

Australia:

Political uproar over Labor leader's call for troop withdrawal from Iraq

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A half-hearted and highly qualified suggestion by Australian opposition leader Mark Latham that the country's troops might be withdrawn from Iraq by Christmas if Labor wins the next general election has sparked a political uproar. Following hard on the heels of the shock election result in Spain, the response to Latham's remark indicates escalating fears in both the Bush administration and the Howard government that their "coalition of the willing" is starting to unravel.

Latham made the comment in an interview with radio 2UE's Mike Carlton last Tuesday. Asked when the troops should be brought home, Latham replied: "We believe we have a responsibility to rebuild [Iraq] and as soon as that responsibility is discharged they should be back here." He said this would "hopefully" be before the end of the year, after "a sovereign handover to a new Iraqi government."

Carlton indicated that he thought Latham's response was "a bit wishy-washy," leaving "a lot of room to move." He asked the Labor leader: "And you would hope they would be home by Christmas?" Latham answered cautiously, "Yes, if that timetable of midyear [for the handover] is adhered to...[and] say the election was in September and there was a change in government, we would be hoping to have them back by Christmas."

Until two weeks ago the Labor party had fully backed the government's ongoing involvement in Iraq. But the fallout from the Madrid bombings—where popular outrage at the Iraq war and the lies on which it was based saw the conservative government thrown out of office and replaced by a social democratic party committed to withdrawing Spanish troops—has transformed the political landscape.

The latest opinion poll found 65 percent of the population believes Australia is at greater risk of terrorist attacks because of its participation in the war and the Howard government's electoral stocks are rapidly falling. Latham has calculated that a timely shift on Iraq might allow him to ride the wave of anti-war sentiment all the way to the election, due later this year.

Despite their tentative character, the government and the Murdoch media have responded to Latham's remarks with outrage, employing the same denunciations of "appeasement"

and "cowardice" that they hurled against the Spanish people. Liberal MP, Ross Cameron declared, for example: "Today, in the mountains of west Pakistan, Osama bin Laden is stroking his beard and celebrating the advent of Mark Latham," while National Party Senator Ron Boswell recommended Latham be nominated for the "al-Qaeda cup." As well as a barrage of scathing editorials, Murdoch's *Australian* published interviews with "defence experts" accusing Latham of firing "bullets" at Australian troops in Iraq and rendering them more vulnerable to attack.

So concerned was the White House at the turn of events in Australia—up until now its most loyal and unconditional ally—that Bush's personal friend and business partner, US ambassador Tom Schieffer, immediately weighed in. Ignoring diplomatic protocol concerning domestic political affairs, he issued a thinly veiled threat on ABC Radio's AM program to the Labor leader that the best thing he could do was "reconsider" and "come to a different conclusion." He told the *Age* newspaper that Labor's stance could encourage terrorist attacks and harm the US-Australia alliance, adding that he was making his comments on behalf of the president.

From a military standpoint, the reaction is absurd—Australia's troop deployment in Iraq is completely insignificant. Of around 135,000 foreign troops, including 115,000 from the US and 9,000 from Britain, Australia has just 280—fewer than Poland, Italy, Ukraine, Spain, The Netherlands, Japan, Romania, Hungary and Portugal.

But from a political standpoint Australia's continuing involvement is seen as critical. Noone has been a more enthusiastic or unconditional backer of the US "war on terror" than Prime Minister Howard. Behind the backs of parliament and the Australian people Howard committed 2,000 troops to the illegal war—along with just two other countries, the US and Britain. Now the Bush administration, facing the increasingly catastrophic consequences of its occupation and a deepening political crisis at home—intensified by the events in Spain—cannot afford an Australian defection.

Demonstrating just how sensitive the issue has become, Murdoch's *Australian* lamented: "A precipitate withdrawal by

Australia would psychologically damage the US-led coalition and could generate an exodus from Iraq... For Washington and London the early exit of Australian forces from Iraq would be a bitter blow, undermining attempts to broaden the multinational rebuilding task..."

