

NORMAN KIRK, THE LABOUR PARTY AND NEW ZEALAND'S RECOGNITION OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

DAVID McCRAW¹
University of Waikato

One of the first foreign policy acts of the third Labour government was the diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC). This action fulfilled a long-standing, often frustrated, desire of the New Zealand Labour party. The previous Labour government had found that the recognition of China conflicted with other, more important, foreign policy objectives and had taken no action, and National governments of the 1950s and 1960s had had little interest in the matter. By 1972, however, when the third Labour government was elected, the recognition of China no longer conflicted with New Zealand's other foreign policy goals, and indeed was thought likely to assist some of them. Nevertheless, the Government originally intended to move more slowly on the matter than it did, and the early action was a reflection of trans-Tasman rivalry.

When the PRC was established in October 1949, the Labour government in New Zealand was not inclined to recognise the new communist government in China immediately. There were a number of reasons for this, the first being the fear that endorsement of a communist government in China could lead to the spread of communism in Asia. The second reason was that Prime Minister Fraser considered that the previous Nationalist (Guomindang or GMD) government of China, which was still in existence but confined to the island of Taiwan, had been the victim of aggression and he was reluctant to abandon New Zealand's former wartime ally. The third reason for non-recognition was that the Labour government did not want to be perceived by the New Zealand electorate a month before a

¹ Dr David McCraw (dmccraw@waikato.ac.nz) teaches New Zealand Foreign Policy and Comparative Political Systems at the University of Waikato, where he is a Research Associate in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy. He is the author of a number of articles on New Zealand politics and foreign policy.

general election as approving a communist takeover in China, and, finally, the Labour government did not want to antagonise the United States, which disapproved of recognition, at a time when New Zealand was trying to get the American government to heed New Zealand's views on the shape of the peace treaty with Japan.²

The Labour government lost power at the end of November 1949, and the succeeding National government continued a policy of non-recognition for very similar reasons, even though the British government, which New Zealand often looked to for a lead, recognised the PRC in January 1950. The negative attitude of the American government towards recognition became of even greater importance after New Zealand became formally allied to the United States in 1951.

The Labour party, however, changed its mind about recognition during the Korean War, when New Zealand and its Western allies were involved in war against China and North Korea. The immediate cause of the change was the belief that peace in the Far East was unlikely to be achieved unless the new Chinese government was accepted by the West and negotiated with. There was also, however, now an appreciation by the party that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government was the product of an indigenous revolution in China and not Russian aggression, and that it might do more for the Chinese people than its predecessor. Party leader Walter Nash told Parliament in 1952 that the Chinese were better off under the communist government than they had been under the corrupt GMD government, and that China should be admitted to the United Nations once the Korean War was over. However, he did not think Taiwan should be automatically transferred to the People's Republic.³

Labour was an anti-communist party, but it was also a party committed to social justice and thus sympathetic to forces for change in developing nations. In 1954, after the end of the Korean War, the party included a pledge to support the recognition of the PRC in its election policy manifesto, along with a commitment to press for China's admission to the United Nations. As an enthusiast for a strong United Nations, Labour did not believe the institution could work if a major country like China was left out. Labour, however, did not win the 1954 election.

When Labour came to power again in 1957 it found itself unable to proceed with recognition. This was largely because of worries about the American reaction, but it also reflected a concern for the effect of a New Zealand move on the non-communist countries of Southeast Asia. Prime

² C. J. Elder and M. F. Green, "New Zealand and China" in Ann Trotter (ed.) *New Zealand and China*, The Papers of the Twenty-First Foreign Policy School, (Dunedin: University of Otago, 1986), p. 46.

³ *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (henceforth *NZPD*) Vol. 299, pp. 357-361, 16 July 1952.

Minister Walter Nash was not prepared to risk New Zealand's relationship with the United States to fulfil the China recognition objective, and he was also unwilling to upset Southeast Asian countries which felt threatened by China and which the Government believed were important to New Zealand's security. The Nash government also feared that recognition might appear to endorse the PRC's claim to Taiwan, which was still under the control of the GMD government, and which Labour believed should have the right to self-determination. Apart from these constraints, the Nash government had an effective majority of just one seat in the House of Representatives, and was in no political position to undertake controversial foreign policy moves.⁴

