



CASTING A LONG SHADOW: TRUMP 2.0'S IMPACT ON AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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About the Author



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Democratic breakdown

On the basis of Trump's first administration, most New Zealanders and the New Zealand Government were bracing themselves for a repetition of economic and political chaos, unpredictability, incompetence, and lies in his second. We were certainly not prepared, however, for such an immediate concentration of power in the hands of the executive, and a major assault on the co-equal standing of Congress, the Judiciary and the Executive. Nor were we prepared for the wilful subversion of checks and balances and other accountability processes. We have been shocked by the extent to which an autocratic President—assisted by a compliant Republican Party—has managed to undermine basic democratic values and institutions. Trump's dubious use of 'national crisis' to justify the deployment of the National Guard in Los Angeles and now in Washington DC represents a worrying militarisation of domestic policing and a personalised aggregation of coercive power. It also breaks the norm that the US military shall not be used against the people of the United States.

We were aghast at the deliberate gutting of the Federal bureaucracy and the loss of all kinds of essential protective services like air traffic control, weather monitoring, disease preparedness and education. We didn't expect to see the abolition of independent regulatory and accountability mechanisms nor such a systematic assault on Federal scientific institutions so critical for providing data for evidence-based decision making. Trump's insistence on political loyalty over professional competence has resulted in the choice of many senior officials lacking relevant experience in Trump's cabinet and has diminished popular trust in good governance.

These developments have generated considerable alarm in New Zealand because they challenge deeply held political principles and values as well as a long tradition of empathetic and compassionate politics. Throughout our short history, New Zealand has celebrated its democratic traditions, the rule of law, and its welfare state.

Trump's brazen material aggrandisement and his utilisation of public power for private gain has been normalised in this administration. All of these negative dynamics seem set to run their course for the next three and a half years.

These developments have generated considerable alarm in New Zealand because they challenge deeply held political principles and values as well as a long tradition of empathetic and compassionate politics. Throughout our short history, New Zealand has celebrated its democratic traditions, the rule of law, and its welfare state. While some of these values are currently under assault because of adverse economic circumstances and some imitative right-wing populism, there is an un-questioned commitment to the central role of government in moderating the adverse effects of capitalism and the provision of free education, health welfare. There has also been a rigorous separation of the public and private spheres. NZ has long been viewed as one of the least corrupt countries in the world.

In recent years, New Zealand has been dealing with the legacy of white settler colonialism by initiating special processes to deal with painful colonial history. The Waitangi Tribunal, for example, initiates research on the expropriation of Māori land and follows the historic evidence with formal Crown apologies to Māori tribes (iwi) alongside substantial material reparations for colonial oppression, exploitation, and racism. These initiatives directly challenge and contradict the MAGA agenda on race, diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Multilateralism under fire

As a small medium-sized country, we worked hard to establish robust respect for human rights and a robust rules-based international system based on support for the United Nations and other multilateral institutions. We were amongst the strongest advocates at the United Nations in 1945 for a new world order where international issues would be resolved in accordance with agreed principles rather than at the whim of powerful countries. We supported the development of the UN, opposed the big power veto in the Security Council but were enthusiastic supporters of the Breton Woods Institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Perhaps one of the areas that has been most worrying for small countries such as New Zealand, however, has been Trump's open disdain for multilateral organisations particularly the United Nations.

On January 20 2025, he withdrew the US from the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. This was coupled with the dismantling of climate change legislation across America. The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement and rollback of climate initiatives have alarmed Pacific leaders. The Samoan Prime Minister, Fiame Naomi Mata'afa, for example, is worried that such actions "undermine global climate action and put the survival of Pacific countries at greater risk." Similarly, Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister, James Marape, labelled the US withdrawal as "morally wrong," emphasizing the existential threat climate change poses to their nations. This has generated a permissive environment for New Zealand's centre right Government to sit lightly on New Zealand's climate change targets and roll back decisions banning the use of fossil fuels.

