US ambassador to New Zealand denounces Auckland mayor's pro-China statements

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In an extraordinary intervention into New Zealand's domestic politics last week, US ambassador Jared Novelly accused Wayne Brown, the mayor of the country's biggest city, Auckland, of being "too close to the CCP," the Chinese Communist Party.

Novelly was sending a blunt message, not only to Brown but to the entire New Zealand political establishment, that Washington will brook no wavering from its allies as it ramps up preparations for war against China.

The ambassador erupted after Brown returned from China, where he had visited several cities and met with New Zealand businesses exhibiting at the China International Import Expo in Shanghai. Speaking with *Stuff* on November 17, Brown praised China's "economic growth and prosperity" and its "centrally-managed capitalism," comparing it favourably with the US and New Zealand.

The NZ media highlighted an interview Brown gave to China's CGTN, in which he said "I have a very poor relationship" with the central government in Wellington. He said the government "probably veered a bit more towards America, but Auckland, the biggest city, is definitely more pro-China."

Brown suggested that New Zealand should "sell" its membership in the Five Eyes to Japan, adding, "I can't see anything in it for us." The Five Eyes is the US-led intelligence sharing network, which also includes Australia, Canada and Britain. It is playing a major role in spying on China and in the US-led plans for war against China, which are at a very advanced stage.

Novelly told Radio NZ that this suggestion was the "most offensive" part of Brown's comments. Five Eyes membership, the ambassador declared, was "a sacred right that has come over 80-plus years, 100 years on the battlefield." Novelly questioned whether the mayor was "smoking crack" and demanded that he "apologise… to the United States, the rest of the Five Eyes partners and Japan" and to "the age of Enlightenment."

Novelly suggested that China had targeted Brown in some kind of "elite capture" influence operation. He also referred to a report by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS) in August, which accused China of spying in New Zealand "at scale." The report, undoubtedly prepared in close collaboration with US agencies, provided no evidence to back up this assertion.

As a minor imperialist power, New Zealand relies on its alliance with the US to uphold its own neo-colonial interests in the Pacific and elsewhere. At the same time, sections of the NZ ruling class depend on strong economic and diplomatic ties with China, New Zealand's largest export market.

Brown, a former property developer and company director who is not a member of any political party, speaks for factions of the business elite, which are nervous about the impact of Washington's warmongering on their profits.

The timing of Novelly's public attack on the Auckland mayor is significant. Prime Minister Christopher Luxon was visiting the Chinese city of Shenzhen for the APEC summit. On November 19, President Trump held a meeting with Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, amid belligerent demands by Democrats and Republicans in Washington, and European leaders, for an escalation in the war against Russia and stepped-up economic war against China.

Novelly, who was appointed as ambassador by Trump in May, is a billionaire, the son of Apex Oil owner Paul Novelly, and a major donor to the Republican Party. He is a member of the US oligarchy, which is determined to reverse its economic decline through the use of military force to redivide the world.

At his first media conference in New Zealand in July, Novelly defended the US-Israeli war against Iran and called for New Zealand to spend more on the military. He praised the joint NZ-US project to redevelop a former US naval base in the Cook Islands—part of the militarisation of the Pacific against China.

The ambassador's intervention against Brown occurred during a political crisis in New Zealand. The country held an election on November 7 which produced an inconclusive result, with neither the incumbent National Party nor the

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main opposition Labour Party able to declare victory. Negotiations with smaller parties to try and form a government will not begin until November 27, after all remaining votes (including from people who voted outside their electorate) have been counted.

Novelly's statements were clearly intended to influence the upcoming coalition talks, making clear that Washington expects the next government, whether it is led by Labour or National, to cut ties with China and align even more closely with the US.

During the election campaign the leaders of both parties, conscious of widespread opposition to war, verbally distanced themselves from the US. Luxon declared that the war against Iran—which he had initially supported—was a mistake and its objectives were "very confused." Labour leader Chris Hipkins, while supporting NZ's membership in the Five Eyes, stated: "We don't align with either side in any conflict between the US and China." Such statements, insincere and hypocritical as they are, will undoubtedly have caused concern in Washington.

There is a precedent for Novelly's public interference in New Zealand politics. In October 2017, following another inconclusive NZ election, then-US ambassador Scott Brown gave a series of extraordinary media interviews to signal Washington's dissatisfaction with the incumbent National Party government of John Key, which was viewed as too close to Beijing. The ambassador specifically criticised Key for failing to completely endorse Trump's threat of nuclear war against North Korea.

Following Scott Brown's intervention, the racist, anti-China NZ First Party decided to join a coalition government with Labour and the Greens instead of National. The 2017–2023 government, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, strengthened the alliance with the US; it ramped up military spending and issued statements denouncing China and Russia as the biggest "threats" facing the world. It also sent NZ troops to Britain in 2022 to assist in training Ukrainian conscripts for the NATO war against Russia.

Over the past week New Zealand's corporate media and political establishment has mostly joined hands with ambassador Novelly in denouncing Wayne Brown and defending the US alliance against China. Anna Fifield, a former *Stuff* editor and currently the *Washington Post*'s Asia-Pacific editor, called the Auckland mayor a "useful idiot" for Beijing and described Novelly's remarks as "apposite, if sharply worded."

Otago University politics professor Nicholas Khoo wrote in the *Post* that Brown's call for leaving the Five Eyes was "misguided" and "would decrease our security."

These and other commentators also criticised Brown's reactionary remark to *Stuff*, "Democracy's had its day. It's time for something else, really." He later told the *New Zealand Herald* that he was not against democracy but was frustrated with the deadlocked election result.

Acting Prime Minister David Seymour, from the far-right ACT Party, told Radio NZ on November 19 that Brown's comments were "incorrect" and the government was "committed to the Five Eyes." He also stressed that the Auckland mayor was not part of the government and said Novelly's statements were undiplomatic and "inadvisable."

Labour Party MP Willie Jackson bluntly criticised ambassador Novelly, telling the *New Zealand Herald*: "Kick this ambassador out or get the government to ask him for an apology… Who does he think he is? Is he Donald Trump the second?" However, a spokesperson for the party, told RNZ on November 20: "Willie Jackson's comments are his personal views and do not represent the position of the Labour Party. Labour does not support expelling the US Ambassador."

The Green Party, which played a major role in the last Labour-led government, has remained silent.

Whatever tensions exist within the capitalist parties, there is no anti-war faction among them. The Labour Party campaigned in the election with the same basic platform as National to slash spending on public services while driving up military spending and recruitment. The bipartisan aim is to integrate the country into US-led wars in the Middle East, against Russia and against China.

The working class must respond by advancing an international and socialist alternative, independent and opposed to all the established parties. To discuss this urgent task, the Socialist Equality Group urges workers, students and young people to register to attend our public meeting, "After New Zealand's crisis election: Build an international socialist movement against austerity and war!" on Sunday December 6, at 6:00 p.m. at Victoria University of Wellington, room AM 103 in the Alan MacDiarmid Building.



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