Out of office again in the 1960s, the Labour party seldom raised the issue of the recognition of China. Labour's 1963 election manifesto declared that China could not be permanently excluded from the United Nations and that recognition would not endorse China's claim to Taiwan, but the 1966 manifesto did not mention China at all. During the 1966 election campaign, however, the new party leader, Norman Kirk, declared that he supported the admission of the PRC to the United Nations, but that Formosa (Taiwan) should also have a seat.⁵ Thus Labour seemed to favour a policy of recognising both Chinese governments: the PRC on the mainland and the Republic of China on Taiwan. This two-China policy was not substantially different from that of the National government. The National government claimed to want to recognise the PRC, but not if that was at the expense of Taiwan's status.⁶ Neither China was prepared to tolerate recognition of its rival. The New Zealand National government had established diplomatic relations with the government on Taiwan in 1961, but had not gone as far as to open a New Zealand embassy in Taipei. The hostile rhetoric of the PRC towards the West during the Cultural Revolution period after 1966 was not conducive to moves by any New Zealand political party to promote the cause of recognition, and nor was New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam war against communist forces aided by China.

In 1969, however, the Labour party's interest in the question of the recognition of China seemed to be re-awakened by moves made by the Trudeau government in Canada to start negotiations with the PRC for diplomatic relations. The leader of the New Zealand Labour party called the Canadian initiative "a most interesting development" and hoped it would presage an improvement of relationships between China and other countries.⁷

⁴ David McCraw, "New Zealand's Second Labour Government and the Problem of the Recognition of China", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 25 No. 2, August 1979, pp. 178-185.

⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 16 November 1966, p.36.

⁶ Rt. Hon. Keith Holyoake, *NZPD* Vol. 350, p. 795, 24 May 1967.

⁷ New Zealand Labour Party, *Report of the Fifty-Third Annual Conference*, (Wellington: New Zealand Labour Party, 1969) p. 26.

Kirk did not, however, call for the New Zealand government to follow suit as soon as possible, a reticence that may have owed much to 1969 being an election year.

At the Labour party's annual conference in May 1969, a resolution to recognise the PRC was, for the first time in many years, proposed and passed. However, an amendment to add the words "even if this means breaking off relations with the Nationalist Chinese government" was lost.⁸ This was a clear indication that the conference could not at that time accept the logical implications of a decision to recognise the PRC, and that it wished the party to conduct a two-China's policy. The conference wanted to keep Labour's negotiating position flexible enough to encompass a continuing recognition of the Republic of China on Taiwan. If the PRC's terms for recognition were accepted, New Zealand's diplomatic relations with Taiwan would have to be broken. Kirk and other Labour front-benchers were personally reluctant to do this because of their friendship with the Republic of China's long-serving Ambassador to New Zealand, Konsin Shah.⁹

Despite the conference's approval of the recognition resolution, it did not appear in the Labour party's 1969 election manifesto released later in the year. This was not particularly unusual, as the party's policy council used conference resolutions as a guide only. Frequently, resolutions were ignored if they were seen as too extreme or electorally damaging. The omission of a pledge to recognise China could thus be seen as a sign that the party policy-makers thought that such a pledge could be electorally disadvantageous for Labour. However, the party's spokesman on trade and industry at the time, Warren Freer, claims that the omission was merely an oversight. The policy council had meant for it to be included in the manifesto, and by some slip, it had not been. The party decided not to reprint the manifesto, as this action would draw undue attention to the missing clause.¹⁰

During the election campaign of 1969, none of the major Labour candidates made any reference to China in their speeches. All foreign policy attention was concentrated on the Vietnam war. The party had, however, prepared candidates for questions on the China issue. The party's Research Office put out a list of likely questions and model answers on Labour's foreign policy and China policy headed the list. The questions on the Research Office paper asked: "What are your party's attitudes towards the recognition of China and trade with China? How far would your party go towards meeting China's conditions for United Nations entry (non-recognition of Nationalist China and all that involves)? Does your party believe in the right of the Formosan and (sic) Taiwan people to self-

⁸ *Report of the Fifty-Third Annual Conference*, p. 45.

⁹ Conversation with Margaret Hayward, former secretary to Norman Kirk, 15 August 1975; letter to author from Rt. Hon. W. E. Rowling, 28 March 1979.

