

‘Turn the planes around’: Māori leader says New Zealand should block Australian deportations

Chair of National Māori Authority says country should adopt John Howard’s playbook or risk sparking local gangland wars between deported criminals



A Māori leader in New Zealand has spoken out against Australia’s policy of deporting non-citizens who have been sentenced to at least a year in prison.

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Mon 27 Dec 2021

A prominent Māori leader has called for a dramatic response to what he labels Australia’s attempts to turn New Zealand into a “dumping ground” for criminals, suggesting Jacinda Ardern’s government should “turn the planes around”.

The executive chairman of the National Māori Authority, Matthew Tukaki, also raised concerns about a potential increase in gun violence in Auckland, saying the city “could see gangland wars similar to those that occurred in both Sydney and Melbourne in the early 2000s if we are not careful”.

Tukaki waded into the longstanding trans-Tasman row over the Australian government’s policy of deporting non-citizens who have been sentenced to at least a year in prison.

“New Zealand has got to stop being the dumping ground for Australian criminals,” he said in an interview on Monday. “Quite frankly, I don’t think any Australian would accept their country becoming a penal colony.”

Tukaki said the New Zealand government had raised its concerns with the deportation policy over many years, but the Australian government was “not listening”, so it was time “to play hardball”.

“It seems to me the only way the Australians will listen, so we can sit down together and sort this issue out, is that those Australian government-chartered planes should not be allowed to land in New Zealand,” he said.

“In other words, let’s take a page out of the John Howard playbook. ‘We will determine who comes to this country and the means by which they come’ - and don’t let them land.”

In an earlier media release, Tukaki mentioned the Howard government’s refusal in 2001 to allow the MV Tampa – a Norwegian ship that had rescued 433 asylum seekers from a sinking vessel en route to Christmas Island – to land on Australian territory.

“Australia should be used to that given what they did with the Tampa all those years ago,” he said in a statement. “Turn the planes around.”

The long-simmering row between Australia and New Zealand stems from the use of section 501 of Australia’s Migration Act, which allows the cancellation of visas on character grounds, and which is most likely to be used against New Zealand nationals.

The number of cancellations under the policy has increased nearly tenfold in under a decade, largely as a result of the Australian government tightening the law to say the minister must revoke the visa if a person has been sentenced to 12 months or more in prison.

In 2020-21, 946 visas were cancelled under section 501 – including 197 for drug offences and 108 for assault. Of these 946 visas cancelled, 402 were New Zealand nationals, followed by 101 from the United Kingdom.

A spokesperson for Australia’s immigration minister, Alex Hawke, said the government routinely removed “foreign nationals from a range of countries who commit serious offences in Australia”.

They said the Australian people expected the government to protect “the safety and security of our community”.

“Violent foreign offenders who do serious harm in our community do not belong here and will not be allowed to stay under this government’s policies.”

But Tukaki said it would improve the safety of communities in both Australia and New Zealand if the two countries set up a joint task force to work through the issue “instead of just deporting the problem away”.

He said the countries had a special connection, meaning that people may have moved to Australia at a very young age. He said such people, for all intents and purposes, were Australians and not New Zealanders.

“Some of these deportees come with very long and concerning rap sheets, others fairly basic minor offences. But a great many of these New Zealanders - they are made and a product of the Australian environment,” he said.

“And given the rise in gun violence, given the rise of gang activity in our country, we’re talking about these people who have learned their trade in Australia. It’s an Australian problem. It’s not a New Zealand one.”

In the earlier statement, reported by the New Zealand Herald and other outlets, Tukaki cited “concerns for the last several years that new gangs and chapters are getting a foothold in New Zealand because of the rising tide of returnees known as the 501s”.

“The truth is these violent thugs and criminals don’t care two hoots about the community, they don’t care about culture or tikanga,” he said, referring to Māori customary practices or behaviours. He said the Australian environment had given them “connections” and “supply chains”.

Australia’s Department of Home Affairs said on Monday the relationship with New Zealand was “amongst our closest and longest lasting”.

The department said it had “implemented processes to reduce the impact of removals on the New Zealand community, through provision of advanced notice and improved information sharing arrangements”.

“The department continues to consult closely with New Zealand authorities to manage this process.”

In 2020, Ardern publicly rebuked her Australian counterpart, Scott Morrison, over the deportation policy, declaring that New Zealand would “own our people [and] we ask that Australia stops exporting theirs”.

Tukaki’s suggestion to “turn the planes around” mirrors the Australian government’s language to “turn back” asylum-seeker boats – an element of Operation Sovereign Borders introduced in 2013 when Morrison was immigration minister.

Australia’s then home affairs minister, Peter Dutton, triggered a political backlash in New Zealand in March by characterising the transfer of deportees across the Tasman as “taking the trash out” to “make Australia a safer place”.

Dutton brushed off the criticism, telling parliament at the time that he was “proud of this government for the way in which we have kicked these people out of our country”.

He said the Australian government would make no apology for its policy of “cancelling visas of dangerous criminals, of people that have committed serious offences against Australian citizens”.