

Australian defence minister admits oil a key factor behind Iraq occupation

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Australia's Minister for Defence Brendan Nelson yesterday acknowledged that maintaining control over Iraq's vast oil reserves was a critical factor behind the ongoing US-led occupation. His comments came just before Prime Minister John Howard delivered a major foreign policy address, similarly stressing the need to ensure "energy security" amid growing "great power competition" in the Middle East.

Howard and Nelson's statements lift the lid on the sordid economic and strategic interests behind the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and Australia's support for it. In a rare moment of candour, the junior member of the "coalition of the willing" has shattered the lies advanced by Washington and its allies. The pretexts used to justify the initial attack in 2003—including weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda connections to Baghdad—have long been exposed as outright fabrications. It is now equally clear that the ongoing occupation has nothing to do with establishing democracy or security in Iraq, or in protecting ordinary people from the threat of terrorism.

In his interview on ABC radio yesterday morning, Nelson was directly asked whether oil was a reason why Australian troops were still deployed in Iraq. "Energy security is extremely important to all nations throughout the world, and of course, in protecting and securing Australia's interests," he replied. "The Middle East itself, not only Iraq, but the entire region is an important supplier of energy, oil in particular, to the rest of the world. Australians and all of us need to think what would happen if there were a premature withdrawal from Iraq."

The defence minister's statement provides unambiguous confirmation of the criminal character of the Iraq war. One of the most fundamental precepts of international law is that wars of aggression—that is, those launched by a government in order to accrue economic or strategic advantage for its own nation state—are unlawful.

This was firmly established in the post-World War II Nuremberg trials of the Nazi leadership, which codified the basis on which architects of "wars of choice" could be prosecuted on war crimes charges. There is no doubt that senior members of the Australian government, alongside their counterparts in Washington and London, deserve to be placed on trial for their actions.

Prime Minister Howard's speech, while somewhat more circumspect and far less widely reported, provided an important insight into the government's strategic calculations.

"While terrorist networks will remain a major threat, nation states will remain the most important international actors; and the global balance of power will remain the most important determinant of Australia's security," he told the Australian Strategic Policy Institute. "Power relativities, as always, will go on changing with the continuing emergence of China and India as major powers reshaping our regional landscape, and tilting the global centre of gravity away from the Atlantic towards Asia...."

"Globalisation could spur a resurgence of protectionism and increasing rivalry over globally traded resources, particularly oil... Many of the key strategic trends I have mentioned—including terrorism and extremism, challenging demographics, WMD aspirations, energy demand and great-power competition—converge in the Middle East. Our major ally and our most important economic partners have crucial interests there."

Howard's remarks point to the real reasons why Washington attacked Iraq. US imperialism, once the unchallenged global force, now faces mounting pressure from powers in Europe and Asia, particularly China. The Bush administration's drive to war in 2003—which was backed by the entire US political and media establishment—marked an attempt by the American ruling elite to overcome its relative economic decline by utilising military force to seize control of the Middle

East's resources and use them to dictate terms to its rivals.

The quagmire in Iraq, however, has only intensified the deep-going crisis confronting the US and its allies, including Australia. Howard's references to "power relativities", "crucial interests", and "great power competition"—terms reminiscent of those that characterised international diplomacy in the 1930s—point to the escalating global tensions. His primary concern is that unless the US-led occupiers successfully oversee the establishment of a sustainable US client regime, other countries will benefit from Iraq's lucrative oil resources at Washington's expense, thereby undermining the entire strategic orientation of the Australian ruling elite.

Shortly after the broadcast of Nelson's radio interview, senior government ministers attempted to place the cat firmly back in the bag.

"We're fighting for something much more important here than oil, this is about democracy," Treasurer Peter Costello declared. Howard, directly contradicting his earlier address to the policy think tank, added: "We are not there because of oil and we didn't go there because of oil. A lot of oil comes from the Middle East—we all know that—but the reason we remain there is that we want to give the people of Iraq a possibility of embracing democracy."

The furious backtracking was driven by a concern that Nelson's open avowal on public radio of Canberra and Washington's oil interests in Iraq threatened to definitively expose the already threadbare pretexts for the occupation. The vast majority of the Australian population opposed the war from the outset, and hostility has only increased as the scale of the death and destruction inflicted by the occupying forces has become more widely known. Facing an election later this year amid plummeting opinion polls, the government does not wish to go on record backing a war for oil in the Middle East.

Letters to the editor and talkback radio calls today registered popular outrage at Nelson and Howard's statements.

The media, however, did its best to play down the story's significance. Today's editorial in the Murdoch-owned *Australian*, titled "Politics, Oil, and War: stable energy supplies are critical to world order", openly defended the government's admission of its oil interests. "Mr Howard has at least offered an honest appraisal of why it is so important that the West shows resolve in its attempts to bring stability to the region," it declared.

Pointing to the contradictory statements from Howard, Labor leader Kevin Rudd said the government "simply makes it up as it goes along on Iraq". In fact, as Rudd well understands, while the public rationale has repeatedly shifted as each lie has been exposed, the real agenda behind the war has remained unchanged. Labor has fully subscribed to this agenda from the outset and, like Howard, remains committed to the US occupation, notwithstanding the party's minor tactical differences relating to the number of Australian combat troops involved.

Likewise, Rudd agrees with the Howard government's military interventions closer to home, in the South Pacific. In another significant foreign policy speech yesterday, Rudd addressed the Lowy Institute for International Policy and proposed an intensified push into Australia's immediate region. Amid obligatory rhetoric about humanitarian concerns, Rudd made clear that the central aim was to ensure that Australian imperialism maintained its dominant role throughout the South Pacific against the growing incursions of rival powers.

On ABC television's "Lateline", Tony Jones asked Rudd the evening before his address: "Are you also motivated at all by a fear that regional competitors, other powers, are moving into the Pacific, increasingly influential and could in fact supplant Australia's interests in some of these places?"

Rudd replied: "Well, to answer your blunt question equally bluntly—yes... If we fail to act effectively, then I think we're going to see a long-term drift in Australia's strategic standing right across this region as well. So the 'arc of instability' becomes a vehicle through which what was once an area in which we were the principal power, we become supplanted over time by other powers from beyond the region."

Taken together, yesterday's statements of Nelson, Howard and Rudd highlight the real interests behind the US invasion of Iraq and Australia's support for it, along with the equally predatory interests driving their operations in the South Pacific.



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