¹⁰ Interview with Warren Freer, 15 August 1975.

determination?”¹¹ The answer to the first question was straight-forward. The text stated: “The Labour party supports the recognition of mainland China”. It went on to point out that recognition did not necessarily carry with it the endorsement of the type of government being recognised, and to declare that New Zealand would welcome increased trade with any country, including the People’s Republic of China. The paper also declared that Labour would seek positive steps to have mainland China seated in the United Nations. In answer to the last two questions, the paper stated that Labour believed that “Taiwan is entitled to separate representation at the United Nations”, and that all people were entitled to self-determination.¹² The Research Office paper confirmed the indication given by the party conference in April that Labour was in favour of a two-China policy. The paper had declared that Labour could not agree to depriving Nationalist China of its United Nations representation. On this basis, Labour, had it been in government, would have been unable to support at the United Nations the annual resolution sponsored by Albania to seat the PRC. The Albanian resolution called for the expulsion of the Nationalist Chinese representatives along with the seating of the PRC. The Labour party was seemingly committed to putting forward an alternative means of bringing the PRC into the United Nations should it win power. However, Labour did not win the 1969 election, although it made some gains in both share of the vote and in seats.

China policy was discussed at some length in the House of Representatives the following year for the first time in a decade. The contributions of Labour members indicated once again that Labour’s policy differed from the National government’s only in the degree of enthusiasm it showed for the recognition of the People’s Republic. National members claimed at this time that the Government wanted to recognise the PRC, but would not do so if it could not retain diplomatic links with the Republic of China on Taiwan.¹³ Labour’s defence spokesman, Arthur Faulkner, claimed that a double recognition could be negotiated, and that New Zealand should at least attempt to recognise on a two-China basis.¹⁴ Faulkner’s apparent quarrel with the Government was not that it refused to throw over Taiwan for the PRC, but that it refused to try and negotiate a double recognition, conceding the hopelessness of it too quickly.

Kirk did not contribute anything on China policy on this occasion, but in September 1970, speaking to the Oamaru Rotary Club, he said that it was “just nonsense” that China was not recognised, and that it was wrong that

¹¹ Labour Party Research Office, *Questions and Answers on Some Aspects of Labour’s Foreign Policy*, unpublished typescript, Wellington, 28 October 1969. p. 1.

¹² Labour Party Research Office, *Questions and Answers on Some Aspects of Labour’s Foreign Policy*, p. 1.

¹³ See, for instance, J. R. Harrison, MP, *NZPD* Vol. 365, p. 513, 16 April 1970.

¹⁴ *NZPD* Vol. 365, p. 575, 16 April 1970.

several hundred million people should be excluded from the United Nations. The Leader of the Opposition doubted whether China wanted to join the United Nations, but he said that the Western world had to come to terms with her. After this, he provided proof positive that he subscribed to a two-China policy by saying that the Western world had to recognise that there were two separate Chinese identities and two separate governments – Communist China and Nationalist China.¹⁵

Labour's desire to continue the recognition of the government on Taiwan may well have accounted for the absence of public comment by the party when Canada finally recognised the People's Republic in October 1970. Canada broke relations with Taiwan, but it refused to endorse the People's Republic's claim to the island, merely "taking note" of it. The Labour party did not urge the Government to follow suit.

The Canadian recognition, the first by a Western state since France had recognised China in 1964, was followed by a flurry of recognitions by other states. These were signs that the international environment, which had been unfavourable to having links with China for nearly 20 years, was changing. The American government, long the major obstacle to attempts to improve relations with China, was, under Nixon, mellowing in its attitude, easing restrictions on dealings with China in the travel and monetary exchange fields. Most significantly, the State Department had not attempted to diplomatically pressure Canada to end negotiations with China about recognition.¹⁶

The Nixon administration in the United States, stimulated by the burden of the intractable war in Vietnam, had reassessed American foreign policy priorities. It had concluded that the United States was over-extended and needed to refocus on its fundamental national interests. This meant concentrating on the containment of Soviet power, which had grown significantly, rather than on the containment of China, which was no longer an ally of the Soviet Union. Indeed, China might be even be enlisted to help constrain Soviet power. Nixon and Kissinger hoped that if the United States could develop a relationship with China, that would pressure the Soviet Union to be more cooperative generally, and particularly with regard to Vietnam.¹⁷ In the meantime, the Administration began to withdraw American troops from Vietnam, and in July 1969, Nixon announced the Guam Doctrine, which ruled out future American military intervention in wars in Southeast Asia. This was followed by a number of gestures towards China, including the end of naval patrols in the Taiwan straits in November 1969, and a number of Presidential and official speeches noting the desirability of a relationship with the PRC.

¹⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 2 September 1970, p. 3.

¹⁶ D. C. Thomson and R. F. Swanson, *Canadian Foreign Policy, Options and Perspectives*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971) pp. 115 and 132.

¹⁷ Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), p. 164.

