

# The Greens, the Socialist Alliance and John Pilger

Nick Beams  
17 June 2004

*Below we are publishing a letter sent to the WSWs in response to comments made by Nick Beams in his address to a WSWs-SEP public meeting in Sydney last month, and the reply by Nick Beams. A report of the meeting on "The Iraq war and the international working class" can be found at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/meet-j04.shtml>. Beams' report can be found at <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2004/jun2004/nb-j04.shtml>.*

Dear comrades,

I refer to the text of a speech by Nick Beams at a recent public meeting in Sydney, in which Beams states in regard to the attitude of the rest of the left towards the Iraq war:

"They [the Greens] maintained that the alternative to war was the so-called 'containment' program of sanctions under the UN-sanctions that had led to the death of up to half a million Iraqi children. Insofar as they oppose Australian military involvement in Iraq, it is on the basis that Australian troops should be deployed closer to home to protect the national interest. These views are echoed on their left by the so-called Socialist Alliance and radicals such as the journalist John Pilger".

While it is true that some representatives of the Greens have couched their opposition to the Iraq war in nationalistic terms, it is incorrect to suggest that all members and tendencies of this relatively large and contradictory party pose their position this way. However my main point is that it is utterly slanderous to suggest that either Socialist Alliance, or John Pilger, oppose the occupation of Iraq on the "basis that Australian troops should be deployed closer to home to protect the national interest" or saw in any way "that the alternative to war was the so-called 'containment' program of sanctions under the UN".

While their positions are not identical, both Socialist Alliance and John Pilger have always called for immediate withdrawal of imperialist troops, have consistently warned of the pro-imperialist nature of the UN in relation to Iraq and have supported the resistance of the Iraqi people—hardly a sign of nationalism. It is particularly ignorant linking Pilger, even implicitly, to support for UN sanctions, as Pilger's documentary "Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq", released in 2000, details the horrific effects of these sanctions. For those of your readers interested in the truth the Socialist Alliance position can be accessed at <http://www.socialist-alliance.org/index.php?type=antiwar> and Pilger's at <http://pilger.carlton.com/iraq>.

comradely,

NF

Socialist Alliance member  
Lismore NSW

Dear NF,

Let me begin by pointing out that in discussing the position of the Greens, I was not referring to "some representatives", as you put it, but to their parliamentary leader, Bob Brown. According to an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news report of April 26, Brown called for the government to set a date for the return of Australian troops from

Iraq, and declared: "It's in our interests to bring our troops home for the security of our own region, promoting the security of our own region. We can't have our nation's policies determined by the White House."

What Brown meant by promoting "our" interests in "our" region was underscored by his response to the Howard government's police-military intervention in the Solomon Islands last year, soon after the invasion of Iraq. On June 27, 2003 Brown told ABC radio: "We have maintained always that we needed to be putting much more into ... security in the neighbourhood.... [T]he Solomon Islands has been ... festering away without the government acting on it. And it's acting now, that's to be welcomed."

[See <http://www.sa.org.au/cgi-bin/index.cgi?action=displayarticle&id=403>]

Your attempt to cover up the Greens' nationalist position with the assertion that "it is incorrect to suggest that all members of this relatively large and contradictory party pose their position in this way" is a graphic demonstration of the modus operandi of the Socialist Alliance and the class interests it serves.

A genuine socialist outlook can only develop through the continuous differentiation of the independent interests of the working class from all those political formations that seek, in one way or another, to tie it to the capitalist order. Today, under conditions of growing alienation from, and outright hostility to, the entire framework of official politics, this struggle assumes ever-more critical importance.

Herein lies the role of the Greens. Presenting themselves as an "alternative", they try to ensure that this alienation, especially on the part of young people, goes no further; that it does not lead to the search for an independent socialist perspective, but is turned back into the arena of bourgeois parliamentary politics and, in the final analysis, behind the Labor Party.

In turn, the Greens rely on the middle class protest groups to buttress them on the left. This is the function of the Socialist Alliance. It collaborates with the Greens, establishes joint platforms and offers "critical" support. And if anyone should point to the Greens' nationalist orientation, as articulated so clearly by Brown, the answer is on hand: "Don't you understand, that is not the position of all the members, this is a large and contradictory formation, there are different tendencies within it, etc. etc."

The Greens and the Socialist Alliance form part of a political mechanism whose essential function is to block the development of an independent socialist perspective. While conflicts arise from time to time, the various components remain united on the essential issues.

