

Behind the “antiwar” stance of the Australian Greens

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The hundreds of thousands of people across Australia who joined demonstrations on February 14-16 to oppose the Bush administration's criminal invasion of Iraq were motivated by a genuine horror of war. Like millions across the globe, they added their voices to the demand “No war against Iraq”.

But if the antiwar movement is to avoid being politically derailed it must make a thorough break with the illusion that the US-led war, or any other imperialist conflict, can be averted through bringing pressure to bear on the powers-that-be, or through the intervention of some official agency such as the United Nations or of more enlightened sections of the capitalist class.

It is therefore essential to tackle and decisively reject the positions of the myriad organisations, political parties and individuals that fight to maintain such illusions. One of the most prominent is the Australian Greens, led by Senator Bob Brown—a party that is currently putting itself forward as an intransigent opponent of war.

The Greens have become prominent in the antiwar movement by declaring opposition to a US-led war against Iraq “under any circumstances”. From this position they work to keep the mass movement at the level of protest politics and to ensure that it does not draw the conclusion that the only way to stop war is to put an end to the economic and social order that causes it—namely, the capitalist system.

The Greens are not opposed to the impending war on the basis that the agenda driving it is imperialist plunder, but because they do not believe it serves the interests of Australian capitalism. Far from being an anti-capitalist party, the Greens function essentially as an arm of that section of the Australian ruling class which regards the forging of close alliances with regimes in the Asian Pacific region as critical to its future.

While not discarding the US-Australian alliance, the Greens, along with significant layers of corporate Australia, Liberal party dissidents and bourgeois commentators are worried that Howard's slavish support for Washington is isolating Australia within the region. They are also concerned that US unilateralism will undermine the authority of the United Nations—a body whose imprimatur Australia may require as it prosecutes its own neo-colonial operations closer to home.

Accordingly, the Greens disagree with sending substantial numbers of Australian troops to far-flung theatres of war at the behest of the US. They want the bulk of Australia's military capability kept in readiness to defend what they consider to be Australia's “national” interests, i.e., the financial and strategic requirements of the ruling elite in the “arc of instability” comprising South East Asia and the Pacific countries located to Australia's north.

The essential features of the Greens' position on Iraq are:

- * That mass pressure will force Howard to change his mind and bring the troops home.
- * That some credence should be given to Canberra and Washington's demand that measures be taken to ensure Iraq is disarmed.
- * The war should be opposed because it is not in Australia's national

interests.

These form the axis of the Greens' statements on the war, and were central to the speeches delivered by Brown at the Melbourne and Sydney antiwar rallies on February 14 and 16.

During the rallies Brown urged all those present to phone Prime Minister John Howard the next day and tell him, “Wrong way. Go back. Bring our people home.” He went on to appeal to Howard: “You can change your mind, you can be a statesman, you can be a leader, and you can get Australia out of this war. And when you, do I will be the first to congratulate you.” The utter futility of such appeals was rapidly demonstrated when Howard echoed US President George Bush in dismissing the demonstrations and declaring they would not influence his position.

Even as Brown acknowledges that Bush's military assault on Iraq is driven by the desire to establish US control of the country's vast oil reserves, he and the Greens continue to support the legitimacy of the so-called “disarmament” process and the need for “containment”. These pretexts are continuously advanced by Bush, Blair and Howard to justify an invasion.

It should be noted that it was the British and US governments that backed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in the first place, supplying him with “weapons of mass destruction” in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, as part of their attempt to weaken post-Shah Iran. Brown conveniently ignores the fact that the subsequent Gulf War of 1991 itself was subsequently waged to “contain” Iraq, as part of escalating US designs on Middle East oil. Brown told the Sydney rally: “Hussein has been contained for 10 years; we can contain him for another 10 or 20, until he's had it. We don't need to attack the children, the women and the men of Iraq to do that.”

The UN's so-called “containment” program, to which the Greens have extended their support, included the imposition in 1991 of crippling sanctions that have been responsible for the deaths of an estimated 500,000 Iraqi children and 600,000 adults, and caused untold suffering by preventing the reconstruction of the country's shattered infrastructure.