Simultaneously, China was reviewing its foreign policy priorities. The main stimulus to this was the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which suggested to the Chinese leadership that the Soviet Union, with whom the PRC had been in ideological dispute for a number of years, might now be a very real physical threat to China.¹⁸ This assessment was confirmed during 1969 when there were serious border clashes between China and the USSR over several months. It seemed to China's leaders that it was imperative for China to improve her relations with the West so as to put some constraint on the Soviet Union.¹⁹ If the Soviet Union was now China's most immediate enemy, then it was logical to come to some sort of accommodation with the secondary enemy, the United States, especially if that enemy was withdrawing militarily from Southeast Asia. The first overt gesture by the PRC to the United States was an invitation to an American table-tennis team to visit China in April 1971. China's Premier, Zhou En-lai, met the team when it came. That same month the Australian Labor party announced that it had applied to China to send a party delegation there to discuss the terms on which the PRC was interested in having diplomatic and trade relations with Australia.

Two of the New Zealand Labour party's most senior parliamentary spokesmen expressed their awareness of the changing situation that same month. The party's finance spokesman, R. J. Tizard, told an audience at Auckland University that Labour would recognise the PRC if elected in 1972, and he went on to say that if New Zealand waited until then to recognise, much valuable time in establishing trade arrangements would be lost.²⁰ The trade and industry spokesman, Warren Freer, argued in a newspaper article that New Zealand must face up to changed political realities, saying that it could not afford to allow a situation to develop where the United States was prepared to change its political thinking, while New Zealand remained in isolation as the last country prepared to face the reality of China's existence. Even now, however, Freer was concerned with Taiwan's position, saying:

... it is agreed that relationships with Taiwan should be continued: in effect, the acceptance of a two-China principle. Whether such a policy will be acceptable in either Peking or Taipei is a matter which the Government must clarify. This cannot be done without discussion between all parties concerned, nor can it be left to others to interpret the mood of either nation to us.²¹

¹⁸ David McCraw *Chinese Foreign Policy: An Ideological Approach* (Wellington: Price Milburn for the New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1975), p. 28.

¹⁹ Kuo Kan-shao, *Zhou En-lai and the Foundations of Chinese Foreign Policy* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1996), pp. 171-172.

²⁰ *Otago Daily Times*, 22 April 1971, p. 3.

²¹ *Otago Daily Times*, 30 April 1971, p. 4.

National government spokesmen had justified non-action on a two-China's policy for years by saying that it was known to be unacceptable to both Beijing and Taipei, but Freer wanted New Zealand to find out for itself.

At the Labour party conference in May 1971, a resolution was passed that called upon the next Labour government to initiate negotiations with the People's Republic of China for the purpose of establishing full diplomatic and trade relations. The conference also called upon the Prime Minister to organise immediately a goodwill visit to the PRC, and declared that if the Government declined to act, the Labour party would do so.²²

The idea of a goodwill mission was probably stimulated by the Australian Labor party's organisation of one. The call for the mission was made by Freer, who said that it was a matter of urgency that steps be taken, preferably at governmental level, to improve contacts between China and New Zealand. Freer said that as the Australian Liberal government had recently agreed to start a dialogue with China, it was essential that New Zealand not continue to ignore her – both as a Pacific power and a nation with tremendous trading potential.²³ Despite Freer's rather dramatic ultimatum to the National government from the conference floor, party leader Kirk made no mention of China at all in the external affairs section of his report to the conference.

On the day after the Labour party conference passed its China policy resolution, Prime Minister Holyoake made a lengthy statement of his own on the National government's China policy, but he made no mention of an intention to send a goodwill mission to China. Accordingly, on June 4 1971, the Labour party sent a formal letter to the Secretary-general of the Chinese People's Institute for Foreign Affairs, informing him of the request made to the New Zealand government by the Labour party to send a goodwill mission to China. The letter was "to ascertain whether a small goodwill mission would, in fact, be welcome".²⁴ Some days later, the Prime Minister announced that the National government would try to send a trade mission to China. The attempt, however, was conducted in secret through a businessman and was eventually rebuffed by the Chinese.

In mid-July the United States surprised the world with the announcement of the secret visit of national security adviser Henry Kissinger to Beijing and of President Nixon's intention to visit China. The era of American hostility to contact with China was obviously well and truly over. In New Zealand, the Labour party leader said that he hoped that it would

²² *Otago Daily Times*, 27 May 1971, p. 5.

²³ New Zealand Labour Party, *Report of the Fifty-Fifth Conference* (Wellington: New Zealand Labour Party, 1971) p. 34.

