New Zealand Court of Appeal allows appeal against anti-enforcement injunction

Introduction

The New Zealand Court of Appeal has allowed an appeal against a permanent anti-suit and anti-enforcement injunction in relation to a default judgment from Kentucky, which the plaintiff alleged had been obtained by fraud: *Wikeley v Kea Investments Ltd* [2024] NZCA 609. The Court upheld the findings of fraud. It also did not rule out the possibility of an injunction being an appropriate remedy in the future. However, the Court concluded that an injunction could only be granted as a step of last resort, which required the plaintiff to pursue its right of appeal against the Kentucky judgment.

The background to the case is set out in a previous post on this blog (see also here). In summary, the case involved allegations of "a massive worldwide fraud" perpetrated by the defendants — a New Zealand company (Wikeley Family Trustee Ltd), an Australian resident with a long business history in New Zealand (Mr Kenneth Wikeley), and a New Zealand citizen (Mr Eric Watson) — against the plaintiff, Kea Investments Ltd (Kea), a British Virgin Islands company owned by a New Zealand businessman. Kea alleged that the US default judgment obtained by WFTL was based on fabricated claims intended to defraud Kea. Kea claimed tortious conspiracy and sought a world-wide anti-enforcement injunction, which was granted by the High Court, first on an interim and then on a permanent basis. Wikeley, the sole director and shareholder of WFTL, appealed to the Court of Appeal.

The Court of Appeal allowed the appeal against the grant of the injunction. At the same time, it upheld the High Court's declarations that the Kentucky default judgment was obtained by fraud and that it was not entitled to recognition or enforcement in New Zealand. It also upheld the High Court's damages award (for legal costs incurred in overseas proceedings in defence of the tortious conspiracy).

The judgment

There are two points from the judgment that I want to focus on here: the Court's emphasis on comity, and the relevance of fraud as a basis for an anti-enforcement injunction.

Comity

An entire section of the judgment is dedicated to the concept of comity, which the Court relied on as a guiding principle. The Court said that it was necessary "to confront, head on, the appropriateness, in comity terms, of an order which … in substance, is addressed to United States courts and which could, at least in theory, provoke countermeasures, with the result that no legal system will be able to administer justice" (at [167]). Drawing on work by Professor Andrew Dickinson, the Court confirmed that comity was not simply "a matter of judicial collegiality" (at [164]). In the international system, comity was like "the mortar which cements together a brick house" (citing Judge Wilkey in *Laker Airways Ltd v Sabena Belgian World Airlines* 731 F 2d 909 (DC Cir 1984) at 937).

Anti-suit and anti-enforcement injunctions had the effect of interfering with comity, because they interfered with "the interests of a foreign legal system in administering justice within its own territory" (at [164]). Drawing again on Dickinson's work, the Court said that anti-suit/enforcement injunctions "push[ed] at the boundaries of … the global system of justice" (at [166]). The Court disagreed (at [189]) with the High Court's observation that the injunction "may even be seen as consistent with the requirements of comity", insofar as the injunction had the effect of restraining a New Zealand company from abusing the process of the Kentucky court to perpetuate a fraud. The United States courts were "unlikely to look for or need the protection of New Zealand courts" and were "well capable of identifying fraud and ensuring no reward flows from it" (at [189]).

Extreme caution was necessary, therefore, before exercising the power to grant an anti-suit/enforcement injunction (at [176]). Comity required "the court to recognise that, in deciding questions of weight to be attached to different factors, different judges operating under different legal systems with different legal policies may legitimately arrive at different answers" (at [177]). Anti-enforcement injunctions were especially rare and were "characterised by particularly careful

assessments of whether the relief sought is truly necessary and consistent with comity" (at [180]).

Because of these concerns, an anti-enforcement injunction should be "a measure of last resort" (referring again to Dickinson, at [185]). This meant that the Court in this case had to "at least await the outcome of the appeal process [in Kentucky] before considering whether to issue an anti-suit or anti-enforcement judgment" (at [186]).