I notice that in your email you choose not to refer to my remarks on the class basis of this unity, which immediately follow the passage you quoted. Permit me to recall them:

"It is an axiom of Marxist politics that the true test of every tendency that claims to be 'anti-imperialist' is where they stand in relationship to the imperialism of their own ruling class.

"Five years ago, we received the definitive answer to that question when

all the radical groups here undertook a political campaign to demand the deployment of Australian troops as part of a so-called peace-keeping force in East Timor.

“They claimed this was necessary to defend the East Timorese masses against the depredations inflicted on them by the Indonesian militia. However, the real purpose of the intervention, which the radicals claim was forced on Howard by the pressure they exerted, was to place Australian imperialism in the best position to grab the lion’s share of the oil resources lying under the seas surrounding the island. Today we hear the government of East Timor issuing almost daily warnings that it faces impoverishment because of the refusal of the Australian government to redraw the sea boundaries in line with international conventions.”

You go to considerable lengths to defend John Pilger. But he was one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the “troops in” campaign, waged by the Democratic Socialist Party (now the chief component of the Socialist Alliance) and the Greens.

From the outset, the Socialist Equality Party insisted that the Australian government’s intervention had nothing to do with the terror campaign being unleashed against the East Timorese people, but was aimed at establishing a UN protectorate “through which Australian and other imperialist powers will seek to reinforce and prosecute their business and strategic interests across the resource-rich Indonesian archipelago.” [See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/sep1999/tim-s08.shtml>]

The significance of the protest demonstrations went beyond the immediate issue of East Timor. They played a key role in creating the political conditions for the Australian government to organise its largest overseas military intervention since the Vietnam War.

As the *Australian Financial Review* noted, up until that time it had been impossible, as a result of Vietnam, for Australian governments to propose military action abroad: Now that taboo had been lifted. “This call to arms has, for the first time in decades, given broad legitimacy to the proposition that Australia should be able to intervene militarily outside its territory.” [See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/1999/sep1999/tim-s17.shtml>] In fact, the despatch of Australian troops to Timor prepared the way for their deployment in Afghanistan and Iraq in support of the US invasions.

Pilger hailed Australia’s East Timor intervention as a significant victory. In an article published on November 2, 1999, he wrote: “It was the public, not politicians, who forced the Australian government to end the betrayal of East Timor.”

And further: “When the Australian government was finally persuaded to provide troops to a UN peacekeeping force, it was only after East Timor had been devastated and de-populated by Indonesian-run death squads and only after public opinion in Australia forced the issue. Tens of thousands demonstrated, trade unions boycotted Indonesian cargo, schools stopped. It was one of those wonderful moments when the force of popular moral and political outrage cannot be ignored; it was Australians at their best.” [See <http://pilger.carlton.com/timor/articles>]

Notwithstanding Pilger’s rhetoric, it has not taken long for the real agenda behind the East Timor intervention to emerge.

Pilger himself has acknowledged this. In an article published in the *New Statesman* on April 1 this year, under the headline “Once again, East Timor is betrayed,” he noted that the government of East Timor was being robbed of its oil resources by the Australian government. Explaining that this was part of a wider agenda to take charge of “failed states” and police a so-called “arc of instability” in the Pacific region, he wrote: “Last year Australian troops were despatched to the Solomon Islands: to ‘police the chaos’, meaning to secure the country for Australian business. Something similar is under way in Papua New Guinea, where a regime of privatisation, deregulation, and ‘free trade’ is being directed by a team from Australia.”

Correct ... as far as it went. But Australia’s interventions in the “arc of instability” to pursue its economic interests did not begin with the

Solomon Islands in 2003, but in East Timor in 1999.

Pilger, however, continued to insist that the East Timor operation was the result of the pressure of public opinion.

“It was only when tens of thousands of ordinary Australians, long shamed by their country’s brutal duplicity in East Timor, protested spontaneously in cities and towns across Australia, that the government agreed to lead a UN force enforcing the result of the plebiscite,” he wrote, referring to the UN sponsored referendum on East Timor’s independence.

According to Pilger, the Australian government did not want to send in its military forces but was forced to do so by mass pressure. This raises an obvious question: If demonstrations involving tens of thousands could pressure the Australian government into military intervention in East Timor, why did far larger demonstrations, involving millions, fail to prevent it from joining the war on Iraq?

