

# Australian Labor conference bows to Washington: No debate on Iraq

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Despite a mountain of new evidence demonstrating that the main pretext for the US-led war on Iraq—its possession of stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction—was a complete fraud, not a single delegate at the recent Australian Labor Party (ALP) national conference condemned the illegal occupation of Iraq or called for the withdrawal of all allied (including Australian) troops.

As the staged-managed conference dragged on over three days it became increasingly clear that there was unanimous agreement between all those present—delegates, party functionaries and the media—that any debate on the central foreign policy issue of the day—the violent eruption of US militarism—was well and truly off the agenda.

In his opening address, newly elected leader Mark Latham referred briefly to the invasion of Iraq but only to cover up for Labor's own criminal support for the war. "Delegates," he declared, "I give you this pledge; a Labor Government will never send young Australians to war in search of weapons that don't exist, for a purpose that's not true."

That, however, is precisely what the ALP supported. In the face of last year's mass demonstrations against the war, fuelled by the widespread popular sentiment that Bush, Blair and Howard's WMD justifications amounted to a pack of lies, Labor never once rejected the claim that Iraq possessed forbidden, lethal weapons. At the same time the party repeatedly expressed its support for military intervention to remove them, so long as the United Nations Security Council sanctioned it.

When the invasion took place, Labor swung behind Australian participation in the US-led war. Former ALP leader Simon Crean declared that since Australian troops had been dispatched to a theatre of war he had

no other option but to support them and the job they were doing.

During his conference address Latham was at pains to declare his life-long attachment to the American military alliance, lauding it as a key pillar of Labor's foreign policy. In doing so, he was accommodating to the demands of key sections of big business, as well as corporate media proprietors who have been grooming and cultivating him as a possible alternative to Prime Minister John Howard. But the condition has always been that Labor mend its bridges with Washington.

This is why, on taking over Labor's top job last December, Latham's first act was to call a press conference to express his unequivocal embrace of US foreign policy. Flanked by an American flag he recanted his earlier designation of Bush as "the most incompetent and dangerous president in living memory" and his crude characterisation of Howard as an "arse licker" for backing the US invasion. He also reiterated his commitment to the so-called "war on terror" and emphasised his hope for a "very, very good relationship" with Washington.

In the weeks that followed the new Labor leader was the recipient of unabashed praise, with the media extolling his leadership qualities and applauding the party for having the good sense to propel him into its top job.

At the conference, Labor's "lefts," some of whom had postured last year as critics of Labor's war policy, fell completely into line. Sensing the shift in ruling circles, and the possibility of winning government, they made a calculated decision that their best interests lay in burying the whole issue.

In the "debate" on foreign policy, not a single "left" raised the illegal occupation of Iraq, let alone called for the withdrawal of troops. Nor did they call for the

release of the two Australian citizens, David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib, along with the other 660 detainees, held by Washington at Guantanamo Bay in violation of international law and basic democratic rights. That, too, would have raised Washington's ire.

When the *World Socialist Web Site* asked a number of leading lights about their attitude to the Iraq war, they responded with astonishment that anyone wearing a media tag would even raise the question.

Before the foreign policy debate, WSWS asked leading "left" and newly elected ALP national president Carmen Lawrence if she would be moving a resolution calling for the withdrawal of US and Australian troops from Iraq.

At the height of the antiwar demonstrations, Lawrence played a key role in trying to divert popular hostility to the invasion back within the safe channels of parliamentary politics and to stem the tide of protests from disgusted ALP members. She toured the country to address protest rallies, carefully distancing herself from official Labor policy. She even participated in a media grabbing protest stunt, joining a boatload of antiwar activists in an unsuccessful attempt to "inspect" weapons of mass destruction on board the USS Abraham Lincoln that was berthed off Fremantle, in Western Australia.

Looking totally bemused, Lawrence claimed she was "not sure what the question meant" and that she needed a moment to think. "You have put a proposition to me and I am not quite sure where you are getting it from or where you are going to," she declared, then abruptly strode away to avoid further questioning.

Lawrence, a seasoned politician and former Western Australian Labor premier, understood only too well what the question meant. Had such a resolution hit the conference floor it would have provoked violent opposition from Latham, as well as the ALP's power brokers and factional chiefs, laying bare the party's craven support for the occupation and its complicity in the catastrophe that has been created.

But if she were to publicly declare her opposition to moving such a resolution, it would seriously damage her reputation as a "left" critic of Labor's rightwing, and her carefully crafted image as an outspoken opponent of the war.

Likewise, shadow minister Martin Ferguson, a former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions

and ex-metal union national official, Senator George Campbell, let it be known that the least of their worries was the suffering of the Iraqi people. Both flatly told WSWS that they had been far too busy negotiating on joint policy resolutions with right-wing faction leaders to concern themselves with the Iraq war.

When WSWS asked leading Victorian "left-winger" Peter Holding why he had remained silent on the invasion of Iraq, he simply declared that to raise the issue would have been futile because the rightwing would never agree to any resolution condemning the Bush administration or the Howard government or demanding the withdrawal of troops.

When the same question was put to key "left" faction leader Anthony Albanese—the mover of a resolution condemning the Turkish occupation of Cyprus—he snapped back: "What the hell are you talking about? There is no need for a discussion. Our policy is well known."

Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs Kevin Rudd made crystal clear what that policy is. He told WSWS that the occupation of Iraq was "not illegal," insisting that the occupying forces had to stay because, under the UN charter, they now had a "duty of care" to perform. Ruling out from the start any conception that the Iraqi people have the right to decide their own fate, Rudd demanded: "Who else is there?"

The unanimous silence of every section of the ALP on the war crimes being committed in Iraq constitutes a serious warning of the agenda it will pursue once it holds the reins of power.



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