

Australia: WikiLeaks cables reveal secret ties between Rudd coup plotters and US embassy

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9 December 2010

The latest batch of the several hundred leaked US diplomatic cables concerning Australia, provided by WikiLeaks to the Fairfax company's *Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne *Age*, provide further extraordinary evidence of Washington's direct involvement in the anti-democratic coup against former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd last June.

Key coup plotters in the Labor Party and trade unions—including senators Mark Arbib and David Feeney, and Australian Workers Union chief Paul Howes—secretly provided the US embassy with regular updates on internal government discussions and divisions within the leadership. As early as June 2008, the American ambassador identified Julia Gillard as the “front-runner” to replace Rudd. In October 2009, i.e., eight months before Gillard was installed in unprecedented circumstances, Mark Arbib informed American officials of emerging leadership tensions. The Australian people, on the other hand, were kept entirely in the dark about any differences between the prime minister and his colleagues until after Rudd was ousted.

Gillard was described, some two years before the coup, by US diplomatic officials as the “rising star” within the Labor government. They made various enquiries into Gillard's foreign policy sympathies, receiving assurances from government sources that her origins in the party's “left” faction had no policy significance whatsoever. Arbib told the embassy that Gillard was “one of the most pragmatic politicians in the ALP”; Victorian senator David Feeney added that “there is no longer any intellectual integrity in the factions” and that “there is no major policy issue on which he, a Right factional leader, differs from Gillard”. When embassy officials checked on Gillard with Paul Howes, Australian Workers Union boss and subsequent anti-Rudd coup plotter, observing that “ALP politicians from the Left, no matter how capable, do not become party leader,” he responded immediately: “but she votes with the Right’.”

The *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Age* have published parts of the latest material in excerpted form, ahead of their full public release expected in coming weeks. They focus today on Mark

Arbib's role as a “secret US source”. One of the key apparatchiks in Labor's powerful New South Wales right-wing faction, Arbib reportedly made several requests to US officials that his identity as a “protected” informant be guarded.

The cables refer to Arbib as early as mid-2006, when he served as NSW Labor Party state secretary. After being elected to the senate in the November 2007 federal election, the factional leader deepened his relationship with Washington. A US embassy profile, authored in July 2009, noted that Arbib “understands the importance of supporting a vibrant relationship with the US” and that officials “have found him personable, confident and articulate”. The profile also recorded that he “has met with us repeatedly throughout his political rise”. Other cables referred to the senator as a “right-wing powerbroker and political rising star” and noted his influence within both Labor's factions and “Rudd's inner circle”.

The cables make clear that Arbib and the other identified MPs function not simply as mere US “sources”, as characterised in the media today—but rather as agents. Within the Labor and trade unions apparatuses, these party members serve as conduits for Washington's agenda. The embassy communications reveal the extent to which the US government determines Australian foreign policy and dictates who will hold senior government posts, including the office of prime minister.

A precise chronology of Washington's sordid, behind-the-scenes manipulation of Australian political affairs, between the Labor Party's election victory in November 2007 and Rudd's axing in June 2010, is likely to emerge once WikiLeaks releases the full cache of relevant cables.

Already, however, it is now beyond dispute that Washington began cultivating Gillard at the same time as embassy officials were issuing damning assessments of Rudd, above all over his stance on Beijing. In June 2008, the same month Gillard was named as the “front-runner” to succeed Rudd, the prime minister unveiled his Asia-Pacific Community project, attempting to mediate the escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China. An American embassy cable lambasted this

proposal as yet another Rudd initiative launched “without advance consultation”. (See: “WikiLeaks cables cast fresh light on coup against former Australian PM Rudd”)

Beginning at this time, the Fairfax press reports: “US diplomats were anxious to establish Ms Gillard’s attitudes towards Australia’s alliance with the United States and other key foreign policy questions, especially in regard to Israel. Numerous Labor figures were drawn by US diplomats into conversation concerning Ms Gillard’s personality and political positions with ‘many key ALP insiders’ quickly telling embassy officers that her past membership of the Victorian Labor Party’s Socialist Left faction meant little and that she was ‘at heart a pragmatist’.”

Gillard was undoubtedly aware that she was being sounded out. One cable sent to the State Department in mid-2008 stated: “Although long appearing ambivalent about the Australia-US Alliance, Gillard’s actions since she became the Labor Party number two indicate an understanding of its importance. [US embassy political officers] had little contact with her when she was in opposition but since the election, Gillard has gone out of her way to assist the embassy... Although warm and engaging in her dealings with American diplomats, it’s unclear whether this change in attitude reflects a mellowing of her views or an understanding of what she needs to do to become leader of the ALP.”

These comments outline who really calls the shots in Australia’s so-called parliamentary democracy. Labor leaders must understand “what they need to do”—that is, kowtow on every major strategic and foreign policy issue to Washington. They need to recognise that Australia is an obedient servant of US imperialism, and that its political superstructure must function accordingly.

Arbib issued a terse statement today, simply outlining that he was an active member of the Australia-American Leadership Dialogue, and “like many members of the federal parliament, have regular discussions about the state of Australian and US politics with members of the US mission and consulate”. Contained here is a fairly clear warning, by Labor’s key backroom operator, to anyone in the government thinking of using the revelations against him. Arbib has helpfully reminded them that he enjoys Washington’s support, and that others are sure to be implicated as more cables are released.

The Fairfax press has already named former Labor national secretary and Rudd government cabinet member Bob McMullen and current backbencher Michael Danby as among those named in the WikiLeaks documents. Others likely to be named are starting to come out of the woodwork, in an effort to pre-empt the fallout. Health Minister Nicola Roxon today

volunteered that she is likely to be identified, as she “meets with US diplomats from time to time”. Greens’ leader Bob Brown has foreshadowed similar revelations—though he was at pains to point out that he was always “very careful” in his responses, and spoke with diplomats “from all over the world, from Bangladesh to the US to New Zealand, Taiwan and Beijing”.

The cables will no doubt reveal similar relationships between Washington and senior Australian media personnel. Editors, journalists, and broadcasters are routinely nurtured through the Australia-American Leadership Dialogue, and other such forums.

The excerpted cables also expose the close working relationship between the US government and Australia’s trade unions. The Fairfax press noted that “senior union leaders have privately briefed US officials about how they use their influence over the Labor Party to shape federal government policies”, and cited an August 2009 cable, which stated that the trade unions “continue to play a significant role in the formulation of national policies that can impact the United States”. Discussions between US embassy officials and senior figures in the Australian Workers Union and the National Union of Workers were reported, with one cable declaring that the leaders of the right-wing unions were “dynamic and forward thinking”.

The same cable reportedly described the declining influence of the “left” unions within the Labor Party, a conclusion that was “drawn partly through briefings from CFMEU [Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union] national secretary Dave Noonan and Victorian secretary Bill Oliver”. These two figures—often hailed as great militants by the various middle class pseudo-left outfits—were described by US embassy officials as “capable leaders”.



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