Brown called on Howard to support the so-called German-French peace proposal that involves sending hundreds of foreign troops into Iraq under the UN flag to back up weapon inspections. This proposal has nothing to do with defending the interests of the Iraq people. It is a calculated move by the German and French ruling classes to undermine the US war plans in order to assert their own interests in the region.

One of the most revealing statements by Brown at the Sydney rally was his declaration: “No matter what, this is George Bush's war. This is not Australia's war. And we should not be going into Iraq, no matter what”.

In other words the Greens' opposition to the war is not derived from an opposition to the violent eruption of US imperialism and the drive by the major powers for a redivision of the Middle East, but on an estimation that it is not in Australia's national interest. The clear implication is that if it were, the Greens would give the assault on Iraq their full support.

This thoroughly nationalist and pro-capitalist outlook is the cornerstone of the Green's attitude to war. Let us examine their record.

In 1999, the Greens issued a statement giving credence to US claims that the motivation for the NATO-sanctioned war against Yugoslavia was the defense of the Albanian Kosovar civilian population against supposed ethnic cleansing ordered by the Belgrade government.

The Greens statement declared: "The Australian Greens condemn the Serbian leadership in Kosovo for its policies and practice of genocide against the majority Kosovar people in Kosovo." The condemnation was accompanied by the ritual call for a ceasefire and for so-called UN peacekeeping forces to be sent to occupy the region.

While the Milosevic regime, like all the other nationalist governments in the region, certainly practised discrimination against ethnic minorities, it has now been established that the lurid claims of genocide were blatant lies. Moreover, the photographs circulated by the US to substantiate its allegations of "ethnic cleansing" in the so-called "Racak massacre" were actually of Albanian-backed Kosovo Liberation Army fighters killed in armed clashes with Yugoslav security forces.

Many thousands of men, women and children in Kosovo and throughout Yugoslavia were, however, killed and injured by NATO's 11-week bombing campaign that hit hundreds of civilian targets in cities, towns and villages. Tens of thousands more were made homeless and forced to flee when their homes were reduced to rubble by US bombs and missiles.

NATO bombing smashed Yugoslavia's infrastructure, causing untold suffering for millions of ordinary people both in the immediate aftermath of the war and up to the present time. But the Greens were not moved by such evident barbarity to issue a statement condemning the criminal actions of the Clinton administration or its NATO allies.

The US waged its undeclared war against Yugoslavia in order to bolster its strategic position in the Balkans and Central Asia—another oil rich area—against its European rivals. The Greens' position directly assisted the Howard government in its backing for the war, which was to prove extremely useful just months later, when the Australian government sought the support of the US for its own imperialist adventure.

Towards the end of 1999 Howard dispatched Australian troops to lead a UN force into East Timor. The Clinton administration intervened on behalf of the Australian government, threatening to crash the Indonesian economy if Jakarta did not accommodate itself to the Australian-led occupation.

Initially, Howard had been reluctant to intervene in East Timor, committed as he was to Australia's "special relationship" with the bloody Indonesia junta of President Suharto. Since the Whitlam Labor government in 1975, successive Australian governments had recognised Indonesia's claim on East Timor following the withdrawal of the former Portuguese colonial administration. In exchange, Suharto signed a treaty with Australia, guaranteeing it the lion's share of the abundant oil and gas reserves lying beneath the Timor Sea. When it became clear that the Portuguese were reviving their interest in East Timor in the wake of the demise of Suharto, Howard quickly realised the need for a dramatic shift in policy. If Jakarta were no longer in a position to guarantee Australia's interests in East Timor's oil, they would be secured by military means.

In August 1999 the East Timorese people voted for independence from Indonesia. Indonesian-backed militia responded with bloody massacres. For their part the Greens, along with every other parliamentary party and the entire coterie of middle class radical organisations, utilised the legitimate public outrage to actively campaign for an Australian-led UN intervention as the only means to end the killings.

In September 1999, the Greens issued a statement to the Howard government declaring that "Australia should support a multilateral armed intervention peacekeeping force being deployed in East Timor, with or without the Indonesian government's approval." The statement declared East Timor to be an "international protectorate".