²⁴ *New Zealand Herald*, 15 July 1971, p. 3.

prompt the New Zealand government to follow the course that the Labour party had urged on it in May.²⁵

The New Zealand Labour party, unlike its Australian counterpart, was not interested in making China policy a party political issue. New Zealand Labour wanted the National government to take action in the China field. When the Chinese replied to the Labour party's letter, they extended an invitation to a party delegation to make the trip, as they had done to the Australian Labor party. This invitation was declined.²⁶ The Labour party did not want the proposed mission to be of their political colour only. It preferred that any delegation be drawn from a variety of sources representing New Zealand. This stance would minimise any undesirable political consequences for Labour in New Zealand. The political risks of the Australian Labor party's mission to China had been thrashed out in Australia before the mission went: it is probable that New Zealand Labour saw them as too high. Kirk wanted at all costs to avoid being tagged as "soft on Communism" by his opponents, fearing that such a tag would be political dynamite for the party.²⁷ The Leader of the Opposition said publicly that any mission to China could do more for New Zealand if it had an official character.²⁸

In October 1971, the PRC was finally admitted to the United Nations when the Albanian resolution triumphed. Taiwan was expelled. Norman Kirk was disappointed with this outcome, telling diplomat Bruce Brown "It's a bad day's work they've done today".²⁹ Nevertheless, the admission of the PRC to the United Nations and the expulsion of Taiwan from that body was apparently a turning point for Labour party policy. In the party's eyes, the PRC's acceptance by the world community at Taiwan's expense dealt a fatal blow to the two-China policy. Kirk was to tell Parliament in February 1973: "Once the United Nations had recognised Peking as the sole legal government of China...the time had arrived for a clear decision".³⁰ That decision was not to attempt to maintain diplomatic ties with Taiwan. The United Nations, an institution dear to the Labour party's heart, had given a sort of moral sanction to the abandonment of Taipei.

The Leader of the Opposition said in November 1971 that the United Nations' decision to seat China and as a consequence dislodge Taiwan was an endorsement of a one-China policy, and a one-China approach implied an

²⁵ *Evening Post*, 17 July 1971, p. 1.

²⁶ Author's interview with Warren Freer, 15 August 1975.

²⁷ Tony Garnier, Bruce Kohn and Pat Booth, *The Hunter and the Hill: New Zealand Politics and the Kirk Years* (Auckland: Cassell New Zealand, 1978) p. 124.

²⁸ *Christchurch Star*, 19 July 1971, p.3.

²⁹ Steve Hoadley, *New Zealand and Taiwan: The Policy and Practice of Quasi-Diplomacy* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1993), p. 55, footnote 10.

³⁰ *NZPD* Vol. 382, p. 81, 21 February 1973.

international acceptance that the Taiwan question was for China a domestic issue. Kirk said that New Zealand had been interested in sending a goodwill mission to China prior to the United Nations decision, but this policy had been overtaken by events: “Now the larger question of the recognition of the government of China arises”.³¹ Kirk still did not publicly advocate the cutting of links with Taiwan. He said that while China might not regard New Zealand’s continuing recognition of Taiwan with favour, that was not an adequate reason for New Zealand’s failing to take early action to indicate to China that it was prepared to recognise the PRC.

When the Labour party’s next conference was held, in May 1972, one remit (proposed resolution) made an attempt to commit the party to the protection of Taiwan’s undetermined status. Remit 11b suggested that a Labour government recognise “the right of the people of Taiwan to self-determination”. Although this remit was completely in line with what had been party policy until that point, the relevant conference committee recommended that that the remit be rejected because of its “vagueness”.³² A new note of practicality seemed to be moving into the party’s deliberations on China. A commitment of any sort to Taiwan would have reduced the party’s ability to negotiate diplomatic recognition of the PRC.

Recent events had shown that the Canadian formula for recognition, which had been simply to “take note” of Beijing’s claim to Taiwan without endorsing it, was no longer acceptable to the PRC. In March, Britain had been forced to acknowledge that Taiwan was properly a province of the People’s Republic of China in order to upgrade its level of representation in China. The rejection of Remit 11b by the Labour party conference signalled that a fundamental change had taken place in Labour’s policy. Vague or not in its meaning, the principle of the right of the people of Taiwan to determine their own future had been part of Labour’s credo for nearly two decades.

When the 1972 Labour party election manifesto came out, it contained, for the first time since 1954, a pledge to recognise the People’s Republic. There was no mention of Taiwan. However, even though National did not similarly promise to recognise the People’s Republic, policy towards China was not an issue in the 1972 election campaign.

