

US ambassador lambasts Australian Labor Party leader

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US Ambassador Tom Schieffer has publicly denounced Australian Labor Party leader Simon Crean in the local media over criticisms made by Labor MPs of President George W. Bush and Australian participation in the impending US-led war against Iraq.

The unprecedented intervention follows last week's parliamentary debate on Australian involvement in the military assault during which right wing Labor MP Mark Latham described President Bush as "the most incompetent and dangerous president in living memory". Several other Laborites also denounced the US administration and the Senate, where the government does not have a majority, passed a no-confidence motion in Prime Minister John Howard.

The ALP has officially stated that it will support a US-led military attack if the United Nations Security Council endorses it, but 15 Labor MPs have defied the policy and said that they will oppose war against Iraq under any circumstances.

While Prime Minister Howard has responded to US requests for military backing and forward-deployed 2,000 Australian troops to the Persian Gulf, his government has little domestic support for a US-led war. With Germany, France and Russia manoeuvring against a unilateral attack on Iraq, any wavering in support from Australia, which Washington regards as one of its most dependable allies, would constitute an international diplomatic disaster for the US.

So when a few Labor MPs began criticising Howard's commitment of troops the US embassy reacted with fury. Deputy Ambassador Mike Owens phoned ALP leader Simon Crean's office twice on February 6 claiming that Latham's speech was "anti-American" and those who accused Howard of deception over the commitment of troops were alleging Bush to be a liar.

The next morning Ambassador Schieffer, a close friend and Texas business crony of Bush, told Channel Seven television that he was "concerned" that the comments were straining relations with the United States. Schieffer claimed he was not trying to bully, but then declared: [W]e're in the business of trying to express what American foreign policy is. The Australian Labor Party has to make up its mind as to how it reacts to this process."

Crean, who has a tenuous hold on the ALP leadership,

quickly tried to defuse the issue. He met with Schieffer later that day and assured him that Labor's support for the US-Australia alliance was "unshakeable". Two days later Crean told the Ten Network that he had cautioned Latham and in future Labor would tone down its criticism of Bush and US policy.

These assurances, however, did little to satisfy the ambassador who stepped up his attack in the *Bulletin* magazine this week. Schieffer told the national weekly in an interview published yesterday that Crean was making a "rank appeal to anti-Americanism" and "anti-George Bush feeling".

The US previously had "terrific relationships" with the Labor party, the US ambassador said, and praised former leader Kim Beazley and current Foreign Affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd for their close collaboration with senior US government officials. "Sadly Simon Crean doesn't have those kind of personal relationships," he added.

Schieffer said he was "surprised" Crean had not met with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage on his Australian visit last December or met key US administration figures during a US vacation during the Australian parliamentary Christmas break.

The ambassador predicted a quick and successful victory against Iraq and said: "By the end of March we'll begin serious negotiations [with Australia] for a free trade agreement. And we want to conclude that very quickly. Inside two years. Now when that happens, that will mean a relationship that literally, I mean literally, does not exist anywhere in the world."

In other words, a favourable trade deal with the US depends on 100 percent political backing for the US-led war against Iraq. And just in case the Labor leadership did not get Schieffer's message, the *Bulletin* spelt it out. Unless Crean fully supports US foreign policy dictates on Iraq, Australian trade negotiations with America might become "painfully, paralytically slow" if Labor "managed to win the next election."

Confronted with Schieffer's crude and unprecedented ultimatum, Crean demanded another meeting. "He does not have the right, nor does any ambassador, to interfere into the domestic politics of this country.... That's unprecedented and unacceptable," he said.

Labor backbencher and former foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton, was even more blunt: “I haven’t seen an intervention such as this since then-ambassador Walter Rice in the Nixon administration publicly attacked the Whitlam government after we criticised the carpet bombing of North Vietnam in December 1972.” Schieffer’s comments, Brereton said, constituted a “huge breach of diplomatic protocol” and the ambassador should be “immediately recalled to Washington and counselled.”

Schieffer, however, will not be counselled by Washington but encouraged to ratchet up the pressure. Direct intervention into ALP internal affairs constitutes an extraordinary breach of national sovereignty and diplomatic conventions, but this is how US imperialism now does business with its post-World War II allies and former political partners.

Last September the Bush administration published its National Security Strategy (NSS), which spells out the *modus operandi* of US foreign policy in the twenty first century. The document makes clear that the American government has dispensed with all principles of national sovereignty and international law and reserves the right to get rid of any regime it considers hostile to its vital interests.

The Howard government, the Labor party and other members of Australia’s political elite may try to console themselves that this doctrine is reserved for Iraq, Iran, North Korea, Libya or other impoverished ex-colonial countries. But the US ruling class has its sights on any nation that stands in its way.

Soon after releasing the NSS, the Bush administration intervened in the German elections against Gerhard Schroeder’s Social Democratic Party (SPD)-Green government because it made a last minute populist appeal to the anti-war sentiment in Germany, declaring it would not support a unilateral US military attack on Iraq. Furious over this stance, the Bush administration publicly supported the right-wing Christian Democratic Union and its conservative allies and conspired behind the scenes to undermine Schroeder and force his electoral defeat.

US officials seized on private comments by a German cabinet minister comparing Bush with Adolf Hitler to whip up a political scandal and try to turn public opinion against the government. While the SPD-Green coalition was returned with a narrow majority, the Bush administration has blackballed Schroeder and, to this day, has not observed the longstanding practice of formally congratulating the new government.

Likewise, Schieffer has regularly intervened in Australian domestic affairs since his appointment in 2001. He has declared, without a shred of evidence, that David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, Australian citizens imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay for over 12 months without charge and in contravention of basic human rights and international law, are “terrorists” and likened them to “Nazis”.

Schieffer has also castigated Australians for being “too complacent” about terrorism and urged the Howard

government to beef up police and security operations. Last year, in a crude attempt to whip up domestic fears, he declared that terrorists could easily detonate a nuclear bomb in Sydney Harbour.

Under his leadership the US embassy stepped into a federal by-election last October in Wollongong, an industrial city 80 kilometres south of Sydney. Nervous over mounting public opposition to Australian involvement in a US-led war against Iraq, embassy officials demanded meetings with all those contesting the election to discuss their positions on Iraq.

While US officials claimed they simply wanted to gauge public opinion in the run up to the November elections in the US, this information was widely available in Australian opinion polls. The real purpose was to send a message to all those contesting the election that the US State Department was closely monitoring their actions. Union officials have also reported that they have been visited or phoned by US embassy staff over the last few months to discuss their attitude to US plans to invade Iraq.

Notwithstanding their attempts to garner immediate political mileage over Schieffer’s bullying—the overwhelming popular response in Australia has been outrage—Crean and the Labor leadership will eventually fall into line. The ALP is a tried and tested political ally of US imperialism. It initiated the establishment of the US-Australian alliance during World War II and has loyally defended it ever since. Labor Prime Minister Bob Hawke became the first government leader to send troops to the 1991 Gulf War and Crean has stressed the ALP’s continuing and total support for the US-Australian alliance.

Schieffer’s threats to Crean, however, are aimed at intimidating not just the ALP, but the entire political establishment. The Bush administration confronts escalating economic problems at home and a growing domestic and international movement against its planned onslaught against Iraq. Under these conditions, it cannot tolerate anything less than total submission to its reckless and criminal foreign policy agenda.



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