The Australian-UN intervention was not a "humanitarian" mission to defend the East Timorese people. The militia murders had ceased well before Australian troops even arrived. The real motivation was confirmed when in March 2000 the Australian government and the UN Transitional Administration for East Timor (UNTAET) signed two agreements renegotiating the Timor Gap Treaty.

The agreements gave a US-Australian-Japanese-British consortium the rights to exploit the huge Bayu-Undan oil field under the Timor Sea that is expected to yield up to 400 million barrels of liquefied gas. They also determined that royalties and taxation revenues would be split between Australia and UNTAET.

How can one explain the fact that the very government now being condemned by Brown for its bloodthirsty warmongering in relation to Iraq was, less than two years ago, being entrusted by the Greens to undertake a "humanitarian mission" to defend the people of East Timor?

In order to mobilise people in support of what they perceive to be the needs of the Australian ruling class, the Greens detach politics from their economic foundations. They deny that *every* policy of *every* government serves definite class interests and that the policies of imperialist nations, Australia included, are determined, in the final analysis, by the ruthless and unending struggle for markets, resources and profits.

These economic interests are not conjunctural, ceasing to exist one day only to operate on another. They are the ever-present ultimate factor determining all government decisions. Such fundamental considerations are dismissed by Brown and his co-thinkers.

Therefore, when the US launched its invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, the Greens did not question Washington's claim that this was a legitimate response to the September 11 terrorist attacks. The fact that detailed US plans to invade Afghanistan had been drawn up well before the bombing of the World Trade Centre, did not concern them. And they made no attempt to point out Afghanistan's strategic location to the oil-rich Caspian Sea region and the Middle East.

The Afghanistan intervention, in which thousands of civilians were massacred by the US military and its militia proxies, enabled the Bush administration to establish a military presence in areas that had been inaccessible to the US from the time of the 1917 Russian revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union. Under the auspices of its "war against terrorism" the US established, for example, a huge air base in the former Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan, which borders China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

At the time, Bob Brown made no mention of opposition to "war under any circumstances." As US, British and Australian troops were pouring into Afghanistan, he made a statement claiming the invasion was not a war, but a "hunt for terrorists". His only concern was that the UN be in charge, not the US.

"Australia's commitment should be under the auspices of the United Nations," he declared. In an interview in January 2002 he told Duncan Reilly of the *Australian HomePage* "I believe the UN should have been in charge of the actions in Afghanistan, not just left to clean up the mess that the US has left behind."

The Australian Greens, like Green parties around the world, was founded on a program that explicitly rejects the class struggle and maintains that social conditions, democracy and the environment can be defended, and the drive to war averted, without challenging the existing capitalist property relations. Of course, this can best be achieved by electing Green politicians to parliament.

The German Greens, lauded by their Australian counterparts for "holding their governments to strong antiwar positions" on Iraq, reveal the logic of the Greens' outlook. Their overriding commitment is also to serving the "national interest."

At the moment, the German ruling class opposes a US war against Iraq because it fears it will result in US domination of a region that is of vital

economic importance to German corporations. This has allowed the Foreign Minister and well-known Green Joschka Fischer and his colleagues to strut the stage as antiwar activists.

In 1999, however, when German imperialism dispatched troops to Kosovo, Fischer obediently backed the move. If Germany eventually decides its interests lie in sanctioning a war on Iraq, it would be entirely in line with their record for the Greens to facilitate the shift and provide a new “humane” rationale for war.

While they currently oppose the Howard government, the Australian Greens will, over the coming weeks, intensify their efforts to contain the growing opposition to war and militarism by directing it into the safe channels of parliamentary and protest politics.

The growing antiwar movement can only go forward to the extent that it resolutely breaks from nationalist politics and the official parliamentary framework—including the ALP, the Democrats and the Greens—and opposes the entire socioeconomic system responsible for war. This requires turning to the construction of a new mass international movement, based on the international working class. Such a movement must be armed with a socialist perspective that sets itself the task of uniting the struggle against war with the fight against the unrelenting destruction of jobs, social conditions, living standards and democratic and civil rights and reconstructing society on the principles of genuine social equality and human solidarity. This is the perspective advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party.



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