

Anatomy of a political diversion

The Australian Labor Party, the Bali bombings, and the death penalty

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On Monday night, I and several other members of the Socialist Equality Party attended a public meeting organised by the Wentworth Human Rights Forum titled “Human rights in 21st century Australia”. The event was designed to cover up the Labor Party’s collaboration with the Howard government’s assault on democratic rights. Labor’s foreign affairs spokesman Robert McClelland was the keynote speaker and appeared alongside failed Labor candidate George Williams, former Hawke government minister Susan Ryan, author Linda Jaivin, and the Labor candidate for Wentworth, George Newhouse.

McClelland gave a seven-minute speech in which he struggled to cite a few instances where Labor had marginally different policies on human rights than the Howard government. I challenged him on Labor’s support for government legislation on every issue raised in the meeting—from the mandatory detention of refugees to the draconian anti-terror laws. I also condemned Labor’s enthusiastic support for the so-called “war on terror”, which has provided the ideological cover for the bipartisan assault on democratic rights.

In response, McClelland lamely indicated that he preferred the term “fight against terror” to “war on terror”. He went on to issue a strident defence of Labor’s policies. “In dealing with terrorism, it is nothing more [and] it is nothing less than criminal action, murderous criminal action,” he declared. “They should be called murderers; they shouldn’t be glorified as being somehow above, somehow a warrior for a cause or an ideology. They are simply murderers, and they need to be dealt with as that.”

In the course of the meeting, McClelland only devoted two sentences to the subject of capital punishment, both of which reiterated existing Labor policy.

“The government voices concern for capital punishment, but when it comes to sensational issues—the execution of Saddam Hussein, the Bali bombers, or whoever it is—the government will always play the political line rather than, as a matter of principle, [say] that we as a nation are opposed to capital punishment,” he said. “And in terms of what Labor will do in government, we have committed ourselves to driving a regional agenda of like-minded countries to eradicate capital punishment in our region, a region where 80 percent of all executions in the world occur.”

Towards the end of the meeting, a young journalist from the *Australian* asked McClelland two questions which had been written out for her before the meeting: whether Labor would

review the Australian Federal Police’s policies on sharing intelligence and other information with foreign police and security agencies, and whether Labor believed that those convicted of the terrorist bombings in Bali, Indonesia on October 12, 2002 should have their death sentences commuted. McClelland’s brief replies again repeated existing Labor policy.

Nothing that occurred at the meeting, however, prepared me for the *Australian*’s blaring headline the following morning, “Save Bali bombers: Labor”. The story, written by the newspaper’s political editor Dennis Shanahan, featured the subhead, “Campaign against executions launched on anniversary of attack”, and described how McClelland supposedly launched a major initiative in defence of the Bali bombers at the forum the night before.

“Labor has thrown the death penalty in Asia into the election campaign,” Shanahan declared. But Labor had in fact done no such thing. The only campaign was that of the Murdoch press, using an entirely manufactured story.

None of the direct quotes the *Australian* attributed to the foreign affairs spokesman was actually uttered during the forum. Shanahan, who did not even attend the public meeting, lifted the quotes from a pre-released script which McClelland subsequently chose not to read from. Having received the text of the speech prior to the meeting—which contained no new policy initiatives and did not mark the beginning of any “campaign”—the paper’s lead story was written without any regard for what actually occurred at the Bondi forum.

Tuesday’s headline article relegated breaking news on the death of an Australian soldier at the hands of insurgents in Afghanistan—the first such combat death in the Middle East since 2002—to a small article on the right-hand column.

Relishing the opportunity to parade their “war on terror” credentials, senior Howard government ministers immediately weighed in. Echoing the *Australian*’s line, Treasurer Peter Costello jumped on the fact that McClelland’s “speech” was delivered a few days before the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attack. “I think it was a very strange time for the Labor Party to come [out] in support of the Bali bombers,” he declared. “Let’s not forget, the Bali bombers killed 88 of our fellow Australians. Let’s have some sympathy for the 88 dead and their families, rather than sympathy for those who cruelly and cold bloodedly

decided to kill them for no reason, other than they were Australians.”