Fraud as a distinct category?

In the anti-enforcement context, some scholars have treated fraud as a distinct category of case that may justify the grant of an injunction: see, most recently, Hannah L Buxbaum and Ralf Michaels "Anti-enforcement injunctions" [2024] 56 NYU Journal of International Law and Politics 101 at 110-111, citing *Ellerman Lines Ltd v Read* [1928] 2 KB 144 (CA) in support. The Queensland Supreme Court also relied on *Ellerman Lines* when granting relief in aid of the New Zealand interim orders (*Kea Investments Ltd v Wikeley (No 2)* [2023] QSC 215 at [178]–[188], with the Queensland Court of Appeal upholding the reasoning in *Wikeley v Kea Investments Ltd* [2024] QSC 201).

The Court of Appeal's reasoning casts doubt on the existence of fraud as a distinct category. In [176], the Court adopted Dickinson's "convenient collection" of the following four categories that may justify anti-suit relief (see fn 157): that "the foreign court has acted or is likely to act in excess of its jurisdiction under international law, in violation of the requirements of natural justice, otherwise in a manner manifestly incompatible with New Zealand's fundamental policies, or that its proceedings are likely significantly and irreversibly to interfere with the administration of justice in New Zealand".

On the facts of the present case, the Court thought that the category of natural justice was most relevant. The Court considered it "almost inevitable" that, had the New Zealand court been in the Kentucky court's position, it would have set aside the default judgment, on the basis that the proceeding had not been drawn to Kea's attention and sufficiently substantial grounds of defence had been made out (at [182]). The Court said that, in these circumstances, "[a]t least if the judgment were final, with all appeal rights exhausted and against a New Zealand entity … a New Zealand court might well consider that, despite its respect for the

United States courts, a sufficiently fundamental policy issue was engaged – *one ultimately based in principles of natural justice and fair hearing rights* – that an anti-suit or anti-enforcement order should issue" (at [183], emphasis added).

What is more, the Court distinguished the case from *Ellerman Lines Ltd v Read* [1928] 2 KB 144 (CA) on the basis "there was no contractual jurisdiction clause that the New Zealand Court was seeking to enforce" (at [187]). It expressed "caution" about the proposition that the pursuit of the Kentucky proceedings should be injuncted because the proceeding was fraudulent and therefore "inherently unconscionable", referring to criticism by Dickinson that the language of unconscionability is "a vestige of an earlier monotheistic society [which] no longer performs any useful role and obscures the real reasons for granting injunctions" (at [190]). A conclusion by the New Zealand court that the Kentucky proceeding was vexatious or oppressive had "the capacity to look patronising from the perspective of the United States – something which in comity terms should be avoided" (at [191]). The issue of fraud could be addressed by the United States court, "with all of the advanced legislative and common law apparatus available to it to do justice between the parties" (at [191]).

On the other hand, the Court clarified that it was not suggesting that "it would *never* be appropriate for a New Zealand court to issue a worldwide anti-enforcement order" (at [188], emphasis in original).

Comments

The Court's detailed engagement with comity is heartening for anyone who is concerned about the destabilising effects of anti-suit/enforcement injunctions on the international system. Yet the reasoning is also underpinned by tension.

First, the Court seemed to eschew fraud as a distinct basis for the award of an anti-enforcement injunction, while accepting the appropriateness of determining whether the foreign proceeding was fraudulent (and granting declaratory relief to that effect). If the Court is willing to entertain a claim that the pursuit of a foreign proceeding forms part of a tortious conspiracy, why should this not provide a potential basis for an injunction (as opposed to, say, natural justice)?

