

**Standing up for values?
Why does New Zealand commit to conflict?**

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'Mr Speaker, New Zealand is a country that stands up for its values. We stand up for what's right.'

So said Prime Minister John Key in announcing New Zealand's deployment to Iraq on 24 February.

But what are we to make of such a claim? Is this really the reason for New Zealand to commit its forces overseas? What does it mean to invoke values in this way? How do these relate to other motivations? Is there a clash or a condominium between New Zealand's values and interests here? And do values lead New Zealand into hazardous territory? Or are they a shallow and cheap attempt to justify decision-making which occurs for other purposes? And whose values are we talking about? These are the types of questions that I hope to explore in tonight's presentation.

Exploring Values

To do at least some of this, the first task is to offer an explanation of what we mean by values. This is not easy, and no watertight definition is available. Toby Estall, a Masters student who worked with me as a Victoria University Summer Scholar over the recent break, came up with one reference to a German publication which suggested no less than 1400 variations on what is meant by values. So rather than seeking to offer you a definition let me make some sweeping generalisations.

To me values belong in the general category purposes: things that we think it is worth striving for. And they are some of the deeper purposes that we can have. They may be, or perhaps they ought to be, our fundamental motivations. Values are the guiding aims we think will make for a good society, a life worth living. They can often be connected to what we regard as moral or ethical conduct. They are closely related to the standards which we want our society to embody in its behaviour. That is not to deny the existence of what we now see as bad values or very harmful value systems – including, for example, a world organized around racist or social Darwinist beliefs. But when we invoke values in foreign policy-decision making, or more specifically when our governments do this, we expect those values to be good ones, especially if it means putting our armed forces in harm's way.

In this connection, one often finds that a distinction is made between values and interests. This distinction is often drawn too starkly. At the very least there is

significant overlap between these two categories of purposes. But sharp distinctions can often be helpful analytically even if they are too stark for practical purposes. While I was on research leave two years ago at the Australian National University I came across a book from the mid-1960s by a sociologist Sister Augusta Marie Neal who argued as follows:

‘Values refer to widely shared conceptions of the good; societal values refer to conceptions of the good society. Interests refer to desires for special advantages for the self or for groups with which one is identified.’

The idea that interests involve special advantages seems to resonate when we talk of self-interests, or when we think about interest groups which focus on a single issue that is of great interest to them, or when we believe that claims about the national interest are in fact claims about benefits that accrue to the particular country concerned. Why might New Zealand act a certain way? Because it is in the national interest of New Zealand to do so. Not, by the way, the national interest of Australia or the United States. I think this is what the Key government now means when it invokes the old notion of New Zealand having an independent foreign policy. We may decide to join with others in a certain action, including action against ISIL. And we may be joining traditional partners as we do that. But this, argues the Key government, is not a denial of our independent foreign policy, because we have made our own mind up that this decision works for us. It is in keeping with our interests. Hence you can work as an increasingly close security partner with the Americans, according to this logic, and still be independent.

In comparison to values, interests are often depicted in more material and concrete terms. To cite the most obvious example, there may be economic interests at stake – ie measurable material benefits. I think a lot of New Zealanders, rightly or wrongly, believe that our foreign policy-decision making has a lot do with these economic interests. But we can also think of security interests, and all or at least most governments have national security interests that they feel it is their primary duty to promote. And these can involve material, concrete considerations – the security of national borders, our sovereign interests, the security of resources within our territorial waters and so on.

Now quite where New Zealand’s interests stop and our values begin is an almost impossible question to answer. Normally we have them mixed up in our minds. Is greater prosperity for the country, for example, an interest or a value, or both? Is peace an interest – because the avoidance of war is the avoidance of something costly in a material and human sense – or a value – because it is something inherently good and proper to work towards? Is the preservation of a strong system of international law a value – invoked when we refer to New Zealand as a good international citizen. Or is it an interest because small states like New Zealand know that strong international laws offer them some protection against the predations of the big powers? As you can see my argument is that in many cases the answer is yes.

If we consider the Prime Minister’s statement to parliament in a slightly fuller extract you may see what I mean:

‘Mr Speaker, New Zealand is a country that stands up for its values. We stand up for what’s right. We have an obligation to support stability and the rule of law internationally. We do not shy away from taking our share of the burden when the international rules-based system is threatened. We have carved out our own independent foreign policy over decades and we take pride in it. We do what is in New Zealand’s best interests. It is in that context that I am announcing that the Government has decided to take further steps to help the fight against ISIL.’

