New Zealand prime minister “abstains” over Iraq occupation

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New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark steadfastly refused to comment this week after Foreign Minister Winston Peters claimed that an immediate withdrawal of US troops would send Iraq into “total chaos”. Peters, who is the leader of the minority NZ First Party in the Labour-led coalition, was speaking at a press conference in February 26 following talks with his Australian counterpart, Alexander Downer. His comments were warmly received by Downer, whose government is determined to maintain its own military presence in Iraq.

Questioned at a subsequent press briefing, Clark flatly refused to state the government’s position on the ongoing US occupation of Iraq, reveal her own opinion or say whether she agreed or disagreed with Peters on the issue. Clark repeatedly rebuffed reporters, saying she was not going to comment when New Zealand had no troops in Iraq. “We are not there. We do not have troops there and I think it is gratuitous for me to give advice to those who do,” Clark said. Asked if she agreed with Peters, she replied: “Mr Peters said for the record that New Zealand had not supported the intervention. We ... are not part of it and I do not presume to give advice to those who did go and are still there on the manner and timing of withdrawal.”

In parliament, Clark again stonewalled when questioned by opposition deputy leader Bill English. Most parties in the house were “not going to get involved in a debate about what other countries should do with their troops,” Clark said, adding that to do so could be construed as “getting into other peoples’ election campaigns”—that is, the Australian one due later this year.

Under the strange coalition arrangement with Labour, Peters holds ministerial office, but is not part of the government, does not sit in cabinet and is not bound by the rules of cabinet responsibility. While his pronouncements are meant to reflect government policy, Clark defended Peters’ comment by saying that under the deal with NZ First Peters was allowed to express an opinion. His was, she said, “an honest opinion about a tragic situation”.

Despite repeated protestations by Clark that her government “opposed” the invasion of Iraq, that is simply not the case. New Zealand army engineers served for a period alongside British forces in Basra. As the military situation deteriorated, the troops were withdrawn and have not returned. Clark has since moved to distance herself from the unfolding disaster, while taking care to maintain harmonious relations with Washington and Canberra. She has remained notably silent on the ongoing catastrophe in Iraq, and firmly quashed mild criticism of the US troop “surge” recently voiced by one of her senior cabinet ministers.

All the while, New Zealand troops have remained on active service in Afghanistan. It has now been revealed that elite SAS forces were complicit in US war crimes there. Defence Minister Phil Goff has just made public the official summary of the SAS deployments. It quotes previously unpublished details of the US presidential citation awarded in 2004 following SAS operations as part of the US-led coalition task force. The report notes that the missions included “search and rescue, special reconnaissance, sensitive site exploitation, direct action missions, destruction of multiple cave and tunnel complexes, identification and destruction of several known al Qaeda training camps, explosions of thousands of pounds of enemy ordnance”.

According to a report in the *New Zealand Herald* yesterday, the SAS captured 50-70 so-called “terrorist suspects” in 2002 in snatch-grab missions and handed them over to the US military for detention and interrogation. Instead of being identified, photographed and fingerprinted and properly registered, they had their heads shaved, and no photos or ID were taken.

Clark’s silence on Afghanistan and the US-led

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subjugation of Iraq is graphic evidence of Labour's utter cynicism over the illegal wars of aggression carried out by the Bush administration. By avoiding any criticism of Australia and the US, she provides both a defence and cover for the neo-colonial policies of both powers. According to Peters, Iraq was not even mentioned in his formal talks with Downer. If true, this is a remarkable admission, given that Iraq is the critical international issue of the day, and the Australian government remains a participant and staunch US ally.

Downer's own comments to the same press conference underscored Australia's imperial agenda and New Zealand's accord with it. He said the choice in Iraq was between letting "insurgents and the terrorists" win or helping "democratic institutions" survive. He went on to draw parallels with the Pacific, which he said had grown more unstable. "We are talking here about problems on a micro-scale compared to Iraq—about the Solomon Islands and so on ... about political stability, democracy, economic progress and prosperity in the Pacific," he said. Downer claimed that if America and its allies were "humiliated and defeated" in Iraq, the consequences would extend "right down into our neighbourhood into Southeast Asia".

Downer was full of praise for New Zealand's military contribution to the revival of neo-colonial conditions in the Pacific, which has seen New Zealand troops dispatched alongside those of Australia on three separate occasions in the past 12 months. "We've had some difficult times in East Timor and in the Solomon Islands," Downer said. "Who is always there with us? Who can we always rely on? I'll tell you who we can always rely on. New Zealand. You can always rely on them."

Turning to the question of Iran, Downer called on New Zealand to use its "anti-nuclear" credentials to be more vocal over Iran's nuclear program, saying the concern should be "what are we going to do now that Iran has not complied with the Security Council resolution?" Downer falsely claimed the United States was not planning a military attack on Iran. Instead of "beating up on the Bush Administration," he said, people should be "diplomatically beating up on [Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] and encouraging him to respect the United Nations".

Taking her cue from Downer, Clark said Iran had not been able to convince enough members of the "international community" that it is not intent on developing a nuclear weapon. Asked if New Zealand believed Iran was or wasn't developing a weapon, she said: "We don't know. Who does? The problem is their lack of transparency. And what the international community is asking for is transparency. 'Open your facilities, be honest, give the information, don't play games with that.' And really the pressure has to go on for full disclosure," she declared.

Clark, it appears, is not quite on message yet. The main demand of the US-backed UN resolution passed in December was that Iran shut down its uranium enrichment plant and related facilities—activities that are permitted under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, which Iran has signed. But she still has time to learn her lines.

Clark is preparing to meet President Bush during a visit to Washington on March 20-21. It will be her second visit to the White House and it is regarded as signalling a continuing thawing in relations, after both administrations set aside New Zealand's previously contentious anti-nuclear policy to concentrate on increased co-operation. The agenda for Clark's meeting with Bush will focus on trade, "counter-terrorism" and "instability in the Pacific". She is also likely to have talks with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Clark declared she was looking forward to speaking with Bush and other senior members of his administration. "New Zealand and the United States enjoy a strong and mature friendship built on common values and a long history of working together in many areas," she said.

As her statements on Iran make clear, Clark and her government are preparing to line up behind the Bush administration's plans for a criminal new military adventure in the Middle East—just as she and Labour have on Iraq and Afghanistan.

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