The strange case of the Australian PM and the American Senator

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In an astonishing breach of diplomatic protocol, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has accused Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama of being Al Qaeda's candidate of choice, because of the senator's proposal to redeploy most US troops out of Iraq. The strange episode has highlighted the Howard government's deepening crisis amid growing antiwar sentiment. Desperate to regain the political offensive, but with no antiwar target within the Australian parliament, Howard has resorted to denouncing the US Democrats.

Howard first criticised Obama during a television interview last Sunday, the day after the Illinois senator announced his candidacy for president. "I think he's wrong," Howard stated, referring to Obama's highly qualified plan to redeploy most US combat troops out of Iraq by March 2008. "I think that would just encourage those who wanted completely to destabilise and destroy Iraq, and create chaos and victory for the terrorists to hang on and hope for an Obama victory. If I was running Al Qaeda in Iraq, I would put a circle around March 2008, and pray, as many times as possible, for a victory not only for Obama, but also for the Democrats."

Howard's remarks sparked an immediate uproar. Obama responded by suggesting that if Howard were so committed to the Iraq war, he should dispatch 20,000 Australian soldiers rather than the 1,400 presently involved. Ron Wyden, Democratic senator from Oregon, labelled Howard's comments "bizarre". Congressman John Murtha accused Howard of trying to interfere in a US election, while Texan Republican senator John Cornyn added that he would "prefer that Mr Howard stay out of our domestic politics and we will stay out of his domestic politics".

All these comments were widely publicised in the Australian media. Even the most pro-Howard and pro-war pundits admitted that the prime minister's claim that the Democrats had aligned themselves with Al Qaeda was not the wisest political move. A number of commentators characterised the remarks as a blunder and suggested that Howard, at 67, was getting too old and should consider retirement.

Howard's statement on Obama, however, was no mistake or lapse in judgement. The prime minister, after all, is a long-standing political operative and well understands the basic diplomatic protocol that heads of governments refrain from intervening in the domestic political debates of their allies, let alone suggest that they assist terrorists.

Why, then, did the prime minister attack Obama?

Howard is becoming increasingly desperate. With his well-developed sense of self-preservation, he smells a shift in the political climate. He knows that antiwar sentiment is mounting, and that the catastrophe in Iraq, for which he is rightly regarded as bearing significant responsibility, is becoming a major factor in Australian politics—particularly since last November's US Congressional elections, which saw the Republicans lose control of both houses. His government faces an election by the end of this year, with recent opinion polls indicating that it would be trounced if the vote were to be held now.

One recently-released poll found that 62 percent of Australians oppose Howard's handling of the Iraq war, against just 28 percent in favour. The survey also reported that the war will be an important factor in how 71 percent of people vote. Moreover, the issue has crystallised opposition to the government's entire agenda, including the bogus "war on terror" and the detention without trial of Guantánamo Bay prisoner and Australian citizen, David Hicks.

Aware that he cannot afford to ignore this sentiment, Howard is attempting to portray his defiance of the popular will as evidence that he is not "poll driven," that he has the courage to stick to his "principles," that he is a man of "guts," etc. At the same time, he has decided to characterise opponents of the Bush strategy—to which he continues to provide unconditional backing—as stooges of Al Qaeda. "Words are bullets," he declared in parliament on Monday. "If you stand up and say your policy is to bring about a withdrawal of all combat units by March 2008, that is noted by terrorist leaders. It is a source of encouragement and comfort."

In the first week of the 2007 parliamentary year, Howard was provided with no opportunity to launch his offensive. Despite the fact that there had been a two-month parliamentary break, neither the "opposition" Labor party, nor the Democrats or Greens, raised a single question or criticism about the war in Iraq or the preparations by the Bush administration for war against Iran, in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. So great is the chasm between official politics and the concerns of ordinary working people, that the widespread hostility to the war has found no expression, in even the most limited or distorted form, within the parliamentary arena.

The official conspiracy of silence was all the more extraordinary given political developments since parliament last convened in early December. Among other events: the Iraq Study Group released its findings and called for a major US policy shift in the Middle East; Bush promptly dismissed the ISG's

recommendations and announced a "surge" of an additional 20,000 US troops; the White House stepped up its threats against Iran in preparation for another illegal military assault; and in a matter no doubt intimately related to these preparations, Vice President Dick Cheney announced he was visiting Australia for talks later this month. The Labor Party (and the Democrats and Greens) deemed none of these issues—nor the deepening humanitarian disaster in Iraq itself—sufficiently important to be raised in parliament.