Is that context, at least as depicted by the Prime Minister, a context of values, or a context of interests? Well, it seems to be both. And there is nothing terribly unusual about that.

Objections

Now there are any number of objections to this invocation of values and interests in the government’s explanation of why it was committing New Zealand forces abroad. Let me deal with at least a few of these in a way that I hope further illuminates some of the problems and challenges of our subject.

One objection is that New Zealand is not deploying forces because it is standing up for its values. In other words, this is a direct refutation of the Prime Minister’s claim. There are several varieties of this argument. We might say that the deployment has nothing at all to do with the values that are claimed. Instead, values are simply the public gloss on a private decision made for different reasons. That reason, we are sometimes told, has all to do with New Zealand’s membership in an English speaking group of countries led by the United States. More specifically, some argue, it is about Five Eyes. And in the Snowden era, this takes us to a view of the world where the spies are omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. No such intelligence world, of course, exists.

A fairly extreme form of this alliance logic is to suggest that because of these connections, the notion that New Zealand makes decisions because of its own interests or values is in fact nonsensical. It is instead the interests of our leading partners that set the terms of our involvement. I for one do not accept this line of reasoning, which has the faint whiff of conspiracy about it.

Even in the case of our involvement in the controversial war in Vietnam, at a time when our alliance links with Washington were very strong, and when we received a very rare visit from the American President of the day, I believe the record shows we were perfectly capable of making our own mind up. And that is what we did, and have generally done since, and before. Just because you decide to work with close partners does not mean you surrender your sense of what is good for you. And just because you make a decision that some citizens find contrary to their weighing of New Zealand’s interests and values, does not mean you yourself have not weighing those factors. It is too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that because you disagree with the government’s calculation, New Zealand must have been dancing to someone else’s tune. That is the foreign policy equivalent of the dangerous conclusion that because your favourite political party loses an election, the system is not democratic. It is too easy to

ascribe complex political phenomena, caused by multiple factors, to hidden military-industrial complexes or a Washington lobby. But if our world was that simple, there would be no need for scholarship on foreign policy and all our debates would be specious. In fact if that is our world, we may as well stop now.

But it must be admitted that the opportunity to work with close partners is one of the factors that has made it easier, and possible for the government to decide to commit New Zealand to an Iraq deployment. This is partly because the government sees advantages in these relationships: that they indeed offer something to New Zealand. What then are we to make of the Prime Minister's memorable comment that New Zealand commitment to the anti-ISIL coalition would be the *price* of the club? This was not only grist to the mill of those who had already incorrectly concluded that New Zealand would be deploying for alliance reasons alone and that the decision was made in Washington not Wellington. Mr Key's words also bypassed a point made in a good deal of the literature on alliances that it is junior powers which tend to get more than they give from the relationship. Accordingly I think we can argue that New Zealand gets more out of these associations than we put in. And if a number of Australian analysts own up that their country has been free riding, then what does it mean for us? Even so, we have to be wary of slipping into the logic where alliance becomes ends in themselves.

Another objection is that it is very dangerous to invoke or resort to or be driven by one's values in making potentially life and death decisions about the deployment of personnel. If we think that values are more about passion, and that interests are more about reason, for example, we might be inclined to take this line. We can't divorce decisions to go to war from the passionate and emotional sides of our political environments. Clausewitz knew this when he saw how Napoleon could benefit in war from the energy unleashed by the French revolution. And while it may be difficult to mobilise those energies by referring to momentary or even long-term commercial advantage, or some other sense of material interest, it may be easier to do so by playing into, manipulating or perhaps even constructing deeper beliefs. Nationalism does this – sometimes too well. Would some of the carnage of the First World War have been avoided if reason had prevailed over passion? Did New Zealanders see the defence of the Empire as a question of interests (a strong Britain is good for New Zealand's security?) Or were they also swayed by the 1914 version of the values discussions we have today.

You might say that New Zealanders are immune to some of these wilder fits of passion when it comes to overseas deployments, at least today, but I am not so sure. I remember clearly how strong the sense of outrage was in wider public opinion over the human rights violations that occurred after the 1999 East Timor referendum result in favour of independence. And I remember at least one prominent politician arguing that New Zealand should intervene before Indonesia had been persuaded to seek international assistance. Fortunately this was not an opinion that was widely shared. But if we think that as New Zealanders we are pretty good and decent people, we are especially vulnerable to the error of assuming that as we go after the things we see as good we will make wise decisions.

