

A case of déjà vu: Howard insists “no plans” for war with Iran

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30 October 2007

Amid mounting US threats against Iran, the issue of a disastrous new war intruded briefly into the official Australian election campaign last Wednesday, when a journalist asked Prime Minister John Howard whether he would support a “preemptive strike” on Iran.

Significantly, Howard did not dismiss the question as “hypothetical”. But he did deny that there were any war plans on his table. Iran’s “transgressions”, he said, should be dealt with diplomatically. “We’re not looking at preemptive strikes, we’re not encouraging preemptive strikes, we’re against them and we want diplomacy to continue,” Howard added.

To be blunt, Howard’s assurances are worthless. Over the past fortnight, the Bush administration has ratcheted up its menacing rhetoric several notches over Iran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs and claims that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is supporting anti-US militia in Iraq. President Bush has spoken of the dangers of World War III if Iran gains the “knowledge to make a nuclear weapon”. Vice President Dick Cheney has warned Iran of “serious consequences” and emphatically declared that the US would not allow Tehran to have a nuclear bomb.

In an unprecedented decision last Thursday, the US dramatically raised the stakes by declaring the entire 130,000-strong IRGC as a WMD proliferator and the IRGC’s Quds Force a “terrorist organisation”. It then imposed a raft of new, unilateral sanctions against Iran. The US military is intensifying the pressure, building a new base just five kilometres from Iraq’s border with Iran. Washington has been strengthening anti-Iranian alliances throughout the Middle East and bolstering the military capabilities of its allies in the Persian Gulf.

It is inconceivable that top Bush officials have not sounded out support in Australia from both Labor and the Coalition. As one of the initial handful of countries that joined the “coalition of the willing”, Howard’s political backing was vital for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Indeed in an interview with CNN earlier this month, veteran American journalist Seymour Hersh, who is known for his top-level sources, named Australia as one of the countries from which the White House had secured an “expression of interest” in military action against Iran.

Howard’s declaration that he “wants diplomacy to continue”

simply parrots the line from Washington. It also recalls the lies he told the Australian people in the lead up to the Iraq war. Questioned on September 22, 2002, for example, over the buildup toward war over US allegations of Iraq’s so-called weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), Howard told ABC radio: “We all hope that it can be resolved without military action. We support the efforts that the Americans and the British are now undertaking to get a resolution through the [UN] Security Council. That is the right thing to do.”

Howard’s comments were false and misleading. The “Downing Street memos” establish that British prime minister Tony Blair had agreed to “support military action to bring about regime change” in Iraq in April 2002. The claims that Iraq had Al Qaeda links and WMDs were fabrications, designed to confuse and disorientate public opinion and provide the pretext for war. As a British cabinet memo from July 2002 noted: “Bush wanted to remove Saddam [Hussein], through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy”.

Howard met with Bush on June 13, 2002 in Washington. While documentary evidence is yet to surface, there is no doubt that he was briefed on the US and British war plans. From mid-2002, Australian ministers used every opportunity to propagate the WMD lies. In January 2003, even as Howard was still telling the Australian people he had not agreed to involve troops in a war, Australian military units were forward deployed to join the US forces massing in the Persian Gulf. Over the following weeks, Howard dismissed the antiwar demonstrations by millions of Australians and the public warning by 43 Australian legal experts that any invasion would be a war crime under international law.

Throughout this entire time, the Labor Party repeated the false claims about Iraq’s WMDs and sought to bury any discussion of the real motives for US aggression: control over oil resources and strategic domination of the Middle East. Labor’s only difference with the Howard government—and the only basis on which it refused to vote in parliament to support the Iraq war—was that military action should have the explicit endorsement of the UN, as it did in 1991, when the Hawke Labor government backed the first Gulf War.

