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New Zealand

New Zealand First and the global far-right

- IV Online magazine - 2018 - IV526 - November 2018 -

Publication date: Friday 30 November 2018

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The New Zealand First (NZF) Party was founded in 1993 by Winston Peters, formerly a cabinet minister for the mainstream conservative National Party. Since then, under Peters' continuous and unchallenged leadership, its share of the popular vote has ranged from 4 to 13% - large enough to be a significant player in all but one of New Zealand's parliaments from then until now, and to have participated in coalition governments with both of New Zealand's major parties, National and centre-left Labour. It is currently the junior partner in Jacinda Ardern's Labour-led coalition, also supported by the Green Party.

The words used to describe New Zealand First have usually been “nationalist”, “populist”, or – more critically – “anti-migrant” or even “racist”. Ask any New Zealanders what politics Peters is usually associated with, and they will doubtless reply anti-immigrant politics, especially opposition to Chinese immigration [1]. Given that, overseas observers might scratch their heads at seeing Winston Peters as deputy Prime Minister to Ardern, whose sunnily optimistic social-democratic approach has led to her being labelled “anti-Trump” [2]. How can a political force which is usually seen as part of the same global trend as Donald Trump, UKIP, and other nationalist reactionaries and fascists be supporting the centre-left?

Some historical background on Winston Peters is probably required to understand this. New Zealand was one of the most enthusiastic adopters of Thatcher/Reagan-style neoliberal economics in the 1980s. However - unlike most countries – neo-liberalism was not at first combined with authoritarianism and social conservatism. Rather, the Labour government of 1984-90 combined privatisation, deregulation and financialisation with an anti-nuclear foreign policy, the legalisation of homosexuality and steps towards reconciliation with the indigenous Māori people. In this way, they were the reverse of the previous 1975-84 National government of Robert Muldoon, which combined social conservatism and an authoritarian style with heavy Keynesian-style state intervention in the economy and trade protectionism.

During National's period in opposition 1984-1990, leaders Jim McLay and later Jim Bolger did their best to ditch Muldoon's legacy and to reform their party in the neoliberal image. In this period, Winston Peters (first elected as an MP in 1978) was seen as the leader of the remaining “Muldoonist” faction in the National Party – sceptical of neo-liberal economics, and appealing to the traditional Tory rural and suburban base. When National returned to power in 1990, and quickened the pace of the neoliberalization of the economy started by Labour, Peters was increasingly the main internal critic of this approach. After being sacked as a Cabinet Minister and told he would not be re-selected as a National candidate, he struck out on his own, promising a new party that would “put New Zealand first, second and third”.

The political basis of New Zealand First has always been *anti-neoliberal and conservative traditionalist*. In an era where both major parties were committed to neoliberal reforms, anti-neoliberalism united former Labour and National voters. NZF quickly pulled significant support away from the Alliance, a broad anti-neoliberal coalition whose major members were the Green Party and a social-democratic split from Labour. I have argued in a series of articles on what I call “conservative leftism” that the perspective of forming a broad anti-neoliberal bloc during the 1990s and 2000s led the activist Left not only into building coalitions with conservative anti-neoliberals such as NZF, but to some extent intellectually capitulating to their xenophobic politics – thus opening the door to the current far-right surge. [3]

Given all of this, what should the radical Left's attitude to New Zealand First be? Certainly Winston Peters is no friend of progressive politics. His historical animus with the Green Party – the most progressive of New Zealand's parliamentary parties - led to them being excluded from formal participation in the current coalition government. [4] His party's latest stunt is a “respecting New Zealand values” law, which “which would legally mandate new migrants

to respect gender equality, "all legal sexual preferences," religious rights, and the legality of alcohol." [5]

It goes without saying that an Ardern-led coalition in which the Greens' James Shaw or Marama Davidson were Deputy Prime Minister would surely be far preferable to the current situation – if the parliamentary numbers were to work out that way. But should we be treating New Zealand First the same way that we would other right-populist, "alt-right" or neo-fascist movements? Commentator Liam Hehir argues that a consistent Left would "no-platform" Winston Peters:

Is Peters really on quite the same level as Nigel Farage? Possibly not (shared interests in Brexit and cricket notwithstanding).

But the big difference between the two is that Farage has a lot less influence over New Zealand than Peters. If you want to ensure migrants and other vulnerable groups feel welcomed and safe, the views of the second most powerful man in the country weigh more heavily than do those of the member of the European Parliament for South East England. Or they should, at least...

For Green MPs, protesting Nigel Farage achieves little but costs nothing. Protesting Winston Peters, on the other hand, might achieve something – but only at the risk of losing political power. It doesn't take Niccolò Machiavelli to work out who gets protested. [6]

There is of course no sharp dividing line between traditionalist conservatism and the resurgent far-right, as the career of the UK's Enoch Powell should show. Peters is famous for a pugnacious, antagonistic relationship with the news media, similar to what we see from Donald Trump. His innate social conservatism led to opposition to the bill legalising same-sex marriage, in favour of a referendum on same-sex marriage – which would have no doubt led to the same extremely divisive consequences as in Australia.

