

What an Independent NZ Foreign Policy would look like

By Keith Locke

A talk in Blenheim to activists in the Anti-Bases Campaign on 27 January 2018

Most New Zealanders want us to have an independent foreign policy. They think we are already independent to some degree. If pressed they would cite our nuclear-free status, or the fact that we don't always go along with the US or Australia at the United Nations. Last month's vote criticising Donald Trump's stand on Palestine is a recent example.

Yet, in my opinion we have a long way to go before we have a consistently independent foreign policy. For example, there is a lot of hypocrisy in our anti-nuclear stance. How can we be truly anti-nuclear when, as we did last year, we put our frigate Te Kaha under the authority of the USS carrier Nimitz task force in the western Pacific - to replace the USS Fitzgerald after it had been damaged in a collision with a Philippine container ship? This was in the midst of Donald Trump's nuclear sabre rattling against North Korea.

So what should a consistently independent foreign policy look like?

We have to start with a vision for our country and the world. That is what John Lennon did in his song "Imagine". He imagined a world free of "greed or hunger" where there was "nothing to kill or die for." We have to aim for an egalitarian world, where all cultures are respected, and there are no armies - because, in John Lennon's words, there is "nothing to kill or die for." All wars have as their origin the protection of privilege, wealth and power against those who might challenge that reality.

An independent foreign policy is not neutral. It is partisan. It does take sides, against the power exercised through governments by the super-rich. And the richest and most powerful government in the world today is the United States.

Apologists for the American government try to disparage our criticisms of US policies as "anti-American" conveniently forgetting that millions of Americans have similar criticisms of their own government.

It is pretty obvious today the huge damage the US government, under President Trump, is doing to the world, fostering hostility and conflict, pulling out of the Paris Treaty on climate change, and making the super-rich richer through tax cuts.

Yet New Zealand and virtually every Western country maintain strong and subordinate defence ties with Trump's America. And strong intelligence ties, such as New Zealand does through the Waihopai spybase, even though we know that the intelligence gained through Waihopai will be used to facilitate Trump's

aggressive agenda against Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Palestine, the Yemen, etc., etc.

In New Zealand's case this subordination to the dominant power has a long history, originating in our subordination to the British Empire and then, after World War II, transferring this subordination to the American empire.

It is hard to challenge that subordination without re-assessing our colonial history, which is happening a little more today. We have to explain the connection between British imperial troops killing Maori in a land grab in the 1860s, New Zealanders joining British soldiers in killing Dutch settlers in the Boer War in another land grab, and New Zealand and British soldiers invading Turkey and the Middle East in World War I, in another, this time British and French, land grab.

During this 100th anniversary of the First World War some of us have been trying to explain that there was nothing progressive or positive about New Zealand's participation. It was simply a war to preserve Britain's dominance as an imperial power and for it to continue to exploit the inhabitants of India and other colonies.

Yet the dominant narrative after 100 years is still that this was a good and necessary war for New Zealand, despite the 50,000 Kiwi casualties. So embedded in our consciousness is the colonial explanation.

It is 50 years since the Vietnam war, yet it is still not seen clearly for what it was: a war of aggression by the United States and its allies in which they slaughtered over 2 million Vietnamese in their own country. The dominant narrative is that the American war, and New Zealand's involvement, was an unfortunate mistake, but simply an inevitable consequence of a Cold War between East and West.

New Zealanders are now more confident about their own nationhood, but the British colonial legacy lives on in the form of the Union Jack on our flag and the British monarch as our head of state. That such a state of affairs still exists decades after New Zealand became constitutionally independent is testament to the colonial brainwashing that still goes on. How can a head of state who lives on the other side of the world, and is the citizen of another country, truly represent us. In 2003, when Queen Elizabeth, in military dress, spoke in favour of the British invasion of Iraq, she was not representing the New Zealand people, when our Parliament was against the war. One monarch can't serve more than one independent country.

To shape an independent foreign policy New Zealanders need to have confident searching minds. Fawning over royals who are there purely by birth line, without the slightest consideration of merit, is irrational and feudal, and dulls our ability to chart our own way in the world.

This gives urgency for the campaign for New Zealand to become a republic, with the current powers of the Queen and the Governor-General transferred to a New Zealand-based non-executive head of state.

One of the arguments against New Zealand having a truly independent foreign policy is that we are too small to make a difference. Actually, being small and unthreatening at the bottom of the South Pacific is an advantage. We are not rubbing up against any other nation, which makes it easier to adopt a global perspective on the world's problems. There is no necessity for us to be trapped in regional military alliances, like ANZUS or NATO, given we have no enemies. Operationally, New Zealand is no longer in ANZUS and should formally withdraw from that alliance.

We might be a small, but we can still pioneer a course to a better world. The truth is that no other Western country really stands up to the United States dominance of world politics, which is backed by huge military forces, bases around the world, and a global intelligence network. America doesn't escape criticism altogether – as instanced by the recent UN General Assembly vote against the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. But no Western nation has really taken on America for its support of Israel's occupation of the West Bank, its blockade of Gaza and its brutal treatment of the Palestinians.

This state of affairs hasn't really changed since the 1980s, when New Zealanders challenged the US by going nuclear-free, and then discovered that no other Western nation would support our stance. Today, no other Western nation challenges America's war in Afghanistan, its support for the Saudi bombing of the Yemen, or its drone assassination program in several countries.