Howard has moved rapidly to try and reassure his more powerful friends that he remains as committed as ever, and that he has the situation under control. In a comment entitled "Stand Firm" published in the *Wall Street Journal* on Friday, the prime minister parrots the Bush administration's line that the military occupation of Iraq and the violent subjugation of its people represent the birth of freedom and democracy.

Like Bush, Howard has decided to refrain from mentioning the non-existent weapons of mass destruction and the fraudulent arguments on which he took the country to war. Iraq, he writes, has now become an "unconventional war...where terrorists seek to destroy the freedom offered by the overthrow of Saddam Hussein."

The truth is that the foreign troops are there on behalf of Washington to intimidate the Iraqi people into submission and put down their resistance to the occupation of their country. To the extent that Al Qaeda or other Islamic fundamentalists have begun operations, this is the direct responsibility of the US-led coalition. As a mountain of evidence has conclusively established, including the Australian government's own Senate inquiry, there were no links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein prior to the invasion, nor any WMD.

"Whether you agree with the decision to invade Iraq or not," Howard continues, "there is no denying that there is a job to be done to ensure that the Iraqi people have a future." He pledges to "stay the course and finish the job."

What job is he referring to? Howard doesn't like to be too concrete, because his whole "argument" rests on separating the reason for keeping the troops in Iraq from the real goal of the war. This was not to find WMD but to remove Washington's previous ally, Saddam Hussein, from power, install a puppet regime that would give free rein to US corporate interests to pillage the country's oil and establish the contractual framework for handing over its entire infrastructure to private investors.

As former White House insiders Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill and counter terrorism co-ordinator Richard Clarke have revealed, this was the agenda of Bush junior's administration from day one. It utilized the September 11 terror bombings as the convenient pretext to set in motion, under the guise of a "war on terror," a neo-colonial war of conquest.

As for Howard, his concern was to use the September 11 atrocity for his own purposes: to strengthen the US-Australia alliance by lining up unconditionally behind US foreign policy and, in return, getting the green light to pursue Australia's own neo-colonial designs in the Asia-Pacific region.

But instead of joyous crowds greeting the invading forces with flowers and kisses, the coalition met dogged resistance, in

line with the traditions of anti-colonial struggle in Iraq dating as far back as the fight against the British in the 1920s.

That is why Howard writes: "Talk of an early withdrawal, or arbitrary deadlines, undermines [the coalition forces'] role and gives comfort to those who seek to thwart the creation of a free and democratic Iraq."

"Those who seek to thwart" the ambitions of Washington are the Iraqi people. "A free and democratic Iraq" is an open market economy, with the privatization of formerly state-owned assets, particularly oil. What Howard is really saying is that the military occupation will continue until a government has been established, totally beholden to Washington, with contracts in place and a constitution set up that guarantees no deviation from US interests. Accordingly, a US state department official told the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Friday that after June 30, when the "interim government" purportedly takes control, "We anticipate a continued need for international assistance, including security assistance."

Like the "white man's burden" at the end of the nineteenth century, the "war on terror" has become the euphemism for a new period of imperialist aggression and expansionism at the dawn of the twenty-first. Just as Israeli Prime Minister Sharon uses the Palestinians' resistance to the seizure of their land to justify further acts of murder and assassination, so Howard and Bush utilize the Iraqi people's resistance to the illegal occupation to justify ever-greater repression—all under the guise of the "war on terror."

Latham's response so far to the uproar has been to accuse Howard of "putting the interests and security of Iraq ahead of the interests and the security of Australia." He has firmed up his pledge to withdraw the troops, not because he defends the right of the Iraqi people to determine their own future, but because he senses that sections of the Australian ruling elite have become concerned with Howard's total embrace of Bush and want Australia's interests more aggressively pursued closer to home.



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