As of August 2025, Trump has withdrawn the United States from at least three other United Nations agencies. On January 20 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14155, initiating the US withdrawal from the WHO. This decision was based on criticisms of the organization's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and alleged political interference. In early February, Trump announced the US withdrawal from the UNHRC (Human Right Council), citing concerns over the council's alleged bias against Israel and questioning its effectiveness. The US has also withdrawn from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and ceased all US funding to UNRWA, accusing the agency of links to Hamas and questioning its political neutrality. Additionally, the administration has initiated reviews of US involvement in other UN-related organizations, such as UNESCO, which he withdrew from in July 2025, the decision to take effect in December. He has signalled intentions to reassess support for other international agreements and bodies as well. This is forcing the United Nations to rethink its organisation and programmes. New Zealand, like other small to medium sized countries, depends on the United Nations and its different specialised agencies to give us a place to voice and share concern on global issues. The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade depends on the United Nations to articulate and reinforce a rules-based global order. A UN without the United States would be a greatly diminished institution.

These withdrawals reflect a broader shift in US foreign policy under President Trump. His America First position is resurrecting assertive nationalism and power politics. His domestic and global politics are dominatory. He much prefers power over others instead of power with others. This is completely anathema to small countries like New Zealand. We know that our security and national interests are best served by nurturing the quality of our social, political, economic, and security relationships and by supporting a robust world order.

At the international level, Trump's desire to promote US 'manifest destiny' and annex Panama, Greenland and Canada was initially dismissed as rhetorical hyperbole but later taken seriously when repeated. We then realised that we were dealing with an alliance partner willing to infringe international law, disobey UN Charter commitments, and undermine respect for the sovereign integrity and inviolability of all nation states. Trump's desire to return to 19th century American expansionism shocked New Zealand. As a country that has long accepted the inviolability of national borders, these proposals made New Zealanders wonder what was happening in Washington and have raised some fundamental questions about whether we wish to be allied with such a mercurial and transgressive political leader.

Economic shockwaves

Trump's challenge to international institutions and a rules-based global order were exacerbated by Trump threatening and then imposing tariffs on the whole world. April 2 2025, the so called 'Liberation Day' for Trump, has created chaos for world commerce and trade. The imposition of 10% tariffs on New Zealand, for example, is five times higher than New Zealand's average tariff on US goods of 1.9%. This has now been expanded to 15% tariffs. This makes no economic sense and will not result in increased manufacturing jobs in the US or a lowering of the current cost of living for most Americans. On the contrary, there is general agreement that the tariffs will be inflationary for America and undermine many small- and medium-sized enterprises. Trump's recent tariff deal with the UK was largely symbolic and aimed at maintaining the 'special relationship' between the US and the UK. Trump and his advisors argue that the UK deal and the coercion of others was the whole point of the tariffs in the first place. This post facto rationalisation, however, won't diminish the harm this tariff policy is doing to global trade, and to the global south in particular.

Similarly, Trump's trade war with China is unwinnable and will be hugely disruptive for the American and global economies. The impact of Trump's day of liberation was a sharp and immediate fall in company shares and pension funds which have not fully recovered. It also challenges the integrity of US securities and bonds, many of which are held by China and Japan. The IMF predicts that Trump's actions will reduce growth in the US by a third in the coming year and lower growth in GDP internationally. Most economists argue that Trump's tariff war will produce higher inflation, lower productivity, and an increased likelihood of economic recession. This is already having a negative impact on New Zealand's growth predictions for the rest of the year and into 2026. Despite the government's best intentions, global economic turmoil will have a deleterious impact on New Zealand's ability to emerge out of recession.

The abolition of USAID does reputational damage to America and direct material damage to beneficiaries who no longer have access to USAID funded education, health, housing, development, and refugee projects. This challenge to US development assistance, again creates a permissive environment for New Zealand policy makers to be parsimonious instead of altruistic and generous.