This potential contradiction had flow-on effects for the scope of the Court's

orders, because the Court refused to discharge the appointment of interim liquidators of WFTL. Interim liquidators had been appointed after attempts by the defendant to assign the benefit of the Kentucky default judgment from WFTL to a United States entity, to "insulate" WFTL from "any New Zealand judgment" (at [43]). The Court considered that the appointment of interim liquidators was "for valid domestic reasons by ensuring assets available to satisfy any New Zealand judgment remained under the control of New Zealand parties" and that it was "unaffected by discharge of the anti-suit and anti-enforcement injunctions" (at [196], [211](e)). The Court acknowledged that the interim liquidators could face pressure to enforce the Kentucky default judgment "in order to meet the New Zealand judgment debt and costs awards against WFTL – this despite the judgments of the High Court and this Court finding claims under the Coal Agreement to be fraudulent and made pursuant to conspiracy" (at [201]). The Court did not "at this stage express any view about how the principles of international comity might respond to that particular scenario" (at [201]). Why is it a "valid domestic reason" to protect the satisfaction of a New Zealand judgment for damages that were incurred in defending the foreign fraudulent proceeding, but it is not a "valid domestic reason" to prevent enforcement of a judgment that is the result of such a fraudulent proceeding?

Second, while the injunction had the potential to interfere with comity, it was also, arguably, a tool for dialogue. The Court of Appeal was clear that the injunction could not be understood as "an act of comity"; and it thought it was unlikely that the Kentucky court would want or would need the help of the New Zealand Court. At the same time, it would be strange if the Kentucky court did not take account of the finding of fraud, or the concerns about natural justice. In this way, the Court of Appeal's decision to treat the injunction as a last resort, and to require the plaintiff to pursue an appeal in Kentucky, may be seen as part of an unfolding dialogue between the courts that would not have happened – and would not have been possible – without the potential of anti-enforcement relief. At the very least, the decision will serve as a pointer to the Kentucky court that the default judgment has cross-border implications and gives rise to a risk of conflicting orders.

Third, the Court seemed to characterise the plaintiff's decision to bring proceedings in New Zealand as a strategic move, noting that "WFTL's New Zealand registration and its status as a trustee of a New Zealand trust provided a

jurisdictional leg up with which to challenge enforcement [of the Kentucky default judgment]" (at [194]). This characterisation sits uncomfortably with the Court's acceptance that the Kentucky proceeding – including the defendants' choice of Kentucky as a forum – was itself based on fraudulent fabrications. It is one thing to conclude that the plaintiffs should have persevered in Kentucky by pursuing their appeal there, on the basis that a foreign court must be left to control its own proceedings. It is another to say that the plaintiff, by turning to the New Zealand court for help, was using WFTL's registration in New Zealand as a "jurisdictional leg up" (cf also the Court's discussion in [183] that there would be a potential case for an anti-enforcement injunction if the default judgment was in breach of a New Zealand entity's rights to natural justice – that is, if *the plaintiff* was a New Zealand entity). Where a New Zealand entity is used as a vehicle for fraud, the New Zealand court may have a legitimate interest – or even a responsibility – to stop the fraud, albeit that an injunction is a measure of last resort.

Fourth, the Court of Appeal distinguished *Ellerman Lines* on the basis that the latter case involved an English jurisdiction clause. This reasoning suggests that anti-suit/enforcement relief may be an appropriate response to foreign proceedings brought in breach of a New Zealand jurisdiction clause, but that it may not be an appropriate response to foreign fraudulent proceedings between strangers. Why is it worse to suffer a breach of a jurisdiction clause, than to be dragged into a random foreign court on the basis of a fraudulent claim (including a forged jurisdiction clause in favour of the foreign court)? The Court did not address this question. The Court also did not address – but noted, in a different part of the judgment – the question whether a breach of a jurisdiction clause should justify injunctive relief as a matter of course (see footnote 158). Clearly, the Court did not think that this question was relevant to its decision to distinguish *Ellerman Lines,* but a more detailed discussion would have been helpful, to ensure the coherent development of the court's power to grant anti-suit/enforcement injunctions.