

New Zealand: Fear of a Māori Planet: Chris Trotter's single-issue retreat from the Left

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Chris Trotter's long journey from the social democratic left to the far right is complete. In a January column, Trotter urged Prime Minister Luxon to call an emergency meeting of state security forces and plan for a race war with the Kīngitanga, whom Trotter likens to the Nazi army in 1938. What has brought Trotter to such paranoid and delusional thinking?



Art by Rafaela Gaspar

When a friend asked me about Trotter, I joked that he'd visited Waikato sculptor Brett Graham's great exhibition *Campaign Rooms*, and hadn't realized it was an exercise in alternate history. Graham imagined Stealth bombers with koru and other Maorified weaponry.

Trotter's long been unsympathetic to Tino Rangatiratanga, fearing it will divide the working class that sustained New Zealand's left in the 20th century. What is new and unusual is the apocalyptic timeline Trotter attaches to his warning.

As Jane Kelsey says, the Treaty process and the Treaty principles it bred were an attempt by the fourth Labour government to stabilize 1980s New Zealand, by taking Māori protest off the street. In the 21st century New Zealand has been perhaps the most stable country in the world, partly because of the Treaty process.

Relations between Māori and Pākehā at a flaxroots level are far more extensive and warm than they were in the 1970s and '80s. Pākehā as a whole have far more liberal views towards Māori than they did in the past. With their extensive assets, deep relationships with local and sometimes central government, and involvement in numerous cross-racial local organisations, iwi are far less isolated from te ao Pākehā. They are not stockpiling ammo and waiting for war.

In New Zealand, experiments with co-governance have been mild and limited. Iwi have vastly less autonomy than some indigenous groups in North America.

Where, then, has belief in an imminent racial conflagration come from?

I wonder whether Trotter's delusions aren't partly an expression of his plight as a political columnist in New Zealand. Trotter is fascinated by wars and revolutions, and began his career in the 1970s, a

time of genuine turmoil in New Zealand - the time that gave us that action-packed dystopia *Sleeping Dogs*.

When I used to follow Trotter's columns a decade ago, I often wondered whether he wouldn't be happier somewhere else - in Bolivia or Ukraine or Venezuela, where there was real turmoil and change. He seemed to strain to find drama in New Zealand.

If Trotter has been bored by the stability of 21st century New Zealand, he must have been especially disappointed by the continued quiescence of our trade unions. And I wonder whether Trotter's obsession with Māori sedition and civil war would have developed if there had been real political action in 21st century New Zealand. For Trotter, the Māori fixation seems to have served two purposes.

In the first place, it has given him an excuse. Trotter seems to blame Tino Rangatiratanga ideology, as well as other types of 'identity politics' like the new feminism and the trans rights movement, for keeping the working class divided and quiescent, and preventing an outbreak of '70s-style class struggle.

And the spectrum of a Māori dictatorship and a new round of the New Zealand Wars supplies Trotter with the revolutionary excitement that is otherwise sadly missing in 21st century New Zealand.

In the 1980s Geoff McDonald, Ross Meurant, and a young Winston Peters wrote and spoke of a coming Māori insurrection, as Libyan or Soviet-trained fighters seized towns and slit white throats. Like Trotter today, they had their fans on the far right. But their fantasies were unrealized, and Trotter's are even less likely today.

Trotter is far from the first New Zealander to move from the left to the far right of the political spectrum. If we put him beside two earlier political travellers, Sid Scott and Connie Purdue, we can see a pattern in their journeys.

In the late '30s and '40s Sid Scott was the Communist Party of New Zealand's chief theoretician. He wrote a stream of pamphlets on New Zealand history and politics, represented the party on a visit to Moscow, and wrote prodigiously for the party newspaper, the *People's Voice*.

Scott paid for his beliefs. In 1928 he was arrested, tried, and convicted after police raided the Onehunga green grocery his family ran and seized treasonous books by Bukharin and other Bolsheviks. In 1940 the police's target was the CPNZ's Auckland headquarters. After cops smashed up the office and its printing press, Scott and his comrade Graham Watson went underground, both figuratively and literally. They set up a primitive duplicator in a Papatoetoe cave, and turned out smudged copies of the *People's Voice*. Kids discovered the outlaws' cave, and the cops came calling again.

Scott was one of the thousands of communists around the world who left their parties in 1956, after the twin shocks of Krushchev's speech acknowledging Stalin's crimes and the Soviet invasion of rebellious Hungary. Scott published critiques of the CPNZ in the New Zealand Herald, and later a fine memoir called *Rebel in a Wrong Cause*.

But whereas other defectors from the CPNZ, like Hone Tuwhare and Elsie Locke, remained on the left, Scott moved steadily rightward. He believed that the USSR was the main threat to the freedom and peace of the world, and he considered the US the power that could defeat the Soviets.

Scott's papers at the University of Auckland library include letters to the SIS and other state agencies, calling for tough action against his old comrades in the CPNZ. Scott became a New

Zealand McCarthyite.

Connie Purdue was the daughter of legendary feminist and anti-imperialist Miriam Soljak, and she followed her mother into the CPNZ in the '30s. Later Purdue swapped the Communists for the Labour Party, became an organizer for the Clerical Workers' Union, and joined young feminists like Sue Kedgeley to campaign for equal pay and access to jobs for women. The Kirk government gave her an MBE in 1973.

In the same year, though, Purdue publicly opposed an abortion rights rally in Auckland, and fell out with her feminist comrades. She joined the powerful Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child, and founded her own group Feminists for Life. Purdue fought against abortion inside Labour and the unions in the '70s, but by the late '80s she'd joined the National Party. She stayed with the party even as the Bolger government made an unprecedented attack on unions with its 1991 Employment Relations Act, and was rewarded with a Women's Suffrage Centennial Medal in 1993.

The political trajectories of Trotter, Scott, and Purdue have the same shape. All three were longtime leftists who became obsessed with one issue, an issue which, over time, overshadowed all others. None of the three ever formally bade farewell to the left, or announced a conversion to right-wing beliefs. All three continued to insist on their fidelity to their old values and beliefs. But their obsessions saw them slowly losing old allies, and gaining new ones. In 1983 Purdue's Feminists for Life changed its name to Women for Life. The original members had by that time been replaced by conservative Christians. Trotter's blog has undergone a similar transformation, losing its left-wing readers and commenters, who have been replaced by right-wing conspiracy theorists.

And, to the mind obsessed with a misunderstood issue, other issues take on a new and warped significance. Purdue opposed gay law reform in the '80s because she thought the law would undermine traditional families, and thereby somehow increase the abortion rate. Trotter opposes recognizing the New Zealand Wars and teaching the subject because he fears it will feed the Māori nationalism he fears. Scott came to oppose the anti-nuclear movement, because he was afraid it would serve the Soviet Union's ends. The obsession contaminates the whole worldview of the person it has afflicted.

Chris Trotter still describes himself, in the blurb that appears under his columns, as New Zealand's leading left commentator. But today that 'left' commentator is urging his readers to support the most right-wing New Zealand government for 30 years. The right-wing platforms Trotter now produces work for are happy to call him the true voice of the left. But just as Kenny G is only seen as a jazz musician by people who don't listen to jazz, and Jim Morrison is hailed as a great poet by folks who don't read poetry, so Trotter is nowadays seen as leftist only by those hostile to the left. His story is sad, but also instructive.

Scott Hamilton

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