On all fundamental points, Labor supports the Howard government's position on Iraq. After being elected to the leadership last December, opposition Labor leader Kevin Rudd stressed his "rock solid" support for the US alliance and made clear that he backed the ongoing occupation of Iraq. Both the Labor and Liberal parties agree that a defeat for US imperialism would undermine the central foreign policy axis of the Australian ruling elite since World War II, and would endanger Canberra's operations in Asia and the South Pacific. "Part of the Leader of the Opposition's dilemma in this matter is that in his heart he knows what I say is right about the consequences of a precipitate coalition withdrawal," Howard declared, in an uncharacteristically honest evaluation.

The only difference between Howard and Rudd is on the tactical question of how best to utilise Australian combat troops. Labor advocates withdrawing these forces (which make up about 500 of the 1,400 Australian military personnel in Iraq), in "close consultation" with the Bush administration so as not to disrupt the US military's management of the occupation. This proposed redeployment—like Obama's proposals—has nothing to do with opposition to Washington's war aims. Rudd wants Australian combat troops redeployed to Afghanistan, East Timor and the South Pacific in order to bolster Canberra's other neo-colonial operations.

For his part, Rudd seized upon Howard's denunciations of Obama in order to criticise the government's position on Iraq *from the right*. He portrayed Labor as the more responsible partner of US imperialism. "When we look at the future and at how Iraq is going to unfold in the period ahead, one thing is for certain: our alliance with the United States is critical," Rudd told parliament on Monday. "The alliance which is the subject of our debate today has survived since 1941. We in the Labor Party are proud of this alliance because we formed it... It has survived and prospered because we have all chosen to refrain from the worst forms of partisan comment of the type that we saw from the prime minister yesterday."

It is this strategic bipartisan agreement that lends such a surreal character to the official Iraq "debate". Howard accuses Rudd of lacking the "guts and courage" to explain the consequences of US withdrawal from Iraq, while Rudd accuses Howard of not having "the guts" to agree to a televised debate. And while the media endlessly analyses the minutiae of these mutual denunciations, all the vital political issues underlying the illegal invasion of Iraq and the eruption of US militarism are systematically excluded from public discussion.

No investigation is conducted into why the US invaded Iraq or why the ruling elite considers the war so critical. No review is made of the propaganda campaign carried out by Bush, Blair and Howard, consisting of outright lies, that was aimed at suppressing the truth: that Washington sought to seize control of Iraq's vast oil reserves, construct permanent military bases in the country, and use its territory as a platform for further criminal acts of aggression throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. No assessment is undertaken of the latest propaganda emanating from the White House about Iran, or what the consequences would be of a US war on that country.

These issues are being deliberately censored because the entire Australian political and media establishment is complicit in the war crimes of the Bush administration and the Howard government.

Responding to Rudd's censure motion in parliament on Monday, Howard pointedly reminded him of his own role in 2002 and 2003, when, as shadow foreign minister, Rudd backed all Washington's lies and pretexts justifying the invasion of Iraq. "I've said repeatedly that there is a significant threat of weapons of mass destruction from Iraq," Rudd declared in September 2002. "Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction—this is a matter of empirical fact," he told the State Zionist Council of Victoria in October 2002. "Biological weapons is right in the middle of the sandwich when it comes to the critique currently, legitimate critique, of the Iraqi regime," he added shortly before the invasion.

As Howard accurately concluded: "The truth is that three years ago the only real division between the Leader of the Opposition and me in a formal sense—we both agreed that Saddam ought to go, we both agreed that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, because that was the available evidence—was that he wanted us to get yet another United Nations resolution, which it was obvious that the Security Council was not going to give us. That was the only real difference three years ago."

The Howard-Obama controversy serves to demonstrate the necessity for the revival of the global antiwar movement on the basis of an independent, socialist perspective. Only by establishing their political independence from the entire official establishment, including Labor and all the parliamentary parties, can working people take forward the struggle against the Iraq war and the imminent threat of a far wider, global conflagration. The Socialist Equality Party is fielding candidates in the New South Wales election in order to advance this struggle. We encourage all those genuinely opposed to war and militarism to assist our campaign and help build the SEP as the new mass party of the working class.

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