Today, the Howard government endorses every aspect of US propaganda. In August, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson told reporters in Washington that Australia shared US concerns over “elements in Iran bringing weaponry into Iraq and also Afghanistan”. Earlier this month, Nelson exploited the death of an Australian soldier in Afghanistan to add to the anti-Iranian propaganda, declaring that the bomb that killed him may have come from Iran.

The Labor Party’s rhetoric is, if anything, more strident than the government’s. Labor’s 2007 national platform labels Iran’s nuclear program—which Tehran has repeatedly insisted is only for power generation—as a “grave threat to international security”. In this month’s *Australia-Israel Review*, Labor leader Kevin Rudd provocatively called for Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to be charged with incitement to genocide over his comments about Israel. Rudd also condemned Iran for destabilising the Middle East.

The support given by Rudd and Howard for anti-Iranian propaganda is the surest sign that both parties have given undertakings to the Bush administration to back any US military attack. While in Sydney last month for the APEC summit, Bush met with Howard, and the cabinet security committee, as well as with Rudd. The US president indicated prior to his arrival that Iran and Iraq would be at the top of his agenda.

When Howard speaks of “not encouraging a preemptive strike” on Iran, it is another indication of the discussions behind closed doors. There are over 160,000 American troops in Iraq, another 26,000 in Afghanistan, hundreds of warplanes and a large fleet of warships in the Persian Gulf and nearby region. Within a matter of minutes, cruise missiles and B-2 bombers could be in the air. All that is required is a stage-managed provocation, which the Bush administration is more than capable of engineering, and war could be unleashed.

Australian military forces are already involved in the preparations. The Australian Navy frigate HMAS Anzac is part of the US flotilla in the Gulf. In late September, an Australian naval commodore took over as commander of the combined naval task force in the northern Gulf. Australian army personnel work in US command centres in Iraq and Afghanistan. Most significantly, information that is being used to identify targets in Iran for possible US strikes is being processed through the US spy base at Pine Gap in the Northern Territory and possibly other US bases in Australia.

The *Sunday Times* reported on October 21 that British special forces had “crossed into Iran several times in recent months as part of a secret border war against the Iranian Revolutionary Guard’s Al-Quds force”. The Australian Special Air Service (SAS) was also involved in joint border patrols with its US and British counterparts and may have intruded into Iranian territory—an act of war under the Geneva Convention. This would not be the first time: the Australian military has acknowledged that SAS troops were operating inside Iraq at

least 24 hours prior to the formal launching of the 2003 invasion.

In a warning of the barbarism that a conflict with Iran could unleash, sources informed Seymour Hersh in April 2006 that the US military and the Bush administration were debating the use of tactical nuclear weapons against Iranian facilities buried deep underground. An unnamed US official told Hersh: “We’re talking about mushroom clouds, radiation, mass casualties, and contamination over years....”

Yet there is virtually no discussion or debate in the official campaign for the Australian election on the preparations for war on Iran and its potentially catastrophic consequences. The question raised with Howard last Wednesday, and his reply, were barely reported. By Thursday morning, it was as if the question had never been asked. No journalist has challenged Howard or Rudd over their tacit support for a new US military adventure. The issue is not the subject of editorials and commentary. It is as if there is an informal D-notice in place.

Behind the silence lies the extreme nervousness of the Australian establishment over the implications of another war in the Middle East. A recent poll by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney found a majority of Australians opposed continuing involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. More than half of the respondents also wanted greater diplomatic distance between Australia and the US. It is little wonder that both political parties want to hide their complicity in the plans for new US war crimes.

The Socialist Equality Party is unequivocally opposed to any US-led war on Iran. Like the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush administration’s aim in attacking Iran is not to “fight terrorism” or prevent Tehran from building a nuclear bomb. It is to advance US economic and strategic dominance in the resource rich region.

The SEP demands the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign military forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf and the rest of the Middle East and Central Asia. Our candidates are using every available forum to alert the working class to the danger of a US attack on Iran and to fight for these policies. We urge all those who oppose war and militarism to support and participate in our campaign.

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