There is, in fact, no contradiction here. The Australian government was not pressured into East Timor against its will. It sent in the troops to advance the considerable interests of Australian imperialism in East Timor and throughout the region. Likewise, Howard’s support for the US-led invasion of Iraq was not simply a matter of taking orders from the White House. Among other things, it was based on recognition of the fact that, just as support from the US had made the East Timor intervention possible, so US support for Australian military action would be needed in the future.

Turning to the question of the relationship between oil and the military intervention in East Timor, Pilger continued: “The self-congratulations for this ‘proud stand for peace’, as Howard called it, apparently with a straight face, also served to cover his government’s continued theft of most of East Timor’s seabed resources. Since 1999, Australia has received more than a billion dollars in taxes on oil extracted from a field fully situated in East Timorese territory; East Timor has received nothing from the same field.” [See <http://pilger.carlton.com/print/133225>]

If Howard managed to acquire a “peace cover” to cloak his government’s theft of oil revenue, then it was provided to him by all those organisations and individuals, including John Pilger, who campaigned in support of military intervention.

What of UN sanctions on Iraq? You write: “It is particularly ignorant linking Pilger, even implicitly, to support for UN sanctions, as Pilger’s documentary “Paying the Price: Killing the Children of Iraq”, released in 2000, details the horrific effects of these sanctions.

The Greens’ Bob Brown made his position clear prior to the US-led invasion. “Hussein has been contained for 10 years; we can contain him for another 10 or 20, until he’s had it. We don’t need to attack the children, the women and the men of Iraq to do that,” he told the Sydney antiwar rally of February 16, 2003.

At the heart of the “containment” process was the UN sanctions, which had already caused the death of more than half a million Iraqi children.

While Pilger denounced the sanctions and their impact, as you point out, his political position was essentially no different from Brown’s—just a little further to the left. His stance was outlined in a web chat discussion on July 31, 2000.

Asked to put forward “some alternative policies to the current genocide” that would hurt Saddam Hussein and his weapons building program, Pilger replied: “The alternative and only viable policy are sanctions that are not aimed at the civilian population but prevent the regime reconstituting its arsenal. But while we’re at it, let’s have the same embargo on other states whose weapons threaten the region: For instance Israel and Turkey.”

In other words, Pilger accepted the basic political premises of the imperialist powers’ propaganda: that the Iraqi regime was a threat to the states in the region and that sanctions had to be imposed to prevent it building up its arsenal. He threw in the reference to Israel and Turkey to give his position a “left” face.

Later in the same discussion, Pilger's reply to a question about "the best way for the UN to help the Iraqi people whilst preventing Saddam Hussein waging war" was equally revealing.

"Lift the economic sanctions immediately," he insisted, "and begin negotiations for UN inspectors to return to Baghdad while maintaining a new regime of military and weapons related sanctions. I hasten to add that the best way of helping the Palestinian people is to insist that Israel respects the UN resolutions and the best way to help the Kurdish people in Turkey is to demand the same of that regime. In other words hypocrisy has no place in the genuine application of human rights." [See <http://pilger.carlton.com/iraq/transcript>]

What is the political function of such comments? They are aimed, not at clarification, but at reinforcing the political confusion generated by the mass media. Instead of exposing the role of the UN, explaining that it is organically incapable of working in the interests of the world's people, that it functions as a clearing house for the imperialist powers—a political fact of life known well to Pilger—he promotes the illusion that somehow this body can be pressured to act, without hypocrisy, in defence of human rights.

Let us examine Pilger's record on sanctions a little more closely.

The sanctions regime against Iraq was initially imposed in the lead-up to the Gulf War of 1990-91. It is instructive to recall Pilger's attitude to it at that time.

In an article published on January 7, 1991, just before the start of the US-led attack, Pilger raised the question as to whether the build-up to war was really a demonstration of America's world leadership at a time of deepening recession. He asked: "Why have sanctions not been allowed time to succeed?"

Returning to the sanctions issue in an article published on March 15, 1991, in the immediate aftermath of the war, he reported on a study by the Glasgow Media Group which had found that "ironically, as the war drew nearer, evidence of the power of sanctions was just beginning to emerge" but, at the same time, the option of sanctions "effectively disappeared as a news story".

"During this critical period, found the researchers, clear evidence was available that the effect of sanctions was 'devastating'; but only the *Guardian* and the *Morning Star* argued against force; the *Guardian* quoted a CIA report that sanctions had stopped 97 percent of Iraqi exports. The rest of the press associated sanctions with 'appeasement'" (John Pilger, *Distant Voices* pp. 130, 159).

