NZ foreign minister tells Chinese-born MP: “Go back to your own country”

Tom Peters
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In his latest racist provocation, New Zealand foreign minister Winston Peters last week unleashed a tirade against Chinese-born Green Party MP Lawrence Xu-Nan, telling him to “go back to your own country.”

Peters leads the right-wing nationalist NZ First Party, which is part of the National Party-led coalition government and is making anti-immigrant xenophobia central to its campaign for the November 7 election. Like Trump in the US, Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, and One Nation in Australia, the party is seeking to divert growing anger over collapsing living standards (wages in NZ have plunged 6.4 percent in the last five years) in a backward and reactionary direction.

The demonisation of Chinese people is also intended to more closely align New Zealand with US-led war preparations against China, which are proceeding at a rapid pace.

The outburst occurred during a debate in parliament on July 29. Peters was denouncing the previous Labour Party-led government, which included the Greens, for encouraging young people to be vaccinated for COVID-19. The current government has spread unscientific disinformation that people under 17 years old were put at risk by having two doses of the vaccine.

Xu-Nan interjected, asking Peters: “Are you vaccinated?” In response, the foreign minister shouted: “I noticed you came here five minutes ago. Go back to your own country—that’s where they lie like a flatfish, but they don’t lie like that here, all right? This is called a democracy, unlike what you’re used to. Go back to where you’ve come from, you loudmouth.”

Xu-Nan is a New Zealand citizen who moved to the country with his family in 1994, when he was a child. There are roughly 279,000 people of Chinese descent living in NZ, making up 5.6 percent of the population.

The outburst prompted a formal complaint from the Chinese Embassy, which released a statement the next day saying it had “lodged solemn representations with the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade over the negative China-related remarks made by [Peters].” It urged the government to “respect and safeguard [the Chinese community’s] legitimate rights and interests, and to create an open, inclusive and non-discriminatory environment for them to study, live and work in New Zealand.”

In a Facebook post, Peters doubled down, describing the Chinese ambassador and others who criticised him as “pearl clutchers” and “communist shills.”

NZ First’s deputy leader Shane Jones, who has recently made a series of racist statements attacking Indian migrants, told the media that he and Peters “are historical foundation New Zealanders and he [Xu-Nan] should know his place.”

While it pontificates about defending “democracy,” NZ First is demanding attacks on migrants’ democratic rights. It is campaigning to restrict the right to vote to citizens only, which would disenfranchise hundreds of thousands of permanent residents who currently have the right to vote after living in New Zealand for one year.

Speaking with right-wing podcaster Chris Lynch, Peters also repeated his outright lie that young people who were vaccinated for COVID “are going to have truncated and difficult lives as a consequence.” He demanded the prosecution of Labour Party leader Chris Hipkins, former health minister Ayesha Verrall and public health advisor, epidemiologist Michael Baker. The NZ First leader praised the US Republicans’ witch-hunt of Dr Anthony Fauci, a former advisor on the response to COVID-19, which is aimed at justifying the destruction of public health.

National Party Prime Minister Christopher Luxon

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sought to distance himself from some of Peters' inflammatory statements. Asked at a public meeting on July 31 whether he thought Peters' comments to Xu-Nan were racist, Luxon said, "Yes, I do." He said the NZ First leader was seeking "to denigrate immigrants and to drive xenophobia."

Luxon's admission that the foreign minister is a racist is bound up with election positioning; it was not accompanied by any action, such as sacking Peters from his ministerial position. The National Party relies on support from NZ First and its other coalition partner, the far-right ACT Party, to stay in power.

The government has given extraordinary power to NZ First—which only got 6 percent of the votes in the last election—by making Peters both deputy prime minister and foreign minister, and making Jones the minister for regional development and resources. The coalition has also passed anti-immigrant laws making it easier for the government to deport migrants even if they have not been found guilty of any crime.

The posturing by the opposition Labour Party and the Greens, which have called for Peters to be sacked, is equally hypocritical. Labour deputy leader Carmel Sepuloni told One News that Peters' comments were "incredibly racist and offensive, and you cannot make those types of comments as a minister."

Yet Labour and the Greens enthusiastically formed a coalition government with NZ First between 2017 and 2020, in which Peters also served as foreign minister and deputy prime minister. Labour had campaigned on anti-Chinese demagogy—notoriously scapegoating people with "Chinese sounding names" for the housing crisis in 2015.

That government, led by Jacinda Ardern, strengthened ties with US imperialism and named China and Russia as the major "threats" to the world order. This militarist, anti-China position was backed by Labour's supporters such as the "liberal" *Daily Blog*, which is now posturing as an opponent of Peters' anti-immigrant demagogy.

The Labour-NZ First-Greens government also adopted harsh new restrictions on immigration aimed at making it harder for migrants from working class backgrounds to move to New Zealand. NZ First's ministers made repeated anti-immigrant statements, including against the Indian community, without facing any consequences.

In January 2020 the Greens' then co-leader James Shaw told the media that he would have "no problem" continuing to work with NZ First. Shaw had worked closely with NZ First's defence minister Ron Mark preparing a document supporting a major increase in military spending. In the event, NZ First failed to gain enough votes to re-enter parliament in the 2020 election.

The Labour-Greens government from 2020 to 2023 presided over soaring living costs and rising homelessness and child poverty. To pay for the subsidies given to big businesses during the pandemic, it imposed austerity measures and froze wages for teachers, healthcare workers and others. Labour lost the election by a landslide as a result, opening the door for the return of NZ First in the present right-wing coalition government.

Whatever the outcome of the election in November, the political establishment will continue its lurch to the right. In particular, both major parties—Labour and National—are committed to doubling military spending, which will be paid for with deep cuts to social programs.

The attacks on migrants, in which all the capitalist parties are complicit, are aimed at dividing workers along national and ethnic lines to block a unified struggle against social inequality, austerity, and war. The working class must respond by building its own party, based on a socialist and internationalist program. This includes defending the rights of all immigrants to live and work wherever they choose, with full citizenship rights.

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