

Australian Labor leader Crean backs Iraq war

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If there were any lingering illusions that the Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposed the US-led invasion of Iraq, they were dispelled last week by the comments of the party's parliamentary leader Simon Crean.

Formally, the ALP disapproves of a war without United Nations endorsement. As the war was launched, the party supported motions in parliament calling for the immediate withdrawal of the Australian military from the Persian Gulf. Just days later, however, Crean indicated that this "opposition" would remain a purely token affair.

Speaking on ABC television on March 23, Crean declared: "The government's decision to commit them [the troops] was wrong but we've got to be realistic about this. They are there, and what we've got to hope for, in the current circumstances, is that their task is completed quickly and successfully."

In other words, on paper, the ALP continues to declare publicly that the war is "wrong". In practice, however, it has no intention of insisting on the most elementary demand of any party opposed to the war: the immediate withdrawal of Australian special forces troops, warplanes and naval vessels from the Gulf.

Crean's comments raised a few voices of protest in Labor's ranks. Harry Quick, a backbencher from Tasmania, declared that "all hell" would break loose in the ALP caucus. But the predicted battle never materialised. Meetings of the shadow cabinet on March 24 and of the full caucus the following day fell right into line. Labor frontbencher Mark Bishop told the media that Crean's remarks "have the overwhelming endorsement and support of his colleagues."

Crean baldly insisted that there had been "no change" in Labor policy. But, when asked by the Greens to support a motion in the Senate calling for the

immediate withdrawal of Australian troops from the Middle East, Labor Senators insisted the word "immediate" be changed to "safe". And in a revealing indication of where the Greens are heading, the party agreed to the change.

This semantic manoeuvre had nothing to do with the well-being of the young men and women sent to invade Iraq—the safest thing for them would be to leave the war zone straight away. It was a signal to the government and its allies in the Bush Administration that Labor, while retaining certain "criticisms," would not actively press for an end to Australian military involvement. As far as Labor is concerned, the troops will only come home when Washington has achieved its aims.

For all its political twists and turns in the last few weeks, Labor has come full circle. The party has never opposed the criminal and illegal US-led war on Iraq on a principled basis. It accepted Washington's phony pretext—Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction—as good coin, and maintained a polite silence on the Bush administration's predatory ambitions in the Middle East. The ALP merely wanted UN authorisation. Even then, Crean left open the option for Labor to support a unilateral US strike—in the event of a veto in the UN Security Council.

The outpouring of antiwar opposition in Australian cities in mid-February, as part of the global protest movement, caught Labor by surprise. When Crean told a rally in Brisbane on February 16 that Labor would support an invasion of Iraq if it had UN support, he was loudly jeered. With opinion polls registering a majority opposed to war, Labor attempted to make up ground lost to the Greens by turning up the volume on its antiwar rhetoric—without altering its political line in any fundamental way.

On March 16, when the US and Britain failed to get

the backing of the UN Security Council, Labor had to make a decision. A majority in the UN Security Council clearly opposed a second resolution for war. With antiwar protests mounting, Crean declared any assault on Iraq without UN approval was “illegal”. For three days he fulminated against Howard in parliament, at the National Press Club and in a nationally broadcast television address. But as the war unfolded and the media campaign to “support our boys” intensified, Crean retreated, accepting the deployment of troops, and thus the war itself, as a *fait accompli*.

It was left to Labor frontbencher Bob McMullan to offer a pathetic justification for the party’s complete capitulation. Speaking to the media after the shadow cabinet meeting last week, he declared: “If the Labor Party was the government there would be no Australian troops in Iraq, but the Howard government will not be withdrawing them. So our consistent position is if the government won’t withdraw them we hope they come back safely and as soon as possible.”

In fact the opposite is the case. If Labor were in office, it would be functioning in precisely the same criminal manner as the present government. In 1990, the Hawke Labor government earned the dubious distinction of being among the first in the world to back the first Gulf War and commit Australian forces to it. Over the last decade, the ALP has uncritically backed every intervention and adventure by US imperialism—from Kosovo to Afghanistan—as well as the Howard government’s own neo-colonial foray into East Timor.

If Crean’s criticisms represent anything more, it is a developing nervousness within a layer of the ruling class about the consequences of Bush’s doctrine of preemptive war and the shattering of the framework of international relations that has existed since World War II. At one point in his National Press Club address last week, Crean declared that whereas the US was “big enough to look after its own national interests”, Australia and other middle size nations “needed an international framework to operate in.”

Translated into plain English, Crean is warning that, as a minor imperialist power, Australia could lose out if the law of the jungle prevails. The US may be able to nakedly use its military muscle to seize oil reserves in the Middle East, but Australia cannot prosecute its imperialist interests without help. While Howard

believes that the best option is to strengthen the Australia-US alliance by doing whatever Washington demands, and hope for future paybacks, other sections of the bourgeoisie are concerned that such a policy could have serious repercussions in Asia, where Australia’s most lucrative markets lie.

The only thing that worries Crean’s critics within the Labor caucus is that he has not achieved the “bounce” in the opinion polls that they believe he could have, if only he had maintained his “antiwar” rhetoric a little longer. Labor is so despised by the majority of working people that Howard is still far ahead of Crean in the polls as preferred prime minister.

The hostility to Crean, however, is bound up with deeper processes. After years of presiding over job destruction, cuts in health, education and other social services at the state and federal level, the Laborites have totally exhausted their political credibility. The war has simply demonstrated, yet again, that the Labor Party does not represent the interests of working people in any shape or form.



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