

New Zealand cabinet minister Shane Jones continues to stoke racism

By John Braddock
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In the lead-up to the March 15 anniversary of the Christchurch fascist terrorist attack on two mosques, in which 51 people died, New Zealand cabinet minister Shane Jones effectively launched his campaign for the country's September election by seeking to stoke anti-immigrant racism.

In a television interview on February 29, the self-described "retail politician" from the anti-immigrant NZ First Party blamed Indian students for "ruining" New Zealand universities, arguing the doors were far too far open to migrants from "New Delhi." He called for a national "population policy," declaring that only NZ First would cut the current "unfettered" immigration levels. NZ First is a coalition partner in Jacinda Ardern's Labour Party-led government.

A flood of criticism followed, including from the government's Race Relations Commissioner Meng Foon, who labelled Jones' comments "racist" and "irresponsible." Jones doubled down. He told Newstalk ZB on March 6 that as a "60-year-old generational style politician," with a Maori lineage that "goes back a thousand years," he was "not going to accept the Indian radicals shutting me down."

After a week's silence, apart from advising Jones his language and "facts" were wrong, Prime Minister Ardern finally rebuked him, suggesting that if he was a Labour MP, he would face demotion. She urged voters to condemn Jones' comments and to "act on their values when it comes to election time."

In fact, Jones is free to flaunt his anti-immigrant bigotry because he is protected by Labour. Ardern has not sacked Jones from cabinet because she has no substantial policy differences with NZ First, to which she gave key ministerial positions despite the party only gaining 7.2 percent of the vote at the 2017

election.

The Labour-NZ First-Greens government has systematically slashed immigration. Temporary work and student visas have increased, exploiting immigrant workers and fee-paying foreign students, but approvals for permanent residency have reduced from around 45,000 annually to 35,000.

Jones' xenophobic outbursts began last November after the Indian community denounced the class-based immigration restrictions. New rules blocked thousands of parents from joining their adult children, with only the wealthiest allowed residency. Jones provocatively declared that Indian families had no right to bring the "whole village" to NZ and, if they didn't like it, they should "catch the next flight home."

Jones' rhetoric echoes the extreme-right positions in Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant's fascist manifesto "The Great Replacement," which incited right-wing violence around the globe. NZ's chief censor suppressed the manifesto in order to prevent any discussion of its similarity with the anti-immigrant xenophobia promoted by politicians in NZ and internationally, and the fascist gunman's sympathy with the military and state agencies.

Jones claimed last November that he spoke for "battalions" of "ordinary Kiwis who were highly anxious" about population growth. In the last five years half-a-million people had been added to the population, he told Radio NZ, while "the birth rate is actually lower than the post-war boom." Jones' fixation with "birth rates" and scare-mongering over "legions" of immigrants were entirely in line with the fascist conceptions advanced by Tarrant.

Jones has indicated that in September he intends to stand in the Northland electorate, which has a predominantly poor, largely Maori population.

Interviewed by Maori broadcaster Te Ao on March 2, Jones tailored his pitch to appeal to racial identity politics, aimed at dividing Maori workers from their class brothers and sisters. Putting forward his own version of the “great replacement” theory, Jones described immigration as “a threat to our identity and status” because it “shrinks our percentage as Maori and I’m deeply opposed to that.”

Jones further derided the “Indian business community” who, he claimed, “got here through a very soft route.” This speaks to the prejudices of the Maori business elite who are hostile to any competition from “foreign” businesses. This layer is often represented by the Maori nationalist Maori Party and Mana Party which defend the capitalist profit system, and the position of wealthy tribal businesses within it.

The same week Jones promoted his anti-immigrant agenda, a member of the fascist group Action Zealandia was arrested over a new terror threat made against the Masjid Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, one of the targets in the 2019 atrocity. This followed a revelation by the NZ Defence Force that a soldier linked to the same group had been arrested and charged with unlawfully disclosing military information.

All the establishment parties are guilty of emboldening such far-right groups by encouraging xenophobia and racism. As far back as 2005 NZ First leader Winston Peters told an audience that moderate Muslims worked “hand in glove” with extremists and Christianity was under “direct threat from radical Islam.”

The Labour Party and the Greens are not exempt. Jones, currently minister for infrastructure in the coalition, began his political career as a Labour Party MP and served as a minister in the Helen Clark-led Labour government. Throughout Labour’s time in opposition, it allied with NZ First, the Mana Party and others in scapegoating foreigners, especially Chinese immigrants, for the housing crisis, low wages and other social problems.

While Jones and NZ First posture as friends of “ordinary Kiwis,” the party is bankrolled by some of the country’s richest and most influential business figures. NZ First’s principal funding mechanism, the NZ First Foundation, is under investigation by the Serious Fraud Office over its handling of donations, particularly its failure to disclose donors’ identities.

NZ First’s donors have included billionaire Graeme Hart, the country’s wealthiest person, with his family the owner of Hubbards, Hansells and Gregg’s food brands; the Van Den Brink family; and companies and individuals involved in the fishing and horse racing industries.

Alongside the business elite, a particularly filthy role is being played by the trade union-funded *Daily Blog*. After years of strident anti-Chinese propaganda, the site’s editor Martyn Bradbury used this summer’s Australian bushfire disaster and the coronavirus pandemic to demand a major increase in military spending to turn New Zealand into a “fortress” against immigrants. Bradbury last year praised Jones as a “political genius,” declaring that “there is an enormous, legitimate grievance with many in New Zealand at the level of immigration.”

Such policies have no support among the broad population. Jones’ salvos, however, are a sign of the extreme right-wing, nationalist agenda on which the coming election will be contested. Throughout the world, the bourgeoisie is reviving authoritarian forms of rule and fascism as weapons against workers and young people, who are seeking to fight back against social inequality, the climate crisis, and the criminally neglectful response to coronavirus.

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