emergence of open divisions between the US and the NATO imperialist powers, and widespread anti-war sentiment in the NZ population, the Labour Party is verbally distancing itself from the Trump administration, while continuing to support the alliance with the US.

Hipkins has criticised the government for considering joining Trump’s so-called Board of Peace, which is intended to rule over Gaza, calling the idea “a disgrace.” Speaking to Radio NZ on January 27, he also praised the speech by Canada’s Prime Minister Mark Carney at Davos, which called on small and middle imperialist powers to work together and assert their interests, including against the US.

But the political establishment’s glorification of the military and silence on the criminality of the Afghanistan war underscore the fact that there is no anti-war tendency in parliament or the ruling class. Whatever party leads the government following this year’s election will continue the record military build-up, in preparation for dragging the country and the working class into new and even more devastating wars.



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