The politics is unmistakable: it was not necessary to launch a full-scale war because the UN-imposed sanctions were proving effective. This was the position of much of the radical "left" at the time, including the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP).

In a statement published in the August 21, 1990 edition of its weekly paper *Direct Action* (forerunner of the *Green Left Weekly*), the DSP declared that military action had not been supported by the United Nations "which decided to impose mandatory economic sanctions on Iraq following the invasion of Kuwait." It called for the withdrawal of "all US and other foreign forces from the Middle East so that the Arab people and the United Nations may seek a peaceful solution."

Here it is in black and white. In the midst of war preparations, and the poisonous propaganda from the world's media, the DSP sought to augment, not dispel, widespread illusions in the UN. Even as it was imposing the devastating sanctions, the DSP insisted that the fate of the peoples of the Middle East be placed in the UN's hands.

Moreover, the DSP's contraposition of economic sanctions—the so-called "peaceful solution"—to military intervention was completely bogus. Sanctions, which were passed by the UN Security Council, with the support of the Soviet Union and Mikhail Gorbachev—whose program of *glasnost* and *perestroika* had been hailed by the DSP—were the first step to war. Over the ensuing weeks, the United States began its military build-

up, culminating in the launching of war against Iraq in January 1991. In Australia, the Hawke Labor government extended its full support, sending three warships.

Throughout this entire period, the DSP continued to insist that sanctions should be given time to work.

In an article published on September 25, 1990, it declared: "Bush rushed an air and naval armada, and 150,000 troops, to the Gulf because the US didn't want to give the sanctions time to work." Another article published on October 9, 1990 called for the lifting of the military blockade because it was "not necessary to enforce the UN sanctions against Iraq." And an article published on February 25, 1991, after the war had commenced, stated: "Sanctions should have been given time to work. Concerted actions like sanctions only have to work once for aggressor countries to realise their potency."

Twelve years on, by the time of the build-up to the March 2003 invasion, the UN's role was much more exposed. While unquestionably illusions remained, millions of people the world over recognised that the UN weapons inspection regime had served to provide a cover for war. Under these circumstances, the DSP was forced to adopt a more critical stance. It warned that with or without a UN vote, the aim of the US, in its long-planned war on Iraq, was to secure the country's vast oil reserves and assure its own strategic hegemony.

Having pointed to the underlying driving forces behind the war, the DSP then devoted all its efforts to preventing the necessary political conclusions from being drawn: that the struggle against imperialist war requires a socialist perspective directed against the very foundations of the capitalist system that gives rise to it. Instead, the DSP maintained that if sufficient pressure were exerted, if the protests were big enough, then US imperialism and its supporters, such as the Howard government, could be pressured to abandon the invasion of Iraq.

In a comment published in the wake of the massive global demonstrations of February 15-16, 2003, the DSP claimed it was "only through such massive mobilisations of anti-war sentiment that the US war drive can be stopped". When masses of people took independent action to protest against the war drive and "the domestic political costs to our rulers begin to outweigh the political and economic gains they hope to gain from a military victory" it would be possible to "stop their present drive to war." (*Green Left Weekly* March 5, 2003).

Protest actions, it insisted, "could begin to dramatically raise the political cost of the war makers' defiance of public opinion" and the war drive would only be stopped "when it is made clear to the war makers in Washington, London and Canberra that working people in the aggressor countries will refuse to engage in 'business as usual' so long as the lives of hundreds of thousands of workers in Iraq are placed in jeopardy" (*Green Left Weekly* March 12, 2003).

There is a logic to politics. Along with promoting illusions in the power of protest to force the capitalist ruling classes to change course, the DSP boosted the antiwar credentials of the Greens. Forced to distance itself from the Labor Party, which supported the invasion of Iraq, the DSP hailed the "much more principled position" of the Greens, citing a statement by Bob Brown that his party would "totally oppose Australian forces going to Iraq" (*Green Left Weekly* January 22, 2003).

Likewise, in his speech to the February 16 Sydney antiwar rally, John Pilger singled out Brown as an "honourable exception" to the betrayals carried out by the Labor leaders.

But, as we have already seen, the Greens' opposition to the war was based on its demand for UN sanctions to continue the "containment" of Iraq. Moreover, it was coupled with the assertion that the national interest demanded the deployment of Australian troops closer to home.

As the historical record makes clear, these policies were "echoed on the left by the so-called Socialist Alliance and radicals such as the journalist John Pilger."

Sincerely,  
Nick Beams



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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