

Australian election: an ominous silence on US war plans against Iran

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
15 October 2007

There are growing danger signs that the Bush administration is preparing for a war against Iran, with a series of leaks in the US and British media pointing to recent White House discussions. In Australia, however—the third member of the “coalition of the willing” that invaded Iraq in 2003—silence reigns. An unspoken agreement exists among the Australian media and major political parties contesting the November 24 federal election, that the issue should not be publicly aired.

This conspiracy of silence was highlighted by the October 8 publication of a lengthy essay in the *New Yorker* magazine entitled “Shifting Targets” by Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Seymour Hersh. Based on high-level Pentagon and CIA sources, the article focussed on the Bush administration’s shifting pretext for an attack—from Tehran’s alleged nuclear weapons programs to sensational claims that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was helping anti-US insurgents kill American soldiers in Iraq. According to Hersh, detailed US plans have already been drawn up and military resources are in place to destroy the most important IRGC camps, supply depots, and command centres.

In the US, the article was widely reported and Hersh was interviewed on several TV networks, forcing the White House to issue bland denials that a new war was being planned. In Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was forced to distance himself from any strike on Iran after Hersh reported that the plan had received “its most positive reception” in London. The *Telegraph* followed up with an article claiming that Brown had told Bush in July that Britain would be “on board” as long as the pretext was Tehran’s alleged interference in Iraq. Further denials followed from Downing Street, but Brown pointedly did not rule out war on Iran.

In an interview with CNN, Hersh also specifically named Australia as one of the countries indicating “expressions of interest” in an air war on Iran. But with the exception of a Washington correspondent for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the revelation has been studiously ignored. Neither the media nor the opposition parties has demanded to know what Prime Minister John Howard has been told of Washington’s preparations for war; whether he has extended his government’s support, and to what extent the Australian military has been committed to a new act of criminal barbarity.

This deafening silence can have only one political meaning: complicity in another war of aggression, in which Australian military personnel would inevitably be involved. According to Hersh, the plan is to use naval resources to strike Iran and respond to any retaliation. The Australian navy currently has a frigate in the Persian Gulf, which operates with British and US warships. Australian Commodore Allan du Toit took over in late September as commander of Combined Task Force 158, which is responsible for security in the northern end of the Persian Gulf.

A series of top-level meetings suggests that behind closed doors, military preparations against Iran are under intense discussion. In late August, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson travelled to Washington for briefings with US defence officials and a meeting with US Defence Secretary Robert Gates. Nelson told reporters that “we certainly did discuss Iran” and voiced “the great concern held by Australia, by Britain, and by the United States, about the role played by elements in Iran in bringing weaponry into Iraq and also Afghanistan.” He refused to discuss details.

In early September, President Bush flew to Sydney for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit, where he met with Howard and the cabinet’s National Security Committee. While other issues were undoubtedly discussed, Bush publicly flagged two main items for discussion—Iran and Iraq. The US president left the APEC summit early in order to be present in Washington for the scheduled report to Congress by the top US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus. A key focus of Petraeus’s comments was the accusation that Iran was waging a “proxy war” against the US in Iran, through the arming, training and direction of insurgent groups.

While in Sydney, Bush met with Labor Opposition leader Kevin Rudd on September 6. The media billed the encounter as a test of Rudd’s determination to withdraw 550 Australian combat troops from southern Iraq, but the meeting was clearly an amicable one and extended to 45 minutes. At Bush’s request, Rudd provided no detail of their discussions, except to say he had reiterated Labor’s intention to pull Australian troops out. Labor’s stance is a sham designed to placate widespread public opposition to the war in Iraq and Australia’s participation. Rudd would maintain 300 to 400 Australian

troops in Baghdad on security and headquarter assignment and a further 700 navy and air force personnel in the Middle East.

Bush's friendly discussion with Rudd is in marked contrast to the treatment meted out to former Labor opposition leader Mark Latham, who put forward a similar proposal during the 2004 election. Like Rudd, Latham's criticisms of the war in Iraq were purely tactical, calling for troops to be used in the "war on terrorism" closer to home—that is, to strengthen Australia's neo-colonial operations in the Asia-Pacific region. In an extraordinary intervention into Australian politics, Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and a string of other top US officials publicly declared that any Australian withdrawal would be "disastrous" and a threat to the US-Australian alliance. Latham quickly fell into line.

Rudd's conclusion from the episode was evident when he took over as Labor leader last December. In his first television interview, the opposition leader stressed that he was "rock solid" in his adherence to the US-Australian alliance. He has repeatedly declared that any withdrawal from Iraq would be "staged" and "in consultation with our allies". But the questions remain: Why has Rudd not been publicly taken to task by Bush? What quid pro quo has the opposition leader offered in return for pulling out of Iraq? Like Latham, Rudd has already pledged to boost Australian forces supporting the US-occupation of Afghanistan.

The most obvious explanation is that Rudd gave assurances to Bush that a Labor government would fully support any new US-led military adventure, in particular against Iran. If Rudd had offered any resistance to US plans, he would undoubtedly have suffered a series of sharp rebukes from Washington. Publicly both Rudd and Howard have followed the White House script on Iran very closely: bland declarations in favour of a "diplomatic solution" and denials of war plans, while vilifying Iranian leaders and stepping up propaganda against Tehran's alleged "meddling" in Iraq and nuclear weapons programs.

Rudd revealed his true colours during a question and answer session in the October issue of the *Australian/Israel Review*. The Labor leader showed himself to be even more bellicose towards Iran than Howard, absurdly claiming that the Iranian regime posed "not only an existential threat towards Israel, but also the broader Middle East, Europe and the world". He also announced that a Labor government would initiate legal proceedings against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on a charge of incitement to genocide.

Ahmadinejad's statements about wiping Israel off the map and questioning the extent of the Holocaust are certainly abhorrent. However, while the Iranian president is clearly appealing to anti-Semitic sentiment, his comments do not amount to incitement to genocide. Iran, like a number of other countries, does not recognise the Zionist state that was established in 1948 by driving out the Palestinian population. Rudd's call for Ahmadinejad to be tried served a definite political purpose: to signal that Labor stands four square behind

the US and Israel and their threats against Iran.

Rudd's remarks were featured on the front page of Murdoch's *Australian* on October 3, but the issue was quickly dropped. The shutters have been brought down on any further discussion. The media and political establishment is acutely aware that any public debate on the wars in the Middle East and Central Asia could rapidly spiral out of control. After all, the overwhelming majority of Australians is opposed to the US occupation of Iraq and would be horrified if the advanced nature of US military preparations against Iran, and Australia's complicity, were to be widely reported. The wall of official silence is designed to keep them in the dark.

Once again, Australia's political leaders are accomplices in the preparation of a terrible crime. Planning and waging a war of aggression was the principal charge on which the German Nazi leaders were tried and convicted after World War II.

The Socialist Equality Party and its candidates in the federal election vigorously oppose the neo-colonial wars being waged in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the preparations for a new attack on Iran. We demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and call for those responsible, including Prime Minister Howard and his ministers, to be put on trial for war crimes.

The SEP urges all those who agree with these policies to actively support our campaign and to vote for our candidates.

Authorised by N. Beams, 40 Raymond Street, Bankstown, NSW



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