On 25 November, the Labour party won the 1972 election in a landslide, finishing up with a 23-seat majority in an 87-seat House of Representatives. The new Labour Prime Minister thus had at the beginning one definite advantage in decision-making over his Labour predecessor in 1957: a solid mandate at the polls. Prime Minister Kirk took the Foreign Affairs portfolio himself.

³¹ Labour Party Research Office, Transcript of Norman Kirk’s speech to the Invercargill Rotary Club 1 November 1971, p. 3.

³² New Zealand Labour Party, *Report of the 56th Annual Conference*, (Wellington: New Zealand Labour Party, 1972) p. 52.

A week after the Labour government was elected, but before it had assumed office, it gained an ideological ally across the Tasman when the Australian Labor party won the December 2 election in Australia. The leader of the Australian Labor party, E. Gough Whitlam, had proclaimed during the election campaign that the first act of a Labor government in the foreign affairs field would be the recognition of the PRC. On his first day as Prime Minister, December 5, Whitlam cabled the Australian ambassador in Paris to open negotiations with his Chinese counterpart.³³

New Zealand's Prime Minister, in contrast, did not seem inclined to rush recognition. A few hours after the Labour government was officially sworn in on December 8, Kirk announced some of the new Government's priorities and attitudes. He said that the Australian Prime Minister had accepted an invitation to visit New Zealand in the New Year, and that the New Zealand government would discuss with him the question of diplomatic relations with China.³⁴

In an interview given by Kirk to veteran political journalist Eric Benton at about the same time, but not published until just after Christmas, the Prime Minister said that although the Government was committed to a policy of recognising the PRC,

We will proceed at a slower pace than Australia. Obviously, there will have to be preliminaries to any recognition of China. Mr Whitlam has been to China and we will discuss the situation when we meet next month.

Asked about New Zealand's future relations with Taiwan, Kirk said:

This is a difficult problem, but it would be part of the task of a goodwill mission to explore what is possible to solve it. We don't want to worsen any relations, but to improve them. The two China's themselves must be thinking and working on their own conclusions, and it may not be the problem it now appears. We would approach a goodwill visit as a prelude to recognition of China and an exploratory look at Taiwan.³⁵

Early in December, then, Kirk intended recognition to follow a goodwill visit to China, and he did not envisage an abrupt parting from Taiwan.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs had given Kirk a paper on 4 December, outlining their suggested high priority policies. One of these was

³³ Graham Freudenberg, *A Certain Grandeur: Gough Whitlam in Politics* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1977), p. 246.

³⁴ *Waikato Times*, 9 December 1972, p. 3.

³⁵ *Wairarapa Times-Age*, 27 December 1972, p. 13.

recognition of the PRC. Kirk had gone through the list putting ticks and crosses beside the suggestions, and China was accorded a cross, signalling Kirk's reservations about speedy recognition.³⁶ Indeed, Kirk told Frank Corner, the incoming permanent head of the Ministry, that Labour would leave recognition until its second term in government.³⁷

Only two weeks later, however, on 22 December 1972, the New Zealand government announced, with surprising suddenness, its recognition of the People's Republic of China. New Zealand's recognition was simultaneous with that of Australia, and this fact led to suggestions that Australia had influenced New Zealand's timing.³⁸ This was true, but not in the sense that the Australian government had persuaded New Zealand to speed up its recognition. Rather, it was a case of Kirk's not wanting New Zealand to appear to be lagging behind Australia in foreign policy initiative.

Sometime between December 8 and December 11, Kirk changed his mind about recognising China later than the Australians. The Minister of Justice in Kirk's government, Dr Martyn Finlay, later said that the reason for the change was Kirk's desire not to be upstaged on this matter by the Australians.³⁹ Kirk's successor as Prime Minister of the third Labour government, W. E. Rowling, confirmed this opinion:

I am convinced that the earlier than anticipated recognition came about largely because the late Norman Kirk did not, on this vital move, want to be seen following in the wake of an Australian move, particularly as the New Zealand party's decisions on recognition had been made at a very much earlier date.⁴⁰

Kirk thought it important that New Zealand should not be seen on the international stage as simply a follower of Australia. He wanted the separate identities of the two nations well-established politically.⁴¹

Frank Corner, however, believes that the Ministry's briefing convinced Kirk that New Zealand could not afford to wait if it was to have effective Asian policies. New Zealand had to be in a position to communicate with the greatest power of the region.⁴² In the official announcement of recognition,

³⁶ Frank Corner, "Kirk Presents a New Zealand Face to the World" in Margaret Clark (ed.) *Three Labour Leaders: Nordmeyer, Kirk, Rowling* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 2001), p. 145.

