

# Once again on the Australian Greens and the Afghan war

**Patrick O'Connor****26 October 2010**

Yesterday's intervention into the so-called parliamentary debate on the war in Afghanistan by Greens' leader Senator Bob Brown underscored his party's role as a mouthpiece for a faction of the foreign policy and military establishment that has developed tactical differences with the government over the Australian military deployment.

Elements within the ruling elite are concerned over the implications of the escalating crisis confronting US imperialism in Afghanistan and hope to see the development of an "exit strategy" for Australian forces. In the course of his 20-minute address, Brown clearly articulated these calculations. The central thrust of his argument to parliament was that Australian combat troops ought to be rotated out of the Central Asian state, like the Dutch and Canadian forces have been, while other means of supporting the US-NATO occupation are enhanced. At the same time, Canberra must strengthen its own predatory military interventions in the South Pacific and South East Asia.

Brown began his address by declaring that the Greens' senators, like their Labor and Liberal colleagues, "stand in total support of our troops in Afghanistan". He continued: "Regardless of political allegiance, this body politic gives the Australians in Afghanistan our thanks and our congratulations for their service at the behest of the government and in the cause of the nation."

Australian forces have in fact been thrust into a neo-colonial operation alongside their US and European counterparts. Confronting a population deeply hostile to their presence, the soldiers' central task is that of crushing anti-occupation resistance and propping up the corrupt US-backed regime of Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Yet for the Greens, all this is service "in the cause of the nation".

Washington's war plans were prepared well in advance of the still unexplained September 11 terrorist attacks, which triggered an extraordinary escalation of militarism abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home in both the US and Australia. Afghanistan was targeted because of its key strategic position adjacent to the energy-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East. For the Bush administration, the 2001 invasion was to be the first shot in a series of US interventions—involving Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and Syria among others—driven by an attempt to control

key energy reserves and bolster Washington's global hegemony against rival powers in Europe and Asia.

As for the former government of Prime Minister John Howard, its participation in the invasion of Afghanistan aimed at ensuring that Australian business was not shut out of lucrative export markets and investment opportunities opened up in the Middle East and Central Asia, as well as retaining Washington's support for Canberra's own operations in East Timor and the South Pacific.

Unsurprisingly, none of these issues was canvassed in the course of Bob Brown's speech. The Greens leader instead backed the official pretext, declaring "This war was entered by the Howard government to stymie Al Qaeda's threat of terrorism to the US and Australia." This was consistent with his position in 2001, when he supported the Afghanistan invasion. Brown then condemned the former Bush administration and Howard government for prematurely reducing the number of occupying forces stationed in the country.

"The Bush administration bungled its war strategy when, having gained control of Afghanistan in 2002, Bush invaded Iraq under the totally false premise of Saddam Hussein possessing weapons of mass destruction," he told the Senate. "The bellicose president withheld troops, military assets and attention from Afghanistan, while Australia, under John Howard, withdrew completely until 2005 ... Should Australian troops, seven years later, have their lives threatened daily because of a strategic stuff-up by George Bush and John Howard? Our troops are fighting in Afghanistan in 2010 because Bush, Howard and others, like Tony Blair, bungled their international ascendancy in 2001-03."

The Greens' position is clear—US-led forces should have violently crushed all Afghan resistance to the occupation when they had the chance.

Brown denounces Bush and Howard's "bungles" and "stuff ups"—but never their *crimes*. The position of the Greens' leader on Iraq echoes that of a key section of the ruling elite in Washington. In late 2006 the bipartisan Iraq Study Group report was released, urging a drawdown of combat forces in Iraq, renewed diplomatic efforts in relation to Iran and Syria, and a

renewed focus on the Afghanistan occupation. These elements within the foreign policy establishment, alarmed over the debacle that the Bush administration's reckless actions had created for the US in the Middle East, swung behind the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama.

In his speech to parliament, Brown did not level a single criticism against Obama. The Greens' leader said nothing about the "surge" strategy advanced by Obama and General David Petraeus, as a result of which there are now three times as many US troops in Afghanistan as when Bush left office. Nor did he say a word about Obama's ongoing illegal drone bomb attacks on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that have killed hundreds of civilians. Instead Brown praised Obama for opening negotiations with the Taliban leadership and for supposedly saying, according to journalist Bob Woodward, that he wasn't "doing ten years" or "long term nation building" in Afghanistan.

The Greens' leader wishes Obama every success in Afghanistan—but, like former defence department official Hugh White and other foreign policy analysts, believes that Australian troops have made a sufficient contribution. "Except in very extraordinary cases, and Afghanistan in 2010 is not one of them, our troops should be available for Australia's immediate regional security, stability and welfare," he said.

In relation to Australia's own region, Brown made clear he was talking about interventions in East Timor and Solomon Islands. "We do not underestimate the need for armed services to defend this nation and its neighbourhood," he declared. "The Greens urged military intervention to stop the bloodshed in Timor Leste before the Howard government decided on that justifiable deployment."

The 1999 intervention—and the continued occupation of East Timor by hundreds of Australian troops—was driven by Canberra's determination to maintain control over the multi-billion dollar oil and gas reserves in the Timor Sea and shut out rival powers from the region. The Greens, in collaboration with the ex-left protest organisations, played the key role in providing the Howard government with the "humanitarian" ideological cover for the imperialist operation. Brown is now keen to remind ruling circles of the affair in order to demonstrate his credentials while urging a tactical shift on Afghanistan.

The *Australian* interviewed the senator last Thursday, noting that "Brown stresses he has never been anti-war, despite being a regular speaker at anti-war protests". The Greens' leader told the Murdoch newspaper: "It was the Greens, and that means me, who called for Australia's troops to be sent into East Timor. That preceded John Howard's decision to do just that."

The Greens' position on Afghanistan is certainly not that of the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign forces. Brown instead told parliament yesterday: "It is our responsibility to ensure we get our [i.e. Australian] service men and women out

of harm's way as soon as that is prudent and feasible." He added that he welcomed Gillard's pledge to provide an annual parliamentary review of the war, "but I challenge Prime Minister Gillard to have a defined exit strategy for the next debate, if not sooner."

And if Gillard chooses not to outline an "exit strategy" by October 2011? The present Labor-Greens alliance will remain entirely unaffected by the two parties' polite disagreement on Afghanistan—and the Greens will uphold their pledge to vote for the minority government's budgets, including those provisions funding Australian military operations in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The Greens image as an "antiwar" party is entirely unwarranted and is primarily due to the media's conscious promotion of Brown and his colleagues as such. The parliamentary debate has served to highlight the chasm between the antiwar sentiments of the majority of the Australian people and the Labor-Liberal consensus for at least another decade of war. Opposition leader Tony Abbott noted the dangers involved with this when he last week referred to the challenge of winning Australian "hearts and minds". In this context, the Greens function as a critical safety valve, diverting opposition to imperialist war into safe parliamentary channels and harnessing it to tactical debates within the political establishment.

The various ex-radical protest outfits provide the Greens with additional "left" cover, with the Socialist Alliance's newspaper published adulatory coverage of the contributions of Bob Brown and Greens' parliamentarian Adam Bandt to the parliamentary debate on Afghanistan.

*The author recommends:*

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