

Liberal and Labor parties responsible for death of Australian soldier in Afghanistan

James Cogan, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Chifley
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Trooper David Pearce, a 41-year-old soldier and father of two, died on Monday, the first Australian to be killed in combat in Afghanistan since 2002. Full responsibility for his death lies at the feet of the Howard government and the Labor Party opposition, led by Kevin Rudd.

The government sent Pearce as part of the Australian military deployment supporting the US-led occupation of Afghanistan, which the Labor Party fully backs. Now, with a federal election due to be called shortly, Howard and Rudd are trying to ennoble Pearce's death with more time-worn rhetoric about the "war on terrorism". The real purpose of their tributes is to justify their criminal endorsement of the Bush administration's wars and whitewash their responsibility for the tragic and unnecessary death of this soldier.

Howard declared on Tuesday that Pearce had died for the "just cause" of "resisting brutal terrorism". Rudd used the occasion to stress Labor's "bipartisan position" with the government and his willingness to send even more Australian troops should Bush ask for them. In the most contemptible attempt to legitimise the war in Afghanistan, Defence Minister Brendan Nelson elevated the conflict into a "struggle for freedom not only of the Afghans themselves but of the free world".

The war in Afghanistan is no more about "fighting terrorism" than the US occupation of Iraq. Plans for the invasion of Afghanistan were drawn up by the key figures in the Bush administration long before September 11, 2001. The terror attacks on New York and Washington were used as the pretext for a war aimed at furthering the predatory strategic and economic interests of the US against its rivals, particularly in Europe and China.

One only needs examine the actual circumstances

surrounding Pearce's death to thoroughly expose the claims of Howard, Rudd and co.

The soldier was probably killed, not by Al Qaeda or any other terrorist network, but by local Afghan tribesmen in the province of Uruzgan, where most of the 1,000 Australian troops are stationed. The Afghan people, especially in the fiercely independent ethnic Pashtun southern provinces, do not view Australian and other foreign forces as deliverers of "freedom". They consider them to be invaders and occupiers. They are resisting the armies that have taken over their lands just as they resisted the Soviet army in the 1980s and the British army before that.

Even Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*, one the most vociferous defenders of Australian participation in the war, observed on Tuesday that "in villages just outside their base in the medieval town of Tarin Kowt, the Diggers [Australian soldiers] have been attacked, abused, and made generally unwelcome".

The hatred of the Afghan people for the occupation forces runs so deep that thousands of young men have been prepared to give their lives in the struggle to drive them out, despite the overwhelming technical superiority of the American and NATO forces. This year alone, over 3,500 poorly-armed Afghan fighters have been killed in vastly one-sided clashes, compared with just 191 occupation troops.

The most horrific acts of terrorism in Afghanistan are being carried out by the US military and its allies against innocent civilians. Indiscriminate US air strikes—some in response to calls by Australian Special Air Service (SAS) troops—have murdered or maimed tens of thousands of Afghan men, women and children over the past six years. In just one week during July, more than 150 Afghan civilians were killed by American bombing.

The psychological impact of these atrocities on the troops forced to take part is incalculable. One former soldier, Geoffrey Gregg, who was involved in an incident during 2002 in which dozens of Afghans were slaughtered from the air, finally committed suicide in September 2005 after suffering with post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.

In official political and media circles, where a consensus exists on keeping the Australian people as ignorant and confused as possible, the crimes being committed daily in Afghanistan are rarely publicly discussed.

If they were honest, Howard and Rudd would admit that they consider the death of David Pearce and the injuries of his fellow soldiers as a very small price to pay for preserving the ANZUS alliance and the benefits it extends to Australian corporate interests. After all, the Bush administration has reciprocated the Australian deployments in the Middle East by fully backing Howard's own neo-colonial operations in the resource-rich, economically lucrative South Pacific.

For his family and friends, David Pearce's death is a tragedy. Just 15 months ago, at the age of 39, he made the fateful decision to transfer from the part-time reserve to the regular army—an unusual time of life to enlist. Whatever the reason, he was killed by a roadside bomb six days after his 41st birthday. He will be mourned by his wife of 18 years and his two daughters aged 11 and six.

Sympathy for his family, however, does not alter the character or motives of the war that has claimed his life. Like the thousands of American and other coalition soldiers who have died in Iraq, David Pearce's life has been sacrificed in a conflict and for a cause that is filthy, murderous and shameful.

Over the next weeks of the 2007 election campaign, one thing is certain: there will be no official discussion or debate on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the preparations for a US-led strike against Iran, the criminal nature of US foreign policy, or the real motivations behind the support extended to it by both major parties. Malcolm Farr, a journalist for the *Daily Telegraph*, summed up on Tuesday the official attitude toward Pearce's death. Farr bluntly stated the war was a "matter of bipartisan agreement" and concluded his column with the declaration that "there is no room in the election campaign for a soldier's death to become

an issue".

Against the Howard government, the Labor Party and their various apologists, the Socialist Equality Party is placing opposition to militarism and war at the very centre of its election campaign. Our candidates are demanding the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all Australian troops from the Middle East and Afghanistan, as well as from East Timor and the Solomon Islands. We are calling for war crimes prosecutions against the US, British and Australian governments for their illegal invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq and for multi-billion dollar reparations to be made to the Afghan and Iraqi people. We encourage all those who agree with these policies to give their full support to our campaign.

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