³⁷ John Scott, "Recognising China" in Malcolm McKinnon (ed.) *New Zealand in World Affairs Volume 2 1957-1972* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs, 1991), p. 249.

³⁸ *NZPD* Vol. 382, p. 595, 7 March 1973.

³⁹ Letter from Hon. Dr A. M. Finlay to author, 16 September 1979.

⁴⁰ Letter from Rt. Hon. W. E. Rowling to author, 20 November 1979.

⁴¹ Garnier, Kohn and Booth, *The Hunter and the Hill*, p. 115.

⁴² Corner, "Kirk presents a New Zealand face to the World", p. 147.

this was the explanation for the move. In the new international situation, brought about by the end of Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union and China's seeking normal relations with the West, it was essential for a small country like New Zealand to be in a position to deal with all four Pacific powers: the United States, the Soviet Union, China and Japan.

We must keep ourselves informed of what they are thinking and doing. Our national interests also require that we have the means of making our views known, and getting them heard, by the great powers. To do this, we must have effective diplomatic representation in all four capitals.⁴³

Although it was now seen by officials as in New Zealand's interest to recognise the PRC, Kirk espoused a foreign policy that was about more than the national interest. He wanted a foreign policy that also reflected New Zealand's ideals.⁴⁴ Reaching out to China and developing a relationship with it expressed a basic Labour ideal: that differences between nations did not have to lead to conflict – they could be ameliorated through contact and mutual understanding.

The Cold War had divided the world into two hostile blocs, but Labour had never been comfortable with this, seeing the growth of communist movements in Asia as popular responses to extreme social and economic conditions. The party had opposed New Zealand's military involvement in Vietnam for this very reason, and just days before the Labour government's recognition of China, it had announced the withdrawal of New Zealand's army training team from Vietnam.⁴⁵

Even while not necessarily approving the policies of the Chinese government, Labour believed that it was wrong to ignore the representatives of so many people and try to deny them their rightful place on the world scene. Prime Minister Kirk declared that his government had a particular sympathy for the struggles of Third World countries: "New Zealand's foreign policy under this government will be sensitive and responsive to the needs and aspirations of other peoples, and especially those in developing countries of the Pacific, Asia and Africa".⁴⁶

Although the expansion of trade was a very important goal of New Zealand's foreign policy in the wake of Britain's efforts to enter the

⁴³ Norman Kirk, "New Zealand in the World of the 1970s", *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 22 No. 12, December 1972, pp. 12; 14.

⁴⁴ Kirk, "New Zealand in the World of the 1970s", p. 12.

⁴⁵ *New Zealand Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 22 No. 12, December 1972, pp. 35-36.

⁴⁶ Norman Kirk in *Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Year Ended 31 March 1973*, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, A.1, 1973, p. 7.

European Community, it played little part in the establishment of official relations with China. Not only was it not the main reason for Kirk's move, but it was hardly even a secondary consideration at the time.⁴⁷

The Prime Minister's explanation for the suddenness of New Zealand's recognition was that there was "no point in delaying about such a fundamental issue". He declined to answer questions on the move, declined requests for a press conference, and refused to appear on radio and television about it.⁴⁸ It seemed that he was still wary of domestic reaction and wished to play down the move.

The matter had apparently been discussed at the first Cabinet meeting on 11 December, and the Ministry instructed to act. The New Zealand representative at the United Nations had immediately contacted his Chinese counterpart, and the reply had come back within a week that Beijing would accept the New Zealand initiative. The announcement of recognition and the establishment of diplomatic relations was coordinated with the Australians, who had been doing their negotiating through their Paris embassy.⁴⁹

In the communique that announced the establishment of diplomatic relations between New Zealand and the PRC, the New Zealand government acknowledged Beijing's claim that Taiwan was an inalienable part of China and that it was a province of the People's Republic of China. This was criticised by the National party, which stated that if recognition were to be granted, it should have been on the Canadian basis of making no comment on Beijing's claim to Taiwan. The Prime Minister's response was that the Chinese government was no longer prepared to accept the Canadian formula, and that therefore the Labour government had no option but to acknowledge Beijing's claim if it wanted to recognise China. Kirk said that the Government had no objection to acknowledging that claim since the authorities in Taiwan themselves considered Taiwan to be part of China.⁵⁰

While the Taiwan authorities saw Taiwan as Chinese territory, they certainly did not regard it as part of the PRC. The Labour party's policy in the past had always been to deny the PRC's claim to the island, on behalf of the Taiwanese. National MP J. F. Luxton harkened back to Labour's previous concern when he asked whether the Prime Minister considered that the 16 million people living in Taiwan should have the freedom to choose their future. Kirk replied that the question was not relevant since "the Government in Taiwan has never yet been willing to give the 12 million native Taiwanese the right to decide their own future."⁵¹ This was true

⁴⁷ Bryce Harland, *On Our Own: New Zealand in the Emerging Tripolar World* (Wellington: Institute of Policy Studies, 1992), p. 46.

