

Australia: Rudd rewrites history as he announces “withdrawal” from Iraq

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Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announced on Monday that 550 Australian Army combat troops operating in southern Iraq would be withdrawn by the end of the month. The withdrawal, however, ends neither Australia’s participation in the criminal US occupation or its support for the Bush administration’s broader militarist foreign policy.

Rudd made his promise to withdraw the troops in last November’s federal election, in an effort to appeal to widespread antiwar sentiment and harness it behind the Labor Party. At the same time, he issued reassurances to the White House that a Labor government would remain a loyal ally in Iraq and Afghanistan and throughout the world. Upon taking office, the prime minister travelled to Washington, in part to discuss the troop withdrawal and ensure it would cause no friction in the US-Australia alliance.

The troops being pulled out of Iraq completed their mission of training Iraqi government forces in two relatively stable southern provinces in 2007. Regardless of which party won the election, they would most likely have been withdrawn this year anyway because the Australian army needs them for troop rotations in Afghanistan, East Timor and the Solomon Islands.

Rudd’s government will leave as many as 800 Australian personnel in the Middle East, performing various logistical and support roles for the US military. As well, an Australian frigate will continue to work with the US fleet deployed in the Persian Gulf off the coast of Iran. Over 1,000 Australian troops, including frontline combat units, will remain in Afghanistan.

In the course of his withdrawal announcement, Rudd attempted to rewrite history, presenting the Labor Party as a resolute opponent of the decision to invade the country in March 2003.

The conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard committed over 2,000 Australian military

personnel to the invasion, in defiance of international law and the majority of the Australian people. Along with the Bush administration and the British Blair government, Howard claimed to have indisputable evidence that the Iraqi regime possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and that it had links to the Al Qaeda terrorist network.

In his speech, Rudd asserted that Labor had “rejected” and “we continue to reject” Howard’s “four reasons” for the war: “to prevent further terrorist attacks; to prevent Iraq giving WMD to terrorists; to prevent other rogue states giving WMD to terrorists; and to put an end to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq”.

The truth of the matter is that when in opposition, Labor was completely complicit in the protracted propaganda campaign to demonise the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and justify a US attack. Rudd himself told the parliament on September 17, 2002, in his capacity as Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, that Hussein “has invaded his neighbours... and he is in possession of weapons of mass destruction, which in the past he has used against his own people as well as his neighbours. None of these matters are the subject of dispute.” On October 15, 2002, he told the State Zionist Council: “Saddam Hussein possesses weapons of mass destruction... That is a matter of empirical fact.”

The Labor Party did not retreat from these claims even as they were being proven to be lies by United Nations weapons inspectors and leaked documents from British intelligence.

In 2003, as the US was preparing its murderous invasion, Labor’s only difference with the war, and the Howard government’s support for it, was a tactical one. It wanted the war to be sanctioned with a UN Security Council resolution. Reflecting the views of a substantial section of the Australian corporate elite, Labor expressed concerns that US unilateralism was destabilising relations

between the world's major powers, with unpredictable consequences for allies like Australia. Labor repeatedly called on Howard to influence Bush to delay the invasion until diplomatic horse-trading had convinced countries such as France, Germany, Russia and China to endorse it. The party's leader at the time, Simon Crean, was jeered off the platform in Brisbane during the mass antiwar demonstrations in February 2003 for advocating his thoroughly pro-war position.

It is a matter of historical record that when the Howard government formally announced Australian forces were joining the invasion, Labor's only opposition was that the intervention had not been sanctioned by the UN.

The key points of the resolution moved by the Labor Party in the Australian House of Representatives on March 18, 2003, against a government motion to commit to war, stated: "This House: 1) insists that Iraq must disarm under the authority of the United Nations; 2) believes that, *in the absence of an agreed UN Security Council resolution authorising military action against Iraq*, there is no basis for military action to disarm Iraq, including action involving the Australian Defence Force..." (Emphasis added)

Once war began on March 20, Labor dropped its token opposition on the basis that it now had to "support the troops". It then recognised the legitimacy of the US-installed "Coalition Provisional Authority" Iraqi occupation regime. In 2006, Rudd underscored his support for this puppet regime when he advocated the arrest of a Muslim cleric in Sydney, Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali, on the grounds that his statements could be construed as inciting Iraqis to resist the occupation.

The fraudulent character of Rudd's attempt to present Labor as opponents of the Iraq invasion is revealed most clearly in his failure to make any mention of the real motives for the war.

Last year, Brendan Nelson, then Howard's Defence Minister and now the leader of the opposition, admitted in a radio interview that control over the oil resources of the Middle East was the central factor in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Nelson stated: "Energy security is extremely important to all nations throughout the world, and of course, in protecting and securing Australia's interests. The Middle East itself, not only Iraq, but the entire region is an important supplier of energy, oil in particular, to the rest of the world."

With Nelson sitting directly opposite in the parliament, Rudd whitewashed the actions of the Howard government. He declared that it had presided over

"mistakes" and a "failure of intelligence" because no WMDs were found in Iraq. At no point in his speech did he use the words "oil", "lie", "illegal" or "war crime".

Rudd did note that the war had no legal justification in the UN charter, but merely to comment that "Australia has to be mindful of new precedents being established... which justify the invasion of one state by another in the absence of any reference to these principles".

He also deliberately downplayed the mass slaughter of Iraqi people that has taken place since 2003. He cited only the Iraq Body Count tally of civilian deaths that are reported in the media, numbering between 84,000 and 91,000. While he referred to "other figures" that "range from 50,000 to more than half a million", he did not name the detailed surveys that have established the death toll to be well over one million. Rudd even followed his reference to civilian fatalities with the bizarre declaration that "Saddam Hussein led a regime that was brutal, repressive and murderous", as if to imply that Hussein was responsible for the carnage since 2003, not the Bush administration and its allies in the Australian, British and other allied governments.

The Labor Party will not bring Howard and his ministers to account because it was complicit in their war crimes, and is continuing the neo-colonial policies that lay behind them.

In fact, Rudd used his speech to signal to the Bush administration that he is prepared to back yet another US war crime in the Middle East. He pointedly labelled Iran as a "rogue state" and stated its "nuclear ambitions remain a fundamental challenge". Later, he declared: "Where our interests are engaged, we will continue to work with allies and partners to prevent or respond to threats that undermine our national security or our collective security."



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