However, Peters draws as much from what has been called in Britain "One Nation Conservatism" – "preservation of established institutions and traditional principles combined with political democracy, and a social and economic programme designed to benefit the common man" [7] If you asked New Zealanders who votes for New Zealand First, those who did not immediately answer "racists" would immediately answer "old people". Peters' traditionalist-conservative politics have historically appealed older New Zealanders in particular. A significant social reform that he was responsible for in a previous Labour-led government was the "Super Gold Card" guaranteeing free public transport for all over 65s.

Perhaps the best international equivalent to New Zealand First would be the Independent Greeks (ANEL), the conservative-populist party who are SYRIZA's junior coalition partner in Greece. Peters has not even been averse to using rhetoric which might be called "left-nationalist". In his speech announcing his decision to join Ardern's coalition government in 2017, he said:

Far too many New Zealanders have come to view today's capitalism, not as their friend, but as their foe.

And they are not all wrong.

That is why we believe that capitalism must regain its responsible - its human face. That perception has influenced our negotiations. [8]

However, a "protean" (vague and shifting) populist appeal to both left and right at the same time is part of Peters'

political strategy, and also part of classical definitions of fascism [9] - so Peters' "anti-capitalist" rhetoric doesn't let him off the hook there.

The New Zealand far-right have traditionally seen Winston Peters much like they see Donald Trump – if not precisely “one of them”, then at least as a possible ally. The explicitly Nazi National Front named NZF as their preferred mainstream political party in their electoral propaganda in 2005 [10]. More recently, during the 2017 election campaign, Peters came out in support of a “European Students Association” (a front for white-nationalist students) which had been closed down at the University of Auckland:

Winston Peters visited Victoria University in Wellington. During his speech to students he questioned the media's role in causing the “European” group to shut down. He accused journalists of suppressing dissenting voices, and on his way out, unashamedly signed a cartoon of a frog named Pepe - the most popular symbol of the alt-right.

Peters' actions set the New Zealand 4Chan boards alight.

"Guess who just got my vote!!" one user wrote. "Winston is based". (Based, loosely, means good).

"Absolutely BASED," said another. "Winnie has my undying respect."

"Winston is /ourguy/, right?" another asked. "I want someone to get rid of the Indians and Chinese, those f***** are stealing our country right out from under us." [11]

One obvious problem with assimilating New Zealand First to the global “alt-right”/white-nationalist phenomenon is that Winston Peters is himself M?ori. The support of a bloc of conservative, rural M?ori opinion has always been a vital part of the NZF coalition – as Ani White pointed out in an article for Fightback[<https://fightback.org.nz/2017/10/20/racial-populism-and-the-2017-new-zealand-general-election/>]], it is precisely rural and small-town voters who tend to be most prone to anti-migrant views. The very first NZF MP other than Peters was elected in one of the constituencies reserved for M?ori electors [12]; and at the 1996 election, NZF made a clean sweep of all the M?ori seats. However, as Ani White also points out, Peters trumpets a conservative, assimilationist policy, opposing “special rights for M?ori”, and has recently shifted to supporting a referendum on abolishing the M?ori seats altogether.

Others have argued that Peters cynically uses anti-migration rhetoric in the same way that pre-Trump US Republican politics have used the issue of abortion – as a way to whip up support on the campaign trail, but having no interest in actually doing anything about the issue once in government. Political commentator Danyl Maclauchlan argues: “He campaigns on the immigration issue every election, but Peters has been in the powerbroker position in government three times now, and each of those governments has seen very high levels of net migration of what his supporters and voters consider “the wrong sort” of people.” [13]

It would be best to argue that, although Peters no doubt cynically benefits from the far-right resurgence, and has no shame in appealing to racial populism, he is essentially a conservative rather than a fascist “national revolutionary”. He seeks to bolster and defend the traditional institutions of the New Zealand colonial settler state, rather than to incite mob violence against the Establishment. Although New Zealand First has long used the rhetoric of racial populism, in practice Peters and his party are mainly concerned with getting a seat at the Establishment table, rather than raising mobs to overthrow it.

[1] New Zealand's position as a small developed Anglosphere country in the Asia-Pacific region has historically led to a tendency to "Yellow Peril" anti-Chinese politics. For a historical background, [see](#)

[2] https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/new-zealand-progressive-paid-leave-environment-jacinda-ardern_us_5bcd998be4b0a8f17eee3a7c

[3] See for example <https://fightback.org.nz/2016/02/15/against-conservative-leftism/>

[4] For pre-election NZF/Green polemics see https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11888053 .

[5] The legality of alcohol as a New Zealand value is ironic given that in this country, as in many others, temperance societies were at the forefront of the movement for women's suffrage, and prohibitionist leader Kate Sheppard is on our \$10 bill for this reason.

[6] <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/17-09-2018/why-are-the-woke-set-not-fighting-to-de-platform-winston-peters/>

[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_nation_conservatism

[8] <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/politics/98084598/winston-peters-wants-todays-capitalism-to-regain-its-human-face>

[9] See for example <http://www.anesi.com/Fascism-TheUltimateDefinition.htm>

[10] https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10343503

[11] https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11888810

[12] Constituencies reserved for Māori electors were introduced in 1867, when the restriction of voting rights to property-owning citizens meant that many Māori were disallowed from voting, to ensure that Māori had some input regarding the makeup of parliament. Although they were intended as a temporary measure, they continue to this day, and many Māori still consider them essential to ensure representation.

[13]

<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/politics/2018/10/opinion-whistling-on-migration-yet-leaving-migration-high-what-s-winston-peters-playing-at.html>