

Iraq forum in Howard's electorate

Australian Labor promises “reliable hands” in time of war

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The extent of public opposition to the Iraq war was recently on display in the prime minister's suburban electorate of Bennelong. Hundreds of local residents packed North Ryde's Community Centre Hall for a Labor Party forum entitled “Australian Foreign Policy: Iraq and Beyond” in the last week of August.

Sponsored by Labor's recent star-recruit, Bennelong candidate and former ABC current affairs presenter Maxine McKew, the forum made an appeal to popular anger over Australia's involvement in Iraq, while simultaneously confirming Labor's commitment to the US alliance and to the era of unrestrained militarism ushered in by the “war on terror”.

With its overflowing audience of older professionals and retirees, including long-time Liberal voters, the forum served to highlight the depth of anti-government sentiment. Recent polls show Howard could be the first incumbent prime minister to lose his seat since the ousting of Stanley Bruce in 1929. The seat of Bennelong has been held by Howard since 1974 and by the Liberals since the party was founded in 1949.

“Iraq is wrong and I'm voting against it” said one life-long Liberal Party voter arriving early to secure a seat. Not even a personal acquaintance with the PM, she explained, could keep her from opposing the government.

Mc Kew told a receptive audience there was “deep disquiet” in Bennelong over Iraq. In her discussion with constituents, she said Australia's long involvement in the Iraq war had emerged as an “unavoidable” issue.

“We should not go into another election campaign without a substantial consideration of why the situation for so many Iraqis is now catastrophic and why the war was so misconceived in the first place,” McKew declared.

Yet each of the forum's three keynote speakers—former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke, retired New South Wales premier Bob Carr and Labor's candidate for Eden-Monaro Colonel Mike Kelly—made clear the ALP's “opposition” to the war in Iraq was of a purely tactical character.

At no stage were the criminal war aims underlying the US-led invasion and subsequent five-year occupation of Iraq—including the seizure of oil and the transformation of Iraq into a client state and military beach-head—challenged.

McKew claimed the war was the product of a “massive misjudgement”, thereby concealing the predatory objectives of the

major powers.

In a carefully worded formulation the Labor candidate said Rudd Labor supported “a withdrawal of our 500 combat forces from southern Iraq, in consultation with our allies and the Iraqi government”. That this would leave more than 1,000 Australian defence personnel stationed in Iraq supporting the US-led occupation was a fact passed over in silence. Labor's position dovetails with that of leading Democratic contenders for the US presidency who are openly advocating an indefinite US military presence in Iraq.

McKew emphasised that Labor's commitment to the US military alliance was “not in contention”. “The critical importance of Australia's longstanding relationship to the alliance happens to be in my DNA”.

It was not “unpatriotic to critique our involvement in Iraq,” she said. The forum's thoroughly nationalist and militarist tone was set early, with McKew offering a tribute to Korean War veterans in the audience and a declaration that her grandparents “were literally saved from the misery of the Depression of the 1930s by the arrival of General Macarthur in World War II at the height of the war in the Pacific.”

While millions will vote Labor at the forthcoming election expressing their deep hostility to the policies of the Howard government, including their opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the candidates of the ALP by no means share the public's antiwar sentiments.

Colonel Mike Kelly is one of three military figures selected by Rudd with the express aim of underscoring Labor's support for the global “war on terror”.

Kelly is no mere foot soldier. A senior military lawyer with the Australian Defence Forces prior to quitting his post in May of this year, he was dispatched to Washington in February 2003 as a specialist in counter-insurgency operations, to help plan “the post-conflict phase” of military operations against Iraq. He addressed the meeting not as an antiwar speaker, but as a senior military figure with major differences over the handling of the war effort. “We knew we were going to win the war,” he recalled, “but could we win the peace?”

The Bush Administration had failed to “front load for success”. “The more effort you put in at the Golden Hour at the front of an operation,” Kelly explained, “the less amount of troops you will

need later.” Donald Rumsfeld’s failure to supply adequate troop numbers at the outset, he said, had jeopardised the mission’s success.

