



## **New Zealand P.M. Jacinda Ardern Peddles Government Censorship to an International Audience**

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With her luster dimming at home, New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is trying out her professional scold routine in front of a world audience, perhaps preparing for a role at some international body. Key to that shift is her belief that this whole free speech thing is a menace, and something should be done about it, preferably around the globe. As it turns out, she has a whole pro-censorship project ready to go for a career reboot after electoral politics.

"A bullet takes a life. A bomb takes out a whole village. A lie online or from a podium does not," Ardern told the U.N. General Assembly in September. "But what if that lie, told repeatedly, and across many platforms, prompts, inspires, or motivates others to take up arms. To threaten the security of others. To turn a blind eye to atrocities, or worse, to become complicit in them. What then?"

"In Aotearoa New Zealand, we deeply value our right to protest," she continued. "But that does not mean the absence of transparency, expectations, or even rules. If we correctly identify what it is we are trying to prevent. And surely we can start with violent extremism and terrorist content online."

Her address then turned to promoting the Christchurch Call to Action, an international initiative she co-founded with France's President Emmanuel Macron with the goal "to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online," according to its founding document.

At the U.N., Ardern briefly acknowledged free-speech concerns, before waving them away as less important than the dangers of unregulated speech. By her words, this category encompasses promotion of terrorism, undefined extremism, disinformation, and also ideas the powers-that-be find threatening.

"How do you tackle climate change if people do not believe it exists?" Ardern demanded of her audience. "How do you ensure the human rights of others are upheld, when they are subjected to hateful and dangerous rhetoric and ideology?"

To combat these perils, she demands "international rules, norms, and expectations" comparable to those applied in weapons control.

In case you were wondering, yes, the United States government did sign on to the Christchurch Call for Action in May 2021. D.C.'s conduct since (and well before) illustrates just why governments ought not be allowed to concern themselves with speech that doesn't directly threaten harm to others.

In recent months, federal authorities have issued advisories warning that a taste for traditional Revolutionary War imagery such as the Gadsden flag may indicate a tendency towards "violent extremism." The Biden administration was repeatedly caught engaging in censorship by proxy, leaning on social media companies to suppress "misinformation" and viewpoints it didn't like, but which is protected against government action by the First Amendment.

"Government officials can use informal pressure—bullying, threatening, and cajoling—to sway the decisions of private platforms and limit the publication of disfavored speech," the Cato Institute's Will Duffield warned last month. "The use of this informal pressure, known as jawboning, is growing. Left unchecked, it threatens to become normalized as an extraconstitutional method of speech regulation."

And there was the Department of Homeland Security's still-born effort to establish a Disinformation Governance Board tasked with distinguishing truth from falsehoods (talk about foxes and henhouses).

In places unshielded by the First Amendment, the situation is worse.

The U.K. is currently debating an Online Safety Bill that, if passed, will let officials "directly silence user speech, and even imprison those who publish messages that it doesn't like," according to the Electronic Frontier Foundation. (The U.K. government supports the Christchurch Call for action.)

The European Union adopted a Digital Services Act that "will most likely result in a shrinking space for online expression, as social media companies are incentivized to delete massive amounts of perfectly legal content," cautions Jacob Mchangama, executive director of Copenhagen-based human-rights think tank Justitia. (The EU's European Commission supports the Christchurch Call for Action.)

For its part, Germany's NetzDG law "conscripts social media companies into governmental service as content regulators," Diana Lee wrote for Yale Law School's Media Freedom and Information Access Clinic. It has also legislation in over a dozen countries. "In a global free speech race to the bottom, the NetzDG matrix has been copy-pasted by authoritarian states to provide cover and

legitimacy for digital censorship and repression," notes Justitia. (Germany's government supports the Christchurch Call for Action.)

Many online companies, including Amazon, Meta, and Google, have also signed on to Ardern's international censorship project. They either agree with its sentiments, or else see the need to court regulators who might otherwise make life difficult (remember the dangers of jawboning).

During her time in office, Ardern has never shied away from openly embracing authoritarianism. She denounced the free-market capitalism that brought so much liberty and prosperity to the world as a "blatant failure." Her government tried to largely disarm her subjects. It also stranded New Zealand citizens overseas on the other side of borders sealed against them out of fear of COVID-19. Inevitably, her government also cracked down on anti-lockdown protests and proposed legislation to narrow the range of acceptable debate under a "hate speech" law. That prompted David Seymour, leader of the opposition libertarian-leaning ACT party to tour the country promoting free speech.

"Democracy and the ability to have civil and honest conversations is already becoming imperiled, which is why this is the worst possible time to empower lynch mobs who choose to take offence at ideas they don't support," Seymour told reporters in April 2021.

While it's too early to predict any country's future political developments, ACT is now rising in the polls while Ardern's Labour party falls. Jacinda Ardern appears to be preparing to move on to new projects in life, and it's rather obvious that will involve promoting global restrictions on speech, with government officials choosing between truth and falsehood, and designating what is fit for public discussion.

You can be confident that politicians in many countries will be more than happy to hear that message, and to embrace any encouragement of tightened censorship.