

Australian Labor leader backs down on Iraq troop withdrawal

Terry Cook
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Remarkably, Australian Prime Minister John Howard last week told government MPs that he believed that the US-led occupation of Iraq was “becoming less of an electoral negative” for the Liberal-National Party Coalition. With an election due within months, his comments signal that the government is preparing to focus its re-election campaign on the “war on terror” and Howard’s unconditional support for Washington.

How is this possible, when every lie employed to invade Iraq has collapsed—from the supposed existence of “weapons of mass destruction” to Saddam Hussein’s alleged connections to Al Qaeda? How can Howard sniff an electoral advantage when the political fallout from the deepening quagmire in Iraq is engulfing every government that supported the war? His government itself is caught up in yet another scandal after evidence surfaced that it had advanced knowledge of the torture of Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison, but did nothing.

If Howard has any wind in his sails, it is not because he has detected a “turnaround” in the sentiments of broad masses of people, whose hostility to the government has deepened as its mountain of lies has unravelled. Rather his confidence flows directly from the grovelling performance of the Labor Party opposition.

Once again, Labor has demonstrated that it offers absolutely no alternative to Howard on any of the vital issues facing millions of people—particularly the war on Iraq, Washington’s “war on terror” and the US-Australia military alliance.

This has emerged clearly since March 23, when Labor leader Mark Latham begrudgingly suggested that if Labor won government this year it would try to pull Australian troops out of Iraq before Christmas.

Radio 2UE commentator Mike Carleton literally

dragged the highly qualified comment out of Latham during an interview following the surprise election result in Spain, which saw the incoming social democratic government pledge to withdraw its troops. Under questioning from Carleton, the reluctant Latham eventually said Australian troops would “hopefully” be out before the end of the year, after “a sovereign handover to a new Iraqi government”.

Since then, Latham and his Labor colleagues have been at pains to qualify the tenuous “commitment” on troop withdrawal, or find a means of dropping it altogether. Their quest became even more frenzied after Latham was sharply rebuked by US President George Bush and senior White House officials.

Standing alongside Howard during a brief media conference on the White House steps on May 27, Bush denounced Latham’s suggestion as “disastrous”. With several members of the “coalition of the willing” following Spain in quitting Iraq, the Bush administration was highly sensitive to anything that could further undermine its shaky position.

Bush’s blunt intervention into the Australian election campaign was followed by a barrage from other administration members. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage warned that any move to withdraw Australian soldiers would put the 53-year-old US-Australia alliance “at risk”. “Now, you either have a full-up relationship or you don’t,” he declared. Armitage labelled Latham’s suggestion as “unthinkable” and demanded he “rethink” his position.

Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian* joined the offensive in a June 12 editorial, which proclaimed: “Both the importance of the Alliance and our obligation to the people of Iraq make it essential that Mr Latham abandon his undertaking to bring the troops back from Baghdad by Christmas.”

The blast from Washington, together with criticism by the Murdoch media, was enough to send Labor's shadow foreign minister Kevin Rudd scurrying. He used the occasion of the annual Australia-US "leadership dialogue" in Washington to seek an audience with Armitage to "explain" Labor's position.

Rudd, a right-wing former foreign policy official well known to Washington, emerged from his discussion with Armitage to declare that despite "differences over Iraq," Latham "would be welcomed to the White House as any other previous Australian Prime Minister".

The apparent softening of Washington's attitude was not because Rudd, as he claimed, had "robustly put our case" on Australian withdrawal from Iraq, but because Labor had shifted from its nominal suggestion of a troop pull-out by the end of the year.

Ludicrously claiming that Labor's policy had been "clear cut from the beginning," Rudd declared: "It is those forces which are purely dedicated to the Iraq-specific operation which would be withdrawn." The Australian warship HMAS Stuart, with its 175 personnel, would remain on patrol in the Persian Gulf and a contingent of PC Orion surveillance aircraft, backed by a 160-strong support team, would also stay.

As for the 86 or so Australian troops supposedly engaged in "protecting" the Australian embassy and its staff in Baghdad, Latham said he would take advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade on their deployment. At best, just 425 of the 846 military personnel deployed in Iraq and surrounding countries would be withdrawn.

Rudd's position was completely in line with the *Australian* editorial, which advised Latham to use the "decision of the UN to allow troops to serve in Iraq to protect its workers" to "leave our small commitment of troops on the ground without losing face with his own Left". "This could be a big, but painless step, towards defusing tensions that would otherwise dog relations between a Latham government and the US," it insisted.

Facing the likely prospect of the Howard government's electoral defeat, sections of Australia's ruling elite have been grooming Latham as an acceptable alternative. Central to their agenda is Washington's continued patronage. The *Australian* editorial reminded Latham: "Their [US] diplomatic pressure on Indonesia and logistics support were

fundamental to the success of our military intervention in Timor."

Australia's small contingent of troops in Iraq has never been significant from a military standpoint. Its importance to Washington is political—it helps bolster the fiction that the Bush administration's criminal invasion of Iraq had international support. Labor's commitment to maintain a military presence, no matter how small, plays exactly the same role. It adds legitimacy to the colonial occupation of Iraq, which was carried out, not to bring peace and democracy to the Iraqi people, but to seize the country's vast oil reserves and facilitate Washington's ambitions throughout the Middle East and Central Asia.

From the very beginning, Labor has been an accomplice of the Iraqi invasion, preferring only that it were carried out under the cover of a UN Security Council resolution. Not one delegate, right or left, at Labor's national policy-making conference earlier this year even mentioned the ongoing occupation, let alone called for the withdrawal of troops. To do so would have cut across Labor's own orientation to Washington, which it regards as essential to ensure support for Australia's military interventions in the Asia-Pacific region.

It was not surprising, therefore, that, following his meeting with Armitage, Rudd underscored this relationship. The alliance with the United States was, he said, "broader than Iraq" and "covers areas of critical concern to both countries in the Asia-Pacific, challenges over the Korean peninsula, China, Taiwan, Islamic Southeast Asia and South Asia."

Latham has also made it known that Labor will cause no further embarrassment to Washington in the lead up to the US and Australian elections. On June 17, he told a meeting of Labor MPs that the issue of troop withdrawal from Iraq was now of "scant interest" to anyone outside the corridors of parliament.



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