

Australian Labor backs call for execution of Hussein

Richard Phillips
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Predictably, Australian Prime Minister John Howard was among the first in the world to join the lynch mob demanding the execution of Saddam Hussein. After an early-morning phone call from US President Bush on Monday, Howard appeared on local radio and television networks supporting any future death sentence for the former Iraqi leader. He later told CNN's *Larry King Live* program that if an Iraqi trial ordered Hussein's execution he would support it "absolutely".

Howard's cold-blooded response is not new. In August he praised the death sentence handed down by an Indonesian court to Amrozi bin Nurhasyim over his involvement in the October 2002 Bali terrorist bombings, claiming it would provide a "sense of comfort" to those who lost loved ones in the tragedy. His comments flew in the face of the United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which Australia has signed, binding it to oppose the death penalty in every country.

The most significant response, however, came from Mark Latham, the recently elected Labor Party leader. Echoing Howard, Latham hailed Hussein's capture and said that if the former dictator were given the death penalty by an Iraqi tribunal, "you won't find any objections coming from me". Latham failed to mention that any trial of Hussein in Iraq would be conducted entirely under Washington's direction, with the outcome a foregone conclusion.

Latham's decision to support the death penalty was taken unilaterally and in direct contravention of official party policy. As Barry Jones, one of Labor's rotating presidents, was quick to point out: "The policy of the Labor Party for over a century has been to oppose capital punishment. This is a moral position and it's unequivocal. It does not apply just to Australian

nationals or to offences committed in the southern hemisphere. It is a universal principle."

But Jones, who established his political credentials in the mid-1960s as a leading opponent of the execution of Ronald Ryan, the last person hanged in Australia, was a lone voice. No other Labor official, including Carmen Lawrence, the newly elected Labor president and a so-called "left", uttered a word against Latham's position.

In fact, Latham's support for the execution of Hussein and its endorsement by the "left" further demonstrates Labor's fundamental and far-reaching shift to the right. The party has now decided that it will outflank Howard from the extreme right and do everything possible to win the backing of Australia's corporate elite, as well as the most confused and ignorant layers of society to which Howard appeals.

Earlier this year, Latham claimed to be an opponent of the Bush administration and Australia's participation in the US-led war against Iraq. In February, at the height of the antiwar movement, he told parliament that the US president was "flaky and dangerous" and crudely denounced Howard as a "brown nose" and "suckhole" for supporting US plans to invade Iraq.

Latham's "opposition" evaporated immediately he was elected Labor leader on December 3. Two days later he met with US Ambassador Tom Schieffer and pledged his total support for the US alliance. The alliance, he declared, was fundamental to Australia's national interests and Labor "looked forward to working closely with the US ambassador and the US administration on common security policy challenges".

To reinforce this message, Latham held a press conference in front of a hastily erected American flag in Labor's Canberra headquarters. Against this backdrop, Latham told journalists that his previous

criticisms of Bush were made in the “heat of debate” and should now be forgotten.

Many things had been said in passion, he said, but “now I have a different responsibility as the alternative PM and I put the American alliance, and the relationship, as the starting point”.

And just to show his determination to work closely with the US on “common security policy challenges,” he prevailed upon Labor MPs the next day to vote with the Howard government to pass amendments to the recently adopted anti-terror laws.

The amendments make it a crime, punishable by five years jail, to protest against, or even report on, the use of the new detention and interrogation powers of Australia’s domestic spy agency, ASIO. Labor senators who had previously opposed this violation of basic democratic rights told the media that the amendments were now minor issues.

In his first week as leader, Latham created a new opposition portfolio—Homeland Security, headed by Robert McClelland, former legal affairs spokesman. McClelland will prepare the integration of 11 different police and spying agencies and advocate the formation of an armed national Coastguard.

The adoption of the name Homeland Security is no accident. It is a deliberate signal to the Bush administration that a future Labor government will go even further than Howard in embracing Washington’s military aggression.

Labor has also cleared up any ambiguity over its position on the Howard government’s assault on civil liberties and basic rights. A day after Latham backed the execution of Hussein, McClelland revealed that he had been in high-level negotiations with the Howard government to give Attorney General Phillip Ruddock unprecedented executive powers.

With Labor’s backing, Ruddock and all future attorneys general will have executive authority to ban any organisation they claim to be terrorist.

Up until a month ago, Labor categorically opposed these powers. Its senators argued that no organisation could be banned unless the UN Security Council had outlawed it. Moreover, it could only be made illegal in Australia after a majority vote in parliament.

Labor’s decision to change tack took place without any discussion among the party’s rank and file. In fact, the parliamentary caucus unceremoniously dumped its

former position the very day it made Latham leader.

And to make it clear that there would be no retreat from the ALP’s far-right course, McClelland told the *Australian* on December 17 that too many of the party’s members—such as teachers, lawyers, university students and social workers—were out of touch with “suburban Australia”.

“We need to convince people [that] Labor has got more than safe hands on security,” he declared. Translated into plain English, Labor will not only pursue an even more right-wing course than Howard, but ride roughshod over any opposition, within or outside the party.

As the *Australian* commented, approvingly, McClelland was “determined to forge a new direction on national security and terrorism” and did not care about “putting many noses out of joint along the way”.

The silence of the Labor “lefts” is a preview of what will occur at the ALP national conference in January. The gathering will hail Latham as a great leader, deepen its support for the US-led “war on terror” and do everything possible to prove to corporate Australia that it will not flinch in deepening the attacks on the basic democratic rights and living standards of the working class.



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