Howard expressed his support for the death penalty. “The idea that we would plead for the deferral of executions of people who murdered 88 Australians is distasteful to the entire community,” he declared. “I find it impossible myself as an Australian, as prime minister, and as an individual, to argue that those executions should not take place when they have murdered my fellow countrymen and women.”

Cynically exploiting the grief of the Bali victims’ families, journalists extracted inflammatory comments from a few who angrily condemned McClelland. Other sections of the media—including every major newspaper, television news, and talkback radio—picked up the story and ran with it throughout the week.

The *Australian’s* campaign was a calculated ploy. Orchestrated just prior to a federal election campaign, it was designed to exploit the fifth anniversary of the Bali bombings to drown out opposition to the destruction of democratic rights and the neo-colonial wars that are being fought in the name of the “war on terror”. The Murdoch press insists that every terrorist act is explicable only in terms of “evil”, Islam, or some deficiency in Arabic culture, while denouncing anyone who points out that the crimes carried out by the US and its allies in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian occupied territories have created the recruiting ground for Islamic extremists.

The political and media establishment is deeply concerned that the entire framework of the so-called war on terror is beginning to unravel. Opposition to the Iraq war continues to grow and government terror scare campaigns are now widely met with scepticism and outright disbelief. It is in this context that the *Australian* has manufactured a furore over the Bali bombings and the death penalty.

The Labor Party immediately accommodated itself to the reactionary offensive. Opposition leader Kevin Rudd wasted no time to demonstrate his right-wing “me too” credentials. He cravenly apologised for any suggestion that Labor opposed the death penalty for the Bali bombers and insisted that McClelland do likewise. Rudd even hinted that McClelland may not be appointed foreign minister if the opposition wins the election.

“When it comes to the question of terrorism, my attitude has always been hardline and will always be hardline, and that is that every measure should be deployed to track down, to hunt down and to destroy terrorists and terrorist cells wherever they are in our part of the world,” the Labor leader declared. “I believe that terrorists should rot in jail for the term of their natural lives and then one day be removed in a pine box.”

Rudd’s attempt to maintain Labor’s nominal opposition to capital punishment while engaging in some chest-thumping anti-terrorist rhetoric was belied by significant policy U-turns. He disavowed the party’s stated policy of encouraging the abolition of capital punishment in Asia, saying that it would now be a matter left to the UN. He also declared his full agreement with the Howard government’s position that no effort be made to encourage the commutation of the Bali bombers’ death sentences. These statements confirm that both major parties have effectively

junked their opposition to the death penalty.

Like the Howard government, Labor will place the ruling elite’s corporate and strategic interests in neighbouring countries ahead of the lives of Australians convicted of serious offences overseas. In 2005 the Singaporean government hanged Australian citizen Van Nguyen for drug trafficking with the tacit approval of the Howard government. Members of the “Bali Nine” group, who were convicted of drug charges, now face execution in Indonesia, again with the Australian government’s support. These young people have been sentenced to death as a direct consequence of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) handing over intelligence to Indonesian authorities, rather than detaining them on Australian soil where there is no capital punishment. Labor has refused to criticise the AFP for its role. The *Australian* journalist at Monday night’s human rights meeting was no doubt fishing for some controversy on this issue when she asked McClelland about Labor’s policy on police intelligence sharing.

Rudd’s craven response drew widespread criticism. Opposition to capital punishment in Australia is deeply felt and has a long history. The last execution in the country, that of Ronald Ryan in 1967, was met with a nation-wide mass movement. Despite the best efforts of sections of the media and the major parties, there is no mass constituency for the reintroduction of the death penalty. Significantly, a majority of the letters published in the *Australian* condemned Rudd for repudiating McClelland’s remarks.

“It is hypocritical of Western countries to champion democracy on the one hand and yet condone the ultimate abuse of democratic ideals on the other,” one correspondent wrote. “Just when McClelland had us thinking that the Labor Party might stand for something after all, his leader steps in and gives him a public dressing down.”

The entire episode provides a salutary lesson in just how the establishment media manufactures political issues to fit their own right-wing agenda, while ignoring the concerns of ordinary people. Significantly neither McClelland’s strident defence of the war on terror nor my remarks exposing the bipartisan support for attacks on democratic rights were mentioned in Shanahan’s scurrilous article.

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