The abolition of the US Agency for International Development also sent shockwaves through New Zealand's aid and development community. Although American public sentiment has been ambivalent about overseas aid, no-one expected the arbitrary cancellation of millions of dollars' worth of contracts and programmes. The ostensible saving of USD 40 billion has to be set against the harm that abolishing the agency does to millions of people around the world, including the world's poorest and most vulnerable. Closing such a leading development agency has emboldened the British Prime Minister to reduce the UK's development budget to 2.0% of GDP in order to cover an increased UK defence budget. Somewhat perversely, the knock-on effect of that decision has meant that the New Zealand government might have to reduce New Zealand's aid programme to fund an expanded defence budget. The abolition of USAID does reputational damage to America and direct material damage to beneficiaries who no longer have access to USAID funded education, health, housing, development, and refugee projects. This challenge to US development assistance again creates a permissive environment for New Zealand policy makers to be parsimonious instead of altruistic and generous.

Institutional subversion and challenges to basic human rights

Trump and Musk's desire to close down the United States Institute for Peace was another act of vengeance which has been successfully challenged in the Federal Court. Although the Board has been restored, it is still in a precarious position. Similarly, closing the Education Department and attacking the integrity and independence of America's major research universities also smack of revenge and are doing enormous reputational damage to the United States. New Zealanders have been watching these developments with shock. It is sobering seeing the country that once led the world in terms of democracy and human rights is now willing to undermine the institutions that gave it standing in these areas.

Trump's immigration policy and the pursuit of 'illegal' and legal migrants and citizens is aimed at generating fear amongst already vulnerable populations and is a craven appeal to his base. This too is undermining trust in the United States respect for the law. The arrest of immigration/deportation targets by masked 'marshalls', ICE operatives and Homeland Security agents is causing deep anxiety and injustice among already vulnerable communities. His removal of habeas corpus challenges fundamental principles of American justice. His wilful disobedience of federal judges who have requested due process is a direct assault on the rule of law.

Trump's second administration draws heavily on the Supreme Court decision stating that a sitting president has legal immunity from actions conducted while president. He has taken this immunity to extreme. Many of his Executive Orders have challenged Congress and tested the limits of his actual legal authority. His appointments of a sycophantic Attorney General and equally sycophantic Director of the FBI are aimed at ensuring that he will never have to endure the investigations and impeachment that marked his first administration. He has weaponised the justice department by pardoning all the January 6 rioters, even those who committed violence in the assault on the Capitol.

His Justice appointments have already taken revenge against those who investigated Trump in his first term. New Zealand is unaccustomed to such brazen attacks on the rule of law and the principle of everyone (including the President of the United States) being equal under the law. The NZ government is worried that if there is a willingness to flaunt the law and subvert the Constitution at home there will be an openness to resile from alliance relationships, contracts, and agreements internationally. A loss of trust in something as basic as the rule of law and all being equal under the law generates opportunities for the subversion of the justice system in America and countries such as New Zealand.

Security and strategic trust

New Zealand is a member of the Five Eyes intelligence community, but we were suspended from ANZUS Council meetings because of our 1980s anti-nuclear policy which banned nuclear-powered and nuclear-armed vessels or planes entering NZ. We still see ourselves, however, as part of the Western like-minded group of nations, continue to have defence relations with Australia, and are gradually re-engaging in joint military exercises with the US. The appointment of Pete Hegseth to lead the Pentagon, however, sent shockwaves through NZ's small defence establishment. Hegseth has enacted a series of controversial policies and decisions that have significantly impacted the Pentagon's operations and culture. He ordered a 20 per cent reduction in the number of four-star generals and admirals. He is under investigation for using the encrypted messaging app Signal to share sensitive military information, including details about US airstrikes in Yemen. This action alarmed New Zealand's intelligence professionals who have been accustomed to high levels of secrecy and confidentiality in relation to intelligence sharing. This incident resulted in the sacking of

Trump's first National Security Advisor which did little to reassure close friends of the US. The resignation of a series of highly experienced civilian and military professionals within the Pentagon gave rise to the accusation that the Pentagon was in a 'full blown meltdown'. This is forcing New Zealand and other even closer allies like Korea, Japan, and Australia to debate whether we want to be so closely associated with such an unreliable and chaotic ally.

