

# COMMENT

## Why business as usual is a risk for New Zealand's foreign policy

Jayden Evett critiques the recent foreign policy speech by the prime minister.

One well-worn cliché describing Aotearoa New Zealand on the world stage compares it to a dinghy, a smaller but defter boat compared to aircraft-carrier-sized countries like the United States. Since the late 1990s, the dinghy has embodied our approach to how we act internationally — use our small size to be more manoeuvrable and responsive to changes overseas.

Chris Hipkins's July foreign policy speech to the NZIIA (to be found elsewhere in this issue) marked his first as prime minister and confirmed that its business as usual for the ship of state. The same is likely be heard from the Opposition heading into the 14 October general election — part of an unspoken decades-old agreement to fence off foreign policy from election year politicking.

There is a benefit to this in ensuring New Zealand's foreign policy remains depoliticised so others can trust and expect the continuity of our international behaviour. But it limits the opportunity to air out and evaluate policy the way we do in all other areas at an election — in the public forum, with a critical eye, and in a way that is straightforward. Academic analysis is not a substitute for public scrutiny.

Returning to the dinghy metaphor, this removes the opportunity for New Zealanders to regularly look at what course our craft is taking abroad and how it is being charted. By not doing this, we have missed a pretty important development: that the rudder on our foreign policy dinghy stopped working years ago, leaving it directionless. Hipkins's decision for business-as-usual risks leaving New Zealand adrift in international waters among increasingly volatile tides of global change.

What was there before? New Zealand's current 'values-based' foreign policy direction comes from the 1990s. It reflects the changes brought by the nuclear-free movement, our expulsion from the ANZUS alliance and the sinking of the *Rainbow Warrior*. As a country we made the right choices internationally, even if they were unpopular, and we were willing to stand alone.

It was the start to a great journey that was never charted in any detail. Instead, successive governments hit autopilot on foreign policy, letting high ideals set the course. Three decades on, Hipkins has hit that button as have those before him. Only this time, that foreign policy is not working like



The sunken Rainbow Warrior

it used to.

### Rusted engine

Like a rusted rudder engine, New Zealand diplomacy's tools do not work like they used to. Our independence has lost its meaning. On his recent bilateral trip to China, Hipkins downplayed Chinese media's praise of our 'independent foreign policy' as reading into it a meaning that is not there. Yet after 30 years of repeating this phrase, it would be a struggle to find anyone who knows what it means now.

Likewise, inconsistency has tarnished our 'values-based diplomacy' and it cuts both ways. Moralising in international forums puts off traditional partner countries in the global West, especially when our experiences are used to make states look bad — consider our relationship with Australia in multilateral climate change negotiations. Yet in the Pacific, politicking underhandedly while feigning saintliness erodes our goodwill and trust with our closest neighbours. New Zealand's alleged conduct during the 2021 Pacific Islands Forum secretary-general election and its surprised response to the fallout thereafter is one such recent example.

As a small country with limited resources, reputation is our most effective asset for achieving foreign policy wins abroad. But when that same foreign policy is running down that which gives it effect, business-as-usual causes more harm than good.

### Lost opportunity

This is not to say we have not had the chance to upgrade the engine on our foreign policy rudder. As our first female Māori foreign minister, Nanaia Mahuta's 2020 appointment came with the promise of much needed innovation — diplomacy guided by bicultural principles, expressed



Jayden Evett is a PhD candidate in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University, Canberra. He is also affiliated with the Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies at Victoria University of Wellington.



Chris Hipkins inspects a guard of honour with Chinese Premier Li Qiang during his visit to China in June



Jacinda Ardern



Phil Goff

through Māoritanga. Yet this has been an uphill battle for Mahuta.

There has been no buy-in at the top end. Jacinda Ardern never used Mahuta's indigenous framework in her foreign policy speeches as prime minister and Hipkins looks set to follow suit. No uptake at this level signals a lack of commitment to this approach.

This has translated down the chain to its similar absence in our day-to-day diplomacy. Would policy embedded in kotahitanga (unity through collective action) have reacted so differently to security deals in the Solomon Islands, where we called for Pacific Islands Forum consideration before its signing, and Papua New Guinea, which we were fine with? Would diplomatic practice that valued tikanga Māori have tolerated High Commissioner Phil Goff's lack of karakia and embarrassment of Kingi Tūheitia at a mihi whakatau before King Charles III's coronation?

It is clear by 2023 that we have let the opportunity of indigenous diplomacy pass us by; but the engine of our foreign policy dinghy still needs replacing. How can we begin that when business as usual reigns and politicians remain uneasy allowing consideration on how we act abroad in the public electoral forum?

### People-powered policy

Any new direction in New Zealand's foreign policy must start with and be driven by New Zealanders. Countries are the sum of their people, who share values and principles that should be reflected in how we act abroad. This is by no means revolutionary — Max Harris has already made a convincing case for it<sup>1</sup> — but it is an idea that is still resisted in our country's foreign policy circles.

The problem with our current foreign policy direction is not what it stands for. It is not unthinkable that most New Zealanders would support doing what is right internationally, even if doing so is unpopular and isolating. The problem is that our actions internationally since this direction's inception in the 1990s have undermined its value abroad. Business as usual risks continuing to flog



Max Harris

a diplomacy that is increasingly seen as shallow, artificial and inconsistent.

New Zealanders deserve a foreign policy as authentic and innovative as they are, and they are key to creating that. Crowd-funding a new rudder for our proverbial dinghy and opening its design up to public comment might make politicians and policy officers on Lambton Quay uneasy. But it sure beats continuing to drift passively on the world's shifting tides.

### NOTE

1. See Harris's chapter in Nina Hall (ed), *Beyond These Shores: Aotearoa and the World* (Wellington, 2020).

## RECENT PUBLICATION



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