

Australian Greens: No principled opposition to Afghan war

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Newly-elected Greens' member Adam Bandt and independent Andrew Wilkie each spoke for 20 minutes on Wednesday in the current Australian parliamentary debate on the war in Afghanistan. While the two speeches spelt out an essentially identical line as to why Australian troops should be withdrawn, Bandt's was the most revealing as the Greens' party has been assiduously promoted as "antiwar" and "progressive" by the array of pseudo-left tendencies in Australia.

The Greens benefited from their illusion-mongering with a higher vote and their first lower house seat in the August 21 election. Bandt's speech, however, advanced the purely tactical and nationalist argument that participation in the war in Afghanistan was no longer in the strategic interests of Australian capitalism. His remarks did not stray once from the limited criticisms of Australian involvement in the war made by various retired politicians, military heads and media commentators. He relied particularly heavily on the views of two former Australian army commanders.

Bandt went out of his way to stress that the Greens' position was not based on opposition to militarism. "The Greens," he declared, "do not oppose the deployment in Afghanistan based on any absolute opposition to the use of military force or from any lack of commitment to our troops". He reminded the parliament that the Greens had "led the call for military intervention in Timor Leste [East Timor]" in 1999.

While the Greens together with the Howard government and the Labor Party used the pretext of pro-Indonesian militia violence to justify the East Timor operation, the real motive was to ensure that the lion's share of natural gas in the Timor Sea remained in the

hands of Australian-based corporations. Australian troops reoccupied East Timor in 2006 amid signs that its Fretelin government was not acting in Australian interests. Some 550 Australian and New Zealand troops and police are still deployed in East Timor, with the full backing of the Greens.

The Greens also supported the original 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. In the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, Greens' leader Bob Brown endorsed the Bush administration's bogus claim that the military occupation was necessary to prevent further terrorist attacks.

Nine years later, Bandt continued to define the Greens' position entirely within the framework of the "war on terrorism". Afghanistan was both "unwinnable" and "unjustifiable", he said, because Al Qaeda no longer used Afghanistan as a base; the war provoked anti-Western sentiment; and the US-backed Karzai government was corrupt and seeking a peace deal with the Taliban insurgency. Other countries were pulling out their troops, he said, and Australia should "do the same".

Australian troops are only in Afghanistan, Bandt said, because "the United States asked us to go and want us to remain." However, he had no fundamental opposition to the US-Australia military alliance. Instead, to define the stance of the Greens, he quoted the former commander of Australian forces in the Vietnam War, Major General Alan Stretton, who stated: "Although it is important to remain an ally of the United States, this does not mean that we have to be involved in all American military excursions."

Australia, Bandt assured the parliament, “could still retain the support of the United States even if we pursue a more independent foreign policy”. Britain’s close military alliance with the US, he noted, had not been threatened by its refusal to send troops to Vietnam, implying Australia’s ties with Washington would survive a withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Bandt concluded by referring to the catastrophe inflicted on the people of Afghanistan as the outcome of a “mistake”—that is, a misguided but presumably genuine belief on the part of the US and Australian governments that “democracy” could be imposed “down the barrel of a gun”. Nothing could be further from the truth. From the outset, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were not about “terrorism” or “democracy” but were to advance the economic and strategic interests of US imperialism.

Planning for a US invasion of Afghanistan was well advanced before the events of September 11, 2001. The “war on terrorism” was nothing more than the pretext for launching a ruthless campaign of colonialism. The invasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq were aimed at establishing puppet states and a US stranglehold over Central Asia and the Middle East. Washington’s perspective is to ensure that it could when necessary deprive its rivals of access to the world’s major reserves of oil and gas. The wars were not “mistakes”, but criminal wars of aggression.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s blanket declaration on Tuesday that Australia will be involved in the Afghan war alongside American forces for the “next decade at least” underscores that US imperialism will not walk away from its attempt to subjugate Afghanistan.

Successive Australian governments have supported US militarism for motives of their own. Since World War II, the ability of the Australian ruling class to retain a dominant position in the South Pacific, and influence in South East Asia, has depended upon the US alliance. Operations like the Australian occupations of East Timor and Solomon Islands in 2003—which was also supported by the Greens—would not have been possible without Washington’s political and military backing.

Bandt’s speech obscured the real motives of the war in Afghanistan because the Greens’ differences with the Labor and Liberal parties are purely tactical. Their basic argument is that the interests of Australian imperialism are better served by focussing on the Asia Pacific region. During the recent election, Green leader Bob Brown openly linked calls for a troop withdrawal with concerns over recent defence ties between East Timor and the Beijing regime. Brown declared the “Greens’ strategy is to have our defence forces personnel at home to secure our own arc of stability.”

The Greens articulate the view of sections of the Australian ruling elite that feel threatened by growing Chinese influence in South Pacific states such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and East Timor. In the coming period, there is no reason to doubt that the Greens will be at the forefront of calling for the dispatch of Australian troops in this region. Bandt’s stress on retaining the “support of the United States” stems from the fact that such incursions would, like East Timor in 1999, depend on American backing.

The Greens have no principled opposition to militarism and imperialism. They simply view Australian involvement in Afghanistan as an unnecessary distraction from more urgent matters closer to home. Bandt’s respectful advice underscores that the Greens will loyally support the Labor minority government and vote for its budgets, including the defence allocations that will finance Gillard’s agenda of at least a decade of more war in Afghanistan.

The author also recommends:

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[20 October 2010]



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