NZ's intelligence community is worried also about the trustworthiness and security of Five Eyes data and the reliability of the Pentagon itself. The recent visit of Kash Patel to establish an FBI office in New Zealand is challenging. Patel's rationale for it was partly to monitor criminal activity in the region. But he stated that the major reason was to monitor and respond to Chinese Community Party activities in the region. This new surveillance aimed at the containment of China is something New Zealand can well do without as most of our trade is with China. The Chinese Ambassador to New Zealand stated his objections to this new development while Patel seemed to ignore the internal turmoil he has generated.

There are many other examples of the ways in which Trump and his administration are gutting national institutions that have served Americans well. There is no space to document them all in detail but there is substantial evidence that this administration poses the most severe threat to the American constitution, democracy, freedom, basic human rights and the rule of law. An autocratic and kleptocratic America is not the America that New Zealand relied upon during the Second World War and the heady post-war years that followed.

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The New Zealand government and people are trying to understand how to relate to a political system that is being systematically undermined by such an erratic and chaotic political leader. Our current strategy is to be as invisible as possible so that we don't incur the wrath of he who yearns to be loved and praised. But US-China antagonism generates big challenges for New Zealand. We cannot antagonise our largest trading partner or an America that is intent on geopolitical competition and containment. The challenge is how to occupy the moral and political high ground when a country once much loved seems to have lost its way. As Michelle Obama said "When someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level. No, our motto is: 'When they go low, we go high'." How to go high when confronted by bullies is perhaps one of the biggest challenges facing the world at the moment.

A recent *Observer* article argued that Trump, Musk, Vance, and other members of his cabinet were committed to the 'killing of kindness'. Empathy, compassion, and basic kindness seem to have no part to play in Trump 2.0's world. On the contrary, his first days in power have been aimed at revenge against his enemies and pardon for his loyal supporters.

Trump has no interest in creating a kind and caring community; his currency is fear, loathing, and negative othering of Chinese, Hispanics, Muslims, overstayers, effete elites and the chattering classes. His world is Manichean and divided between loyalists and enemies. He has tilted towards support for Putin in Russia, accepted Russian narratives on who started the war against Ukraine, and is trying to engineer a highly unequal ceasefire which he is trying to impose on Ukraine. This has been modified recently but the appalling attack on Zelenskyy in the Oval Office of the White House revealed the dark underbelly of Trump's modus operandi.

Preserving New Zealand values

We are living in very troubled times. The world is confronted by many interlocked 'wicked problems'. This is a moment for co-operation rather than competition. It is critical, therefore, that we build solidarity between progressive social democratic movements and politics all around the world. It also important that, small as our nation is, New Zealanders give support to all those courageous Americans who are resisting the destruction of effective, capable, and legitimate governance in America.

This is a moment in human history when we all need to reiterate our deepest values. Equality, welfare for all, community, respect for diversity, the promotion of human dignity and the creation of inclusive and respectful institutions.

New Zealand will suffer directly with adverse tariff arrangements. But we are also suffering directly and indirectly by convulsions in the White House. It is impossible (even 12,000 kms from the US) not to be dominated by Trump on traditional and social media. He is having a coarsening effect on political discourse in America and around the world. His deceit and misinformation are undermining respect for the truth, science, and evidence-based decision making. Right-wing parties in New Zealand are adopting bits of the Trumpist agenda on immigration, race relations, and the undermining of a caring and compassionate welfare state. Fortunately, voters in the recent Australian and Canadian elections managed to defeat parties that were espousing Trumpist principles. This is a moment in human history when we all need to reiterate our deepest values. Equality, welfare for all, community, respect for diversity, the promotion of human dignity and the creation of inclusive and respectful institutions. Under this Trump administration, these values are more critical than ever before. Let's hope that they will prevail and not be eradicated while we wait for the mid-term elections. The true challenge is not only how we respond to Trump, but how we preserve—and live—the best of ourselves in doing so.



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