The door is open to us, as a country, to take a world-leading stance on the side of those who are suffering through war, oppression, exploitation and poverty. Don't underestimate the impact we can have. When we excluded nuclear warships from our ports we had every Western government against us, but we also had huge support from ordinary people in those same countries. That is what frightened Western governments. We were setting a political example for their own people to follow.

That being said, New Zealand has worked with some of the smaller Western governments, like Norway and Ireland, on disarmament issues, to successfully conclude treaties banning landmines and cluster bombs. These treaties were not endorsed by big states like the US, Britain and Russia, but the existence of such treaties has restrained the production and use of these inhuman weapons.

Having a principled foreign policy doesn't mean we will be working alone. We should be open to working with any nation moving in the same direction. Sometimes it will be developing nations – such as in the work we've done on anti-nuclear issues with South Africa, Brazil and Malaysia. Other times we'll be alongside Scandinavian counties or human rights issues, or the facilitation of peace negotiations in war-stricken nations.

Working in concert with other countries also helps us fend off any counter-measures from the nations we are criticising.

This is an important issue, particularly when the pressure comes from big, powerful countries like America or China. You'll remember that Donald Trump threatened to reduce aid to countries that voted in the UN against the President's support for Jerusalem as Israel's capital. China puts pressure on other governments not to meet the Tibetan Dalai Lama, and in 2010 it suspended trade talks with Norway following a Nobel Peace Prize award to an imprisoned democracy advocate Liu Xiaobo.

Because of such pressures we have to be careful that New Zealand's trade interests do not constrain us, and undermine a principled foreign policy. New Zealand is now particularly vulnerable to pressure from China, because so much of our trade is with that country. Diversifying our trade, therefore, becomes more important, because we can't be silent on China's persecution of political dissenters or its censorship of the media and the internet. We have a vital interest in the democratisation of China as it becomes the dominant power in the world.

However, our advocacy of human rights will find more of a hearing from the Chinese people if we are not seen as a military subordinate of China's main adversary, the United States.

Being a military lackey of the United States was never a wise policy, but in the era of Trump it is madness. Our best option is not to take sides in any standoff between America and China, or America and North Korea.

America's confrontational stance towards North Korea has been a total failure. For years it's been clear that North Korea's nuclear program is about protecting the regime. Security guarantees for North Korea could de-escalate the situation. This is where New Zealand could help, in an independent mediator role. Instead, New Zealand essentially tails along behind America in putting more pressure on North Korea. Peace in region requires all parties to pull back their rhetoric and their troops, including the United States, which has 20,000 troops in South Korea and another 45,000 in Japan.

It would be much easier for New Zealand to play a peaceful, peacemaking role in the world if its armed forces reflected that role, and were not, as they presently are, geared for major combat alongside America and Australia. Thank goodness, during my time in Parliament, we got rid our air combat force. We now need to get rid of the navy's two frigates, which are configured for war-fighting rather fisheries patrols or relief work.

Of course, we also need to end our participation in America's mass surveillance network, the Five Eyes, which is geared to protect America's dominant position in the world, including using the information gained for its own military adventures.

National and Labour argue that the Waihopai spy station and the Five Eyes network produces useful information for New Zealand. But what is it? They don't say.

The GCSB was exposed in the Snowden papers as spying on China. I need not explain how stupid and counterproductive that was, and still is.

The GCSB has also spied on the private communications of the Pacific Island leaders - hardly the way for New Zealand to make friends. This spying was insulting, illegal and displayed a big brother attitude towards our Pacific neighbours.

We should be standing alongside our Pacific neighbours as equals and making a greater effort to assist their social and economic development. And we should be open to learning from them, when they are ahead of us in foreign policy, as for example, the Solomons are in their support of West Papuans, or Tuvalu is in campaigning for better climate change policy.

The defining character of a progressive, independent foreign policy is that it listens to, and sides with, those who are poor, exploited and oppressed. It takes their side against those who would exploit and oppress them.

In this sense a progressive, independent foreign policy is no different from a progressive domestic policy, writ large on an international stage.

For example, when we confront the gross inequalities of wealth in the world we first refer back to our policies for New Zealand for a more progressive income tax regime and a capital gains tax, and then argue for similar policies for other countries. Of course, our international policy to reduce wealth inequality has additional, supra-national, elements, such as the elimination of tax havens and a global financial transactions tax and opposition to Trans-Pacific Partnership type investment agreements that favour the global corporations.

Our foreign policy only has real weight to the extent it is leveraged off a progressive domestic policy. For example, an internationalist policy in support of indigenous people's rights only has credibility to the extent that our domestic policy is empowering Maori. Similarly, we need strong domestic policies combating institutional sexism and supporting women's rights.

And how can we be seen as champions of effective global policies against climate change if we are not seriously reducing greenhouse gases ourselves.

Progressive ecological policies must be at the forefront of our thinking. Progressive social and economic policies are not much use if we don't have a habitable planet.

To conclude. We should be confident of our ability to shape a truly independent foreign policy. We just need to take heart that bold, progressive policies will

meet with support from ordinary people around the world, as our nuclear-free stance has done.