

As Iraq war looms: Australian government shuts down parliament for two weeks

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Claims by Australian Prime Minister John Howard that his unconditional backing of the US-led war against Iraq is grounded on a commitment to democracy and human values were exploded on Wednesday when his government blocked calls for an emergency debate on Australian participation in the war, ejected two dissenting MPs and shut the parliament down for a two-week recess.

While Howard continues to insist to the Australian people, who are overwhelmingly opposed to a war, that no decision has been made, more than 2,000 Australian and military personnel have already been dispatched to the Gulf and declared ready for battle.

In the final hours of the current session, House of Representatives MP Peter Andren attempted to break the parliamentary silence by moving an urgency motion to suspend question time and hold a debate. Andren, an Independent, holds the rural New South Wales seat of Calare. Notwithstanding his conservative political views, Andren's speech provided a small indication of the depth of mass hostility to the assault on Iraq and to the official political establishment.

"This is a motion from the Australian people concerned at this likely and illegal war," Andren declared. "Everywhere I've gone in recent months, I've been accosted by people wanting to know why their representatives have not been given the chance to vote on arguably the most important military engagement ever contemplated by this nation..."

"Why the most important? Because it is the first time our nation's leader has so brazenly contemplated assisting in the attack on another state in the absence of any overt attack by that state on a neighbour... Australia is about to join the British and American administrations in a new and frightening military strategy—the so-called pre-emptive strike. This

American obsession with regime change, and redrawing the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East, is about to plunge the world into international lawlessness."

"As Australia prepares to join a coalition of the so-called willing in defiance of any Security Council veto by France, Russia or China, this parliament stands mute. In this place [parliament], a travesty of democracy and no vote wanted by either side!"

The government's response was contemptuous. Rising to his feet, Howard told the parliament that the commitment of Australian troops to war was a cabinet responsibility. Parliament would have the opportunity to hold a debate, he declared, but cabinet's decision would be final. In other words, the country's elected representatives would have no role in deciding whether Australia went to war or not. They could "debate" the issue, but outside of bringing down the government, their positions would be ignored.

Significantly Andren's intervention laid bare the collaboration of the Labor Party with the Liberals in stifling any discussion. The MP said he wanted to expose government and Labor "deceit of the Australian people, who expect not only a debate, but a vote to see... where their representative[s] stand on this issue."

Caught off guard, Labor MPs quickly scrambled to try and salvage their credibility, speaking in favour of Andren's emergency motion. A heated exchange erupted between Industrial Relations Minister Tony Abbot and Labor MP Wayne Swan, in which Abbot taunted the Laborites for their hypocrisy over Iraq and Swan accused the government of "political thuggery" for opposing a debate. This charade continued until the government used its majority to suspend Swan from parliament for refusing to withdraw his remarks. It then voted down Andren's motion for a debate on Iraq and

adjourned parliament until March 18.

Swan's denunciation of government "thuggery" is utterly cynical. Labor has no principled opposition to a war against Iraq. In fact, it has conspired with the government in parliament twice in the last six months—in September 2002 and February 2003—to prevent any formal vote on resolutions from Andren and the Greens opposing Australian military involvement in any attack on Iraq.

In the last weeks, however, as the antiwar movement has mushroomed, the ALP has attempted to distance itself from its past acts and posture as an opponent of the war. Hence Swan's "sound and fury" in the House of Representatives. In the Senate, Labor's desperate manoeuvring was even more clearly revealed.

Since the Howard government has no outright majority in the Senate, the ALP could force a debate on Iraq if it blocked with the Greens, Democrats and independents. Instead, it voted on Wednesday with the government to reject a motion by Greens Senator Kerry Nettle that was virtually identical to Andren's.

Calling for a debate on Iraq, Nettle declared: "The prime minister has blatantly disregarded every clear statement by the public on this issue. He has dismissed off-hand the millions of people who took to the streets two weeks ago... It is outrageous that when I asked yesterday about why this parliament is not allowed to vote on such an important issue, we were told that executive prerogative was the answer."

Government Senator Ian Campbell dismissed the resolution as a "cruel and disgraceful stunt", which he claimed, without a hint of irony, "demean[s] this great political institution, and... Australia as a democracy."

When Liberal Senator Peter Alston declared that parliament had already debated the question, he was backed up by Labor Senator Bill Ludwig. Demonstrating the unbridgeable chasm between Labor and the mass of the population, Ludwig said his party had made an earlier deal with the government to discuss the Petroleum (Timor Sea Treaty) Bill and there was therefore no time to debate whether Australia supported a US invasion on Iraq.

During the discussion, Greens leader Bob Brown pointed out that the Senate was suspending standing orders so it could "get its hands on the money from the Timor Gap oil". Brown continued: "The lives of Australian defence personnel and Iraqis should come

before dollars... This government wants to debate, on behalf of the oil corporations, how to get its hands on the East Timorese people's oil. That is its agenda for today—and it's disgusting."

These comments, however, had no impact on Labor senators, who blocked with the government to reject Nettle's resolution. Labor backed the government to expel Brown from the session, after he correctly characterised as "blackmail" the government's bullying of the East Timorese government so that Australia would secure the lion's share of oil and gas resources from the Timor Sea. With Brown ejected from the Senate for the day, the government pushed through the Timor Sea Bill and then adjourned the Senate for two weeks—all with ALP support.

Labor's Senate vote and its support for Brown's suspension makes clear that, on any matters of substance or principle, it is indistinguishable from the government. And, contrary to claims by Brown and the Greens, the sordid parliamentary manoeuvring on March 6 provides yet another demonstration of the fact that mass protests, rather than forcing the two parties to change course, are drawing them closer together.



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