Kelly admitted that he felt “very uncomfortable” when Australian troops first crossed Iraq’s borders in February 2003. “It was the first time we went into a war without a Security Council mandate and without international support”. The problem with this was not the criminality of US and Australian operations—which fit the Nuremberg definition of an unprovoked war of aggression, the central crime for which the Nazi regime was found guilty in October 1946—but that “it raised doubts in the minds of the Iraqis themselves about the legitimacy of our presence and our intentions.”

The audience sat silently—and, one felt, a little uneasily—as Kelly outlined some of his own responsibilities in Iraq in the field of “counter-insurgency”. These included operations against Shi’ite cleric Moqtadr Al-Sadr and “responsibility for looking after Uday and Kusay’s bodies and disposing of them, which was interesting”.

The main line of the forum was established by former Labor prime minister Bob Hawke. His rare public address was framed as a history lesson stretching back to 1939, “exploding the mythology ... that they [the conservatives] and not Labor, are to be trusted with the basic issue of foreign policy and Australia’s security”.

The conservatives, Hawke argued, were a failure when it came to Australia’s national defence. “Menzies was an appeaser, who opposed Churchill’s resolute defiance of Hitler,” he declared. Then, in World War II, when “Australia was posed with the greatest security threat in its history” Menzies proved “so incompetent” that the Independents who held the balance of power “passed the baton onto John Curtin and Labor—and John Curtin and Labor did not let Australia down.”

“They created an efficient armed services, they organised Australian industry and they co-operated magnificently with General Douglas Macarthur.”

The real record of the Curtin government includes the suppression of industrial resistance to wartime austerity, the mass internment of “aliens” and unflinching support for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was Labor, with the critical support of the Stalinist Communist Party of Australia, which acted as the recruiting sergeants for war. Australia’s intervention into World War II was not aimed against fascism, as Hawke claimed, but was part of the struggle for the re-division of the globe between the imperialist powers for control over resources, markets and spheres of influence—costing the lives of more than 48 million people.

When it came to the Iraq war, Hawke made a deliberate appeal to antiwar sentiment, pointing to the long history of Great Power intrigue in Iraq, first under the British and French, and later the Americans. He was applauded as he described US claims about Iraq’s use of chemical weapons as “hypocrisy”. “You know where the blueprint for the first chemical weapons plant in Iraq came from? It came from an American firm.... [The US] provided them with chemical weapons, stood by while they used them, and now inflict us with this terrible conflict.” But he omitted to mention that his own government used the very same “hypocritical”

rhetoric to justify the first invasion of Iraq in 1990-91.

Hawke’s primary criticism of the 2003 invasion was that it should have been conducted under a UN mandate. Indeed, Maxine McKew told her Bennelong audience that as PM during the first Gulf War, Hawke “showed how it should be done”. But what was “done” in Iraq was nothing short of genocide, with an estimated one million children killed as a result of the UN sanctions regime imposed between 1990 and 2003, following the devastation wreaked by the UN-sponsored coalition force which invaded Iraq in January 1991.

If anything, the UN’s role in relation to the 2003 invasion has been even more criminal. UN Security Council Resolution 1441 subjected Iraq to an intensive weapons inspection regime and played a critical role in the build-up to war. Then, in May 2003, less than two months after the US blitzkrieg was launched, the UN Security Council, with backing from France and Germany, formally endorsed the US occupation.

Hawke derided “the philosophy” of the conservatives that “we can’t be independent. We can’t make our own foreign policy decisions in terms of our own interests. We have to go along with some great and powerful friend”. He said that Howard was guilty of, “a completely unquestioning lapdog acceptance of the Bush neo-conservative rhetoric”. The necessary changes to Australia’s foreign policy could only be introduced by Labor because it was, “clean and unsullied” and “has always in the past been right when it comes to Australia’s security.”

Despite its many falsifications and omissions, Hawke’s potted history of the twentieth century underscored a fundamental truth: Labor has been called upon during each period of global capitalist crisis to impose war and economic austerity on the working class.

While the forum was ostensibly convened to provide the people of Bennelong with “a voice” and while McKew is advancing herself as a “good listener” and “communicator”, she allowed only four questions from the sea of hands which shot up following the speakers’ presentations. That one of those four questions concerned US preparations for war on Iran is indicative of deep disquiet over the untrammelled eruption of US militarism. But McKew’s guest speakers were not inclined to speak on such issues at any length. “My guests have very busy schedules,” she said, before drawing the meeting to an abrupt close.



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