⁴⁸ *Waikato Times*, 23 December 1972, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Year Ended 31 March 1973, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *NZPD* Vol. 382, p. 246, 27 February 1973.

⁵¹ *NZPD* Vol. 382, p. 246, 27 February 1973.

enough, but had never been mentioned by the Labour party during the time of its two-China policy. In the 1960s Labour had accepted the Nationalist Chinese government as representing the Taiwanese. Luxton's question *was* relevant, since whatever the relationship between the Taiwanese people and their government, both of the major New Zealand political parties had previously always upheld the right of the people of Taiwan not to be absorbed into the PRC. The belief that the future of the non-communist people of Taiwan should not be mortgaged to the mainland government, even in principle, had been a major constraint on the Nash Labour government's desire to recognise the PRC. Twelve years later, the belief was no longer of great importance to the Kirk Labour government.

When a National Member of Parliament asked the Prime Minister what the Labour government's attitude would be if the People's Republic sought to assert its claim to Taiwan by force, Kirk, perhaps surprisingly, pointed out that Taiwan still had a mutual security treaty with the United States.⁵² The Prime Minister thereby implied that Labour's acknowledgement of the PRC's claim was only made because it knew the claim could not be enforced. The Prime Minister could have replied that Beijing was entitled to assert its rights by any means it saw fit, or that New Zealand hoped that Beijing would not resort to force.

For the Kirk government, a link with the People's Republic of China in the post-Vietnam era was a greater national interest than preserving links with Taiwan. Kirk hoped that New Zealand's move to initiate a relationship with the People's Republic would be a forerunner of a movement among all Asian nations to come to terms with China. New Zealand's future role in the Asia-Pacific region, he believed, was to encourage the nations of Southeast Asia to enter into relationships with China in order to eliminate the causes of conflict that might draw other powers into Asia on one side or the other. Kirk was to write in 1973:

It remains our long-term aim to bring about a reconciliation between countries that have been divided by the conflicts of a past generation, and especially between the countries of South-east Asia on the one hand and China on the other.⁵³

The goal that Kirk proposed for New Zealand was the opposite of the one set by the previous Labour government. Nash's government had been fearful of encouraging South-east Asian governments to develop a relationship with China. Just as Nash had been convinced that New Zealand's recognition might encourage Asian countries to consider the same course, with disastrous results for them, so Kirk now hoped that a New Zealand recognition would

⁵² *NZPD* Vol. 382, p. 246, 27 February 1973.

⁵³ Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the Year Ended 31 March 1973, p. 9.

point the way for Southeast Asian nations to do likewise, but this time with beneficial results.

Conclusion

The New Zealand Labour party had wanted to recognise the People's Republic of China since the early 1950s, but when in power between 1957 and 1960 it had found that other important foreign policy objectives had prevented it taking action. In the early 1970s, however, the international environment became more favourable to recognition. The major foreign policy objectives which had prevented the Nash government taking action were no longer in conflict with New Zealand's recognising China. First, a change in American policy towards China meant that it became possible to recognise China without straining New Zealand's vital alliance with the United States. Second, a change in China's policy towards the Western world and non-Communist governments in Southeast Asia meant that a relationship could be established with China without threatening Southeast Asia. Indeed, a relationship with China was now seen as enhancing the peace of the region. These two changes, in turn, lessened the importance of maintaining the link with Taiwan in New Zealand's policy. Although the Labour party was historically committed to the principle of self-determination of peoples, the principle had been applied to Taiwan only because of the Cold War: a consequence of the PRC's hostility to the West and New Zealand's concern for the security of other non-communist countries in Southeast Asia. Once China was perceived as no longer threatening the non-communist governments of Southeast Asia, Taiwan's importance as a symbolic outpost of anti-communism was much lessened. Even so, Kirk was reluctant to abandon formal links with a friendly nation, but after the United Nations had given international sanction to derecognising Taiwan, the Labour party was no longer prepared to give the goal of upholding Taiwan's right to an international existence priority over establishing a relationship with China.