A further objection is that while governments often refer to values as purposes that are shared, they are shared in such selective company as to make an emphasis on them internationally divisive. Indeed we hear quite a bit today about shared interests and values as ways of explaining these close partnerships. While we shouldn't focus entirely on what governments say at the expense of seeing what they do, here is a statement from former Secretary of State Chuck Hagel at the time New Zealand and the United States were signing the Washington Declaration:

'Having fought together in every major conflict of the last century, including Afghanistan, our bonds are rooted not only in our common interests as Pacific nations, but also in the history and the values we share.'

Now the first clause of that statement actually – the fighting together in every major conflict of the last century – probably works better as a depiction of the US-Australia alliance than the US-New Zealand closer partnership. But beyond this question of interpretation, this reference to the sharing of history and values is unlikely to be mentioned, to use the most obvious example, when the United States is talking about its relationship with China. There the focus, when there is language of cooperation, is squarely on common interests. And when Mr Key said last year in a question and answer session after a talk on foreign policy that New Zealand has one type of relationship with China and one type of relationship with the United States and that both understood this to be the case, we get a similar picture. New Zealand's relationship with China, generally, although not always or completely, so often gets depicted by the government in terms of our shared economic interests. And what is different then about our relationship with the United States? Part of that difference was conveyed by Phil Goff as Trade Minister in 2006 when he highlighted New Zealand's involvement in Afghanistan to an audience in Washington DC:

'we both have an overriding commitment to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and freedoms. We are both old democracies, and members of a relatively small group of countries that over the last century have been consistent in the advocacy and practice of these principles.'

Not dissimilar language might be cited today in explaining New Zealand's commitment to what is a US-led coalition against ISIL. Now this is not to suggest, in comparison, that China is objecting to New Zealand's commitment of forces to Iraq, nor that China is unworried about ISIL. And it can be argued that if one of the threats that ISIL poses is to values, then it may well be threatening some of China's values too. Elsewhere in Asia, there are signs of that sense too. Having ISIL sympathisers in Indonesia is a direct challenge to the social contract which allows for generally moderate and stable government in the world's largest Muslim country.

And yet an emphasis on standing up for *our* values, because it is coincidental to similar logic used by our traditional western partners in justifying their overseas military commitments, who are standing up for theirs, can still generate a sense

of a select group with a similar value system. The question then for us is whether we are comfortable with this, or whether we are not. Or to put it in a more direct sense, what happens on the day when the United States announces that because of its concerns that China is violating the values that undergird security in Asia it has called on its allies and partners to take steps against Beijing? Does New Zealand suddenly go quiet at that point?

Indeed this raises a further objection. If we wish to argue that we stand up for our values in sending troops overseas, would we not want these values to be applied consistently? Surely a *selectively* applied value loses a certain amount of its moral high ground. If we are standing up for our values, and these include, for example, 'democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and freedoms' why aren't we standing up for our values with significant deployments to one or more of the UN peacekeeping missions currently underway in Africa? An obvious answer here is that this is not where so many of our interests are concentrated. Another, perhaps, is that this is not a priority for our allies and partners with whom we prefer to work. Another, less charitable, explanation is that we simply don't care that much. Another is that the government sees little in the way of public sentiment pushing for such a move.

Or to put it another way, what price are we really willing to pay for those values? On Iraq the government has clearly its preference for training missions behind the wire, eschewed a special forces mission, and it has agonized for months over even this decision. Of course what happens as that deployment unfolds could work in a range of directions. But how much standing up are we really doing? And seeing the repercussions that are now looming for some of Sweden's commercial interests, are we willing to stand up for our values in the way that Stockholm has by calling out Saudi Arabia as a dictatorship? How much does our government stand up for our values when talking about China where the space for civil liberties shrinking as Xi Jinping consolidates his power?

This relates to a further objection where international politics is regarded as an amoral, or immoral playground and where power politics driven by self-interest dominate. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, the title of a book written by Reinhold Niebuhr in the 1930s, implies that the values we may hold – and apply – in our lives as individuals may be rendered powerless in a social world where the interests of strong political actors dominate. It is still not uncommon to find people arguing that in international politics in particular, where there is no overarching sovereign authority, and no justice system with credible enforcement powers, the room for a values-based approach is very slim indeed.

