

# Australia: Labor leader recommends Iraq “exit strategy”

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14 January 2006

The tactical infighting within the American and British political establishments over how to successfully prosecute the Iraq war has received a belated echo in Canberra, with Labor leader Kim Beazley calling on Australia and its allies to develop an “exit strategy”. Labor’s intervention into the strategic “debate” only serves to underscore its complicity in the Howard government’s participation in the illegal US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

“We’ve got to get out of Iraq,” Beazley declared on Sydney radio January 9. “We’ve got to get a timetable, we’ve got to get an exit strategy—not only us, the Americans and the British as well. Now, the British are working on one, that’s obvious, and the Americans are as well. What John Howard seems to be trying to do, instead of making this deployment of troops our last rotation in the Al Muthanna province, he seems to be trying to find an alternative location for them—he should not.”

The leader of the opposition went on to accuse the Howard government and its partners in Washington and London of creating a training ground for terrorists and of increasing the risk of a domestic terror attack. While Beazley has made similar comments in the past, his latest remarks were somewhat less muted and received wide coverage in the Australian media.

Beazley’s criticisms of the Iraq war represent nothing more than a difference of opinion with the Howard government over how the military can best serve Australia’s imperialist interests. While the government sees its token contribution to the occupation as necessary to secure Washington’s backing for its increasingly aggressive neo-colonial interventions in the Pacific and south-east Asia, Labor argues that concentrating Australia’s troops in Afghanistan and in Australia’s immediate region would better serve these ends.

Nearly three years after the invasion of Iraq, all of the pretexts and lies used to justify the attack have been

exposed—from Iraq’s alleged stockpiles weapons of mass destruction to the non-existent connections between the Baathist regime and Al Qaeda. The war in Iraq was driven by the Bush administration’s determination to expand its hegemony over the Middle East by establishing Iraq as a US-controlled client state in the region. American domination of the country’s oil and natural resources was viewed as the means through which the US could gain a strategic and economic advantage over its imperialist rivals in Europe and Asia.

Labor has fully supported the Bush administration’s agenda in the Middle East, and has no disagreement with the essential orientation of the Howard government’s policy. The opposition has consistently supported US aggression against Iraq, including the UN sanctions regime in the 1990s which caused the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi civilians. Labor also backed all of the lies and pretexts used to justify the 2003 invasion. The party’s only objection to the war was that Washington and Canberra should have secured a rubber stamp from the UN Security Council.

Labor has condemned none of the countless crimes committed by the occupying forces in Iraq—from the Abu Ghraib torture scandal to the destruction of Fallujah in November 2004. The party has repeatedly endorsed the Bush administration’s efforts to form an effective puppet regime in Baghdad. Only three months ago, Labor hailed the US decision to reverse its ban on ex-Baathist senior officers joining the new Iraqi armed forces.

Beazley’s proposed withdrawal of Australian troops in Iraq only applies to the 450 Australian troops guarding Japanese forces in the southern Al Muthanna province, and would not affect the 100 soldiers protecting Australian diplomatic staff, nor the 350 naval and air force personnel securing southern Iraqi ports and oil terminals in the Gulf. The opposition leader has stressed that any withdrawal of forces would be closely

coordinated with Washington. As he explained last July: “We should sit down with our allies and, if we were in government we would do this, and work through with them, so we didn’t inconvenience them, the bringing home of Australian troops.”

Throughout his political career, Beazley has been among the most strident supporters of Australia’s political and military alliance with the United States. His priority when addressing the question of the Iraq war has been causing no offence to Washington. The Labor leader’s latest comments on the occupation are entirely consistent with this concern. He only spoke up after the US and Britain announced plans to scale back the number of ground forces in Iraq and after factional infighting broke out within the US political and military establishment.

Beazley has close connections with the military and foreign policy establishment in Canberra. While serving as defence minister from 1984 to 1990 he earned the nickname “Bomber” for his stridently right-wing and pro-US foreign policy sympathies. The opposition leader’s track record belies his present pose as a critic of the war. One of his central priorities since taking over as leader of the opposition last January has been to reassure the Bush administration of Labor’s support.

In March 2004, following the shock defeat of the conservative Spanish government, Labor leader Mark Latham made a heavily qualified pledge to withdraw most of Australia’s troops from Iraq before Christmas, if he were elected prime minister. Latham quickly fell into line, however, after he came under fire from the Australian media and from a range of major US figures, including President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, Secretary of State Powell, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage, and US Ambassador Schieffer. Beazley’s subsequent appointment as shadow defence minister was designed to demonstrate Labor’s pro-US credentials. The Iraq war was barely mentioned in the 2004 federal election.

Beazley has since emphasised Labor’s full support for the so-called war on terror. On January 10, the party welcomed the Howard government’s announcement that it would be sending an additional 110 special forces and two Chinook helicopters to Afghanistan. The additional troops will join the 190 Australian special forces in the country, and will later be followed by a further 200-strong reconstruction team due to be dispatched in April.

Labor’s strident support for the ongoing occupation of Afghanistan underscores the duplicitous nature of its position on Iraq. The open-ended “war on terror” was

contrived by the Bush administration to justify its efforts to secure US domination over the Middle East and the world. Beazley’s assertion that the invasion of Iraq was a “mistake” that detracted from the “war on terror” is aimed at covering up the criminal character of the invasions of both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The Bush administration exploited the September 11 terrorist attacks to implement long established plans to overthrow the Taliban regime and secure a US presence in the strategically critical Central Asian region. In the aftermath of the invasion, the US has installed a puppet government dominated by warlords and criminals under the nominal leadership of Hamid Karzai. Vital oil pipelines have been exploited in the interests of major US corporations, while permanent military bases have been established which allow for the consolidation of American military hegemony over the region.

Not a single faction of the political establishment has any principled objection to the Howard government’s participation in US war crimes. The Greens, who posture as an antiwar party, oppose the government on the basis that it is not acting in Australia’s “national interest”. “This is the Bush administration’s war and it is up to President Bush to ensure the security of both [Iraq and Afghanistan], not the Australian Defence Forces,” Senator Bob Brown declared on January 10. “Our troops should be in Australia and our neighbourhood where our national interests are concentrated.”

Working people and youth opposed to war and militarism must reject this nationalist perspective, along with the official framework of the entire phoney Iraq “debate”. The people of Iraq and Afghanistan have the right to freely determine their own future. The demand must be raised for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian, American and other foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan, and the payment of compensation to the victims of these wars. The antiwar movement can only be advanced by breaking with Labor, the Greens, and all the established parties, and by developing an independent movement against imperialism on a socialist and internationalist basis.



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