New Zealand PM quashes criticism of US military escalation in Iraq

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The New Zealand Labour government's duplicity—and cowardice—over the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq was underscored last week when it silenced critical remarks made by a senior cabinet minister about US President Bush's plan to dispatch a further 21,500 soldiers to the war-ravaged country.

With most MPs on summer holidays and Prime Minister Helen Clark headed to the ASEAN summit in the Philippines, duty minister Jim Anderton was left to comment on Bush's escalation announcement. In a *Christchurch Press* report, later published nationwide, Anderton, who is ranked third in the cabinet, compared the US strategy in Iraq to the mistakes of Napoleon, Genghis Khan and Vietnam.

"It is hard to see how an additional 20,000 to 25,000 troops are going to be capable of making any real difference and this has an eerie Vietnam revisited element to it. One wonders whether the lessons I would have expected to be learnt from that fiasco have been learnt in any way at all. It is literally years since Mr Bush landed on an aircraft carrier and announced the war was over. I don't know whether he remembers that," Anderton said.

Anderton's limited observations produced an immediate and sharp rebuke from Clark, who intervened from overseas to publicly insist that they were "not made on behalf of the government".

From the beginning, Clark has run a double-handed policy on Iraq, distancing herself at home in order to adapt to the widespread hostility to the war, while manoeuvring in the international sphere to comply with Washington's open-ended "war on terror".

In 2003, one month after tens of thousands of demonstrators turned out in the main cities and provincial centres around New Zealand to protest the invasion, Clark was forced, under the threat of economic sanctions, to apologise to the White House for suggesting the war would never have happened if the Democratic Party candidate, Al Gore, had won the presidency.

During a 2004 visit by her Australian counterpart John Howard, Clark took the opportunity to emphasise that while there was a "difference of opinion" between herself and Howard over the "timetable and the means" of the operations against Iraq, there was "not daylight" between the two leaders on the objective—to see Iraq "effectively disarmed and contained".

Accordingly, her government sent navy frigates on tours of duty in the Gulf region and deployed a contingent of army engineers to operate alongside British troops in Basra. It also dispatched elite SAS troops to assist US forces in "Operation Enduring Freedom" in Afghanistan—receiving rare US presidential citations for their role.

As the disastrous impact of the US-led occupation deepened, Clark shifted again. She recalled the army engineers and in September last year declared that five years on from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the invasion of Iraq had made the world less safe from terrorism. Her statement was met with alarm in the media, with one newspaper insisting that it "risked incurring the ire of the United States and Britain".

In response to Anderton's comments last week, the prime minister made yet another volte-face. Although he was specifically responding to media requests for an official comment, Clark insisted Anderton was speaking only as leader of the Progressive Party in the Labour-led coalition and as a local MP, not as the government's duty minister. Foreign Minister Winston Peters also weighed in from the Philippines, no doubt with Clark's approval, denouncing Anderton's comments as "ill-informed and regrettable".

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Anderton, a businessman and former Labour Party president turned MP, has a long history of "left" posturing. He has been regularly brought forward at times of crisis in order to derail movements of the working class. During the onslaught on jobs, living standards and public services under the Labour governments of 1984-90, Anderton circumvented any fight against Labour's right-wing leadership by walking out and setting up the breakaway NewLabour Party, and following that, the Alliance.

In 1999, as Alliance leader, Anderton was instrumental in rounding up support for New Zealand's military involvement in the Australian-led intervention in East Timor. When Labour assumed office after that year's elections, he took the Alliance into government as a minor coalition partner, where he played a critical role in enforcing the decision to send combat troops to Afghanistan. After all but one of the 11 Alliance MPs voted to support the troop deployment, the Alliance imploded, whereupon Anderton set up the Progressive Party as a vehicle for keeping himself in parliament.

Unsurprisingly, Anderton's outburst against Bush's new Iraq strategy was short-lived. For less than a day he made a play of holding his line, telling the NZ Press Association he did not resile from anything he said and that his statement had been made as the government's authorised spokesman. However, once he was replaced as duty minister, he backed down saying that in the context of the interview with his local newspaper, "I probably let my local hat take over my duty minister's hat for a while." They were his views and not the government's, he added.

Clark meanwhile emphasised that nothing Anderton had said would "bind the government". In the face of Bush's rapidly accelerating political isolation and defiance of the November US congressional election outcome, Clark avoided any criticism of his renewed military offensive, the plans for more troops or implicit threats against Syria and Iran. All she would say was that the situation in Iraq was of "great concern to New Zealand", and that her government's policy was to support "reconciliation in Iraq". Clark went on to blame the Iraqis, not the US occupation, for the social disaster and massive loss of life—claiming that attempts to "bring peace" had "foundered in the face of a bitter insurgency marked by sectarian violence".

Media commentators unanimously endorsed Clark's position. The *Dominion Post* editorialised that while Anderton's assessment was not wrong, he "did New Zealand no favours in his forthright denunciation of the US's Iraq policy". *New Zealand Herald* deputy editor Fran O'Sullivan opined that Anderton "was speaking the truth... Like Vietnam before it, Iraq has also become a quagmire". However, Anderton had made a "misjudgement" to think that pulling out was a "real option"—an error, she added, not shared by Clark and Peters who were taking a "more holistic approach".

The accommodation by New Zealand's ruling elite to the Bush administration and its crimes against the Iraqi people stands in stark contrast to the views of ordinary New Zealanders, whose antiwar sentiments find no expression within the official political setup. A poll published on the *Dominion Post* website the day after Anderton was silenced showed almost 80 percent of more than 3,500 respondents agreed with his attack on Bush's Iraq strategy.

An informal street poll carried out in Wellington by the same newspaper produced a similar result. "He's right on the button. Why shouldn't he say what he thinks?" one person said. Another, a 66-year-old teacher, said Clark should "get off the fence" and support Anderton. Iraqi refugees were also supportive. "We don't want America in Iraq," Wellington resident Abdulrahman Niji declared.

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