

Prominent New Zealand entertainer Lynda Topp denounces government's military budget

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On stage at New Zealand's Aotearoa Music Awards on May 28, entertainer Dame Lynda Topp issued a powerful rebuke of the National Party-led government's soaring defence budget compared with its paltry arts funding.

Speaking just days after the death from cancer of her twin sister and fellow performer Jools, the 68-year-old directly challenged Arts Minister Paul Goldsmith who was in the audience. In a blistering speech, Lynda said that the government's budget, released the same day, did not allocate any money for music, while earmarking billions for defence.

The coalition government, which includes the far-right ACT and NZ First, and the opposition Labour Party have agreed to double the military budget from 1 to 2 percent of GDP. This is only the beginning. US Secretary of War Pete Hegseth has demanded that NZ and other allies spend at least 3.5 percent of GDP on the military, as part of US-led war preparations against China.

The militarisation of society is being funded with sweeping attacks on public services, thousands of job cuts, an increase in student fees and cuts to welfare benefits. The 2026 budget also cuts \$27 million from arts and cultural agencies over 4 years.

Lynda Topp's speech was a significant intervention by one of the country's most prominent entertainers. After initially taking up busking, the Topp Twins became a celebrated folk-singing and comedy duo known for their country music influences and comedic characters.

The duo, who were openly gay at a time when homosexuality was still against the law in the early 1980s, have since won numerous awards, including induction into the NZ Music Hall of Fame. A 2009 documentary, *The Topp Twins: Untouchable Girls*, won the Audience Award at the Toronto International Film Festival.

At last month's music awards ceremony, Topp took the

microphone following a tribute performance by musician Tami Neilson and singer-songwriter Jenny Mitchell, eliciting loud cheering and clapping from the audience when she blasted the government.

"When we performed 40 years ago there were hundreds of venues in this country. We played in cafes and pubs, rural halls, woolsheds, house parties, and now we've lost so many of those places for young artists to perform in," Topp declared.

She continued: "We need support for artists in this country, we need a government that says the arts is more important than a defence budget. Way more! I see young artists struggling not because they've got a gig on Friday night—because they are trying to put through some sort of crazy mother****ing arts submission to get a few lousy dollars from the government. This is not fair!"

Addressing Goldsmith she declared, "We are not defined by a government. We are defined by people and our culture and our art." She noted: "I did a speed read on the budget this afternoon, there doesn't appear to be any money for music, but in big, big letters in the top of the news: \$2.1 billion for defence. What the f****!" The total defence budget is now \$4.29 billion.

Topp received a roar of laughter and a standing ovation after questioning how the increase in the defence budget would help in the event of an invasion, saying "passionate musicians" could do more on the battlefield than the country's defence force.

Goldsmith later dismissed Linda's criticisms as the "same old cliché" and said he expected artists to critique "centre-right" governments. In response, Topp told Radio NZ (RNZ) on June 2 the arts sector was "not a luxury," and contributes some 4.2 percent of GDP, \$17.5 billion, while the government only commits 0.1 percent of GDP in arts funding.

Contrasting the arts with defence, she declared: “One of those things bring joy and happiness, the other brings death and destruction. Which side do you want to be on?” Challenged by interviewer Lisa Owen, who cited “humanitarian” work supposedly carried out by the defence force, Topp posed the question: “But who exactly is our enemy?”

She denounced as “extreme” a recent suggestion by Defence Minister Chris Penk that his government would be open to having “a discussion” on NZ’s long-standing anti-nuclear policy, which bars nuclear-powered vessels from entering the country. The Topp Twins campaigned for the “nuclear free” policy in the 1980s.

Tens of thousands of people watched and shared the video of Topp’s speech on social media and made supportive comments. It tapped into widespread opposition to war, including the genocide in Gaza and the criminal US-Israeli war against Iran.

Leila, writing on RNZ’s Facebook page, called the level of defence spending “a massive transfer of wealth to the weapons industry whilst people are literally suffering.... We need investment in people. Not propping up the obscenely rich so they can play war games.”

Amalli called for money to go “towards something more positive that’s going to encourage our people and inspire people instead of getting ready for a war we don’t even want.”

Simone said it was “A pity to see arts funding slashed—it speaks of a certain narrow mind that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.”

Wayne, a worker on the Cook Strait ferries wrote: “Ironically, if we want to participate in the arts, or watch a concert, we usually have to pay, but we have war thrust into our living rooms, by way of biased TV news reports, every night.”

Meanwhile a vicious backlash was fomented by right-wing commentators, attacking Lynda Topp personally and the entire concept of public funding for the arts. Host of the far-right Platform NZ podcast, Sean Plunket, denounced her as an “ungrateful hua”—an insult in Māori approximating to “boiled head.”

Plunket, whose online operation has been funded by a multi-millionaire private benefactor, declared that “good artists” are not “welfare beneficiaries.” Artists seeking public funding, he announced, was equivalent to homeless people sitting outside cash machines demanding money.

Right-wing blogger Ani O’Brien joined in the pile-on, declaring: “occasionally you meet a musician with a good grasp of politics, but for the most part you don’t want to

hear their political opinions.”

Serious artists and musicians cannot remain indifferent to the deepening crises of social inequality, poverty, genocide and ever-expanding wars. Musicians such as Bruce Springsteen, Macklemore and Roger Waters and others have gained a popular response from audiences worldwide who are seeking expressions of opposition sentiment. Philistines who call for politics to be kept out of music have had their day.

In her speech to the music awards, Topp said she hoped that “future governments” would make different choices. The opposition Labour Party, however, has made no commitment to reverse the National-led government’s cuts to arts funding—or any of its austerity measures—while fully supporting the militarisation of the country and the alliance with US imperialism. The anti-war sentiments expressed by Topp find no expression in the established political parties.

The assault on public arts funding has its own agenda which is ideological, not primarily fiscal. The real motive is fear. As WSWS Arts editor David Walsh has argued, the ruling elite “is frightened by everything it cannot control, cannot understand, everything that does not serve the interests of the market. It is instinctively hostile... to truthful and penetrating depictions of life.”

The questions of public arts funding and escalating militarism are tied together as fundamental class questions. As Walsh notes, a ruling class that presides over permanent war, staggering social inequality, and continuous attacks on democratic rights cannot inspire serious art—it can only inspire disgust. The artist who honestly portrays this society must inevitably be driven toward opposition—and socialist conclusions.



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