In other words standing up for ones values in the making of foreign policy decisions is either delusional or dangerous or both. Instead, you stand up for vital interests. This is a world of course in which New Zealand, which lacks material power, is at the mercy of those who have it, and where our only real protection is either through the security that those actors choose to provide for themselves – which coincidentally helps us – or from the accident or our relatively benign geography.

I don't personally think this sums up the world of international affairs. And I think New Zealand has options. But especially in a world where people find that values are stood up for inconsistently, and where they doubt whether values claims are what they first appear, it is not hard to have some sympathy for this objection.

Show me a value...

Indeed one objection is simply to argue that in the end values matter little. Show me a value, some may suggest, and I will reveal the interest that lies underneath it. Values, and especially the notion of shared let alone universal values, become a convenient cloak to cover more pragmatic and selfish reasoning. And this is even worse because the cloak is meant to have moral significance because of the surface nature of those values claims.

And yet when we look back at a number of New Zealand's deployments over the last two decades, it is difficult to conclude that the values aspect has been nothing more than an illusionist act. This doesn't mean that only values were involved. Other factors were certainly at stake. Did New Zealand's reputation among traditional partners benefit, for example, from the deployment of our forces to Bosnia? Well yes it did. But does that mean humanitarian concerns were not a significant part of the picture? I think they were. Indeed an interests-based argument might have concluded that we had no business making this commitment.

When we deployed forces (many of whom were unarmed) to Bougainville were we partly thinking about our interests in the South Pacific, our neighbourhood where our influence is strongest? Quite probably we were. But was our sense that a relatively just outcome needed our involvement involved? Well yes it was too.

And what was our long commitment in Afghanistan about? Did New Zealand gain considerably from that long commitment in terms of its now closer relationship with the United States? The record is clear that this is the case. But were we, like many other countries, appalled at what had been wrought from the 9/11 attacks – did we see this as an attack on some of the shared principles of conduct that are about values as well as interests? Well, yes we were.

What then does this mean for New Zealand's deployment of forces in Iraq?

First of all, we are right to want to question all the explanations that governments offer. Not to do so, and to take all values and interests claims at face value, is not good for our democracy.

Second, it is unlikely that the claim that we are standing up for our values provides a fulsome explanation of why New Zealand is sending forces overseas. Most of these decisions have multiple factors behind them, and that is partly why (although it is not the only reason why) the public justification for deployments can move around a little. Those factors also can change as a campaign evolves.

What initially motivated a deployment may not be the same group of factors in their same respective weightings that keep the deployment going. New Zealand's involvement in Afghanistan over several years is a case in point.

Third, when calculations of interests are involved in a decision to deploy forces, and they invariably are, it is not clear that their existence necessarily cheapens the values claims that are made. This is not least because interests and values are hard to separate. It is also because if the measuring of both interests and values point towards the same deployment decision, presumably it has a better chance of standing up to the challenges that come in any deployment as the mission progresses. I personally think, and you are perfectly entitled to disagree with me, that there are at least some New Zealand interests and values which support the deployment of forces to Iraq. But I also think that values can compete with each other: can you maximise liberty and order at the same time? Quite possibly you cannot. Should you seek to maximize any single value at the expense of all others? I agree with Isaiah Berlin that this is a bad and dangerous idea. And do we agree with even our closest partners on the rank order of these values? Again, I think not. Even with them there will be differences. Some shared values perhaps, but not the same weight given to each of them. And perhaps these differences show up in some of our respective deployment decisions.

Fourth, the international system is not a morally barren universe where there is no room for the application of values. But neither is it free of power politics. It is a mixture. This means that there will be occasions when we are able to stand up for our values in some way, including through the deployment of military forces. And it means sometimes there will be less room to do so. Of course for some people the deployment of military forces is a betrayal of the values they hold, and I am happy to entertain questions on that in a moment. But if we agree that the international system is something of a mixed bag, where there is room on some occasions for values to be stood up for, and where there is little such room on others, we shouldn't be surprised if values are not stood up for all of the time, or that when they are stood up for it happens imperfectly and inconsistently. I think that is the mixed world that New Zealand makes its foreign policy decisions in. And I think I would rather have a bit of the values ingredient applied, even if it sometimes doesn't work, than to retreat to cynicism.

End.