

Australian leader addresses US Congress: Obsequiousness in the service of anti-China aggression

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Yesterday's address by Australia's prime minister to a joint sitting of the US Congress was always going to be a cringe-inducing demonstration of complete subservience. But Julia Gillard's extraordinary display of fawning obsequiousness managed to surpass all expectations. Underlying her emotive rhetoric, however, was an unambiguous message—the Australian Labor government will unconditionally stand with Washington as it aggressively confronts China in the Asia-Pacific.

“Be bold,” Gillard absurdly exhorted the assembled congressional delegates. “I firmly believe you are the same people who amazed me when I was a small girl by landing on the moon. On that great day I believed Americans could do anything. I believe that still. You can do anything today.” And so it went on, for nearly thirty minutes. The prime minister stressed the “shared values” and “great friendship” between Australia and the US, and, in a series of mawkish and clichéd tributes, recalled the two countries' history of joint military responses from World War II to the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

It needs to be recalled that Gillard was speaking to an assembly dominated by corporate-sponsored politicians, many of them multi-millionaires, determined to press ahead with a savage austerity agenda of public spending cuts and attacks on welfare, healthcare, and public sector jobs and wages. The US is mired in the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, with mass unemployment and growing social distress. In Wisconsin and many other states, Republican and Democratic leaders alike are on a right-wing rampage, attempting to permanently slash the living standards of ordinary people. None of these social realities was even hinted at in Gillard's address.

The discordant message was noted by the BBC's Washington correspondent Katie Connolly: “Back in 2008,

Ms Gillard's bright words might have seemed reflective of the country's mood. But in the interceding years, the nation's mood, as reflected in Washington, has altered dramatically... Across the country, shop-fronts are shuttered and foreclosed, or repossessed, homes sit empty. Queues at food banks are depressingly healthy. States are embroiled in fierce budget battles that either have or will result in lay-offs and cuts to public programmes. Private companies are hoarding cash reserves, as yet unwilling to hire new workers, such is the nervous mood of the business community.” Connolly wondered whether the Labor PM was “tone deaf”.

Gillard, however, displayed no hardness of hearing when it came to the reactionary sensitivities of her audience. She described former Australian Prime Minister John Howard—a man guilty of terrible war crimes for his participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq—as an “Australian patriot and an American friend”. Gillard also included a gratuitous reference to the centenary of President Ronald Reagan's birth, describing the despised right-winger as “a great symbol of American optimism”.

The central political message delivered by Gillard to the 112th Congress concerned Australia's place relative to the escalating tensions between the US and its rising challenger in East Asia, China. “Momentous as the changes in the Middle East are, I believe it is in the Asia-Pacific where the global order is changing most,” she declared. “The centre of global strategic and economic weight is shifting to this region. The rise of the Asia-Pacific will define our times.”

Gillard's address marked the 60th anniversary of the ANZUS Treaty between the US and Australia. The treaty was a product of the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union. Gillard has now pledged allegiance to the new strategic imperatives of US imperialism in the twenty-first century—above all, the task of maintaining American global

hegemony through aggressive confrontation with rising challengers, in the first instance China.

The Australian Labor government has issued its unswerving support and encouragement for the Obama administration's efforts to unite various East Asian countries in an anti-China cordon.

"You were indispensable in the Cold War and you are indispensable in the new world too," Gillard told the Congress. "So your growing engagement with key countries in the region—like Japan, India, South Korea and Indonesia—is enormously welcome. We will work closely with you to strengthen the fabric of these relationships and underpin regional stability... Australia in the south, with South Korea and Japan to the north, form real Asia-Pacific partnerships with the United States. Anchors of regional stability."

Far from promoting "stability" as Gillard insists, the US is the most violently destabilising force in world politics today. Washington's attempt to maintain its hegemony in East Asia and the Pacific Ocean is jarring at every step with the new strategic reality created by China's economic expansion. Beijing, unsurprisingly, cannot accept American assurances that it will provide security for the vast daily shipments of oil and raw materials feeding China's industrial expansion, and so is developing its own blue water navy, together with overseas naval and port facilities, and cultivating new diplomatic alliances. All this cuts across American interests, creating a series of flashpoints that could easily see any small-scale military clash erupt into war between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Australia, as Gillard has made clear, would serve as the American military's southern "anchor" of operations in such a conflict. This is why the prime minister has repeatedly emphasised her "enthusiasm" for a larger US navy and army presence in Australia.

For the same reason Gillard went out of her way to promote the so-called war on terror and the criminal US-led occupation of Afghanistan in her address to Congress. The prime minister stressed that Australia "will stand firm" in Afghanistan. She hailed the "resolute and courageous commander in General Petraeus", and warned that "transition [to handing control to proxy Afghan forces] will take some years yet".

As well as being struck by the tone of Gillard's address—"drenched in overblown rhetoric, even corniness ...

it had everything but streamers and a marching band", the *Australian's* correspondent acknowledged—sections of the Australian media referred to her origins in the Labor Party's "Socialist Left" faction. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Phillip Coorey suggested: "Standing in the cradle of democracy, supporting a war and free trade, Gillard has come a long way since her alleged socialist left leanings as a student." The *Daily Telegraph's* Mark Kenny added: "It was hard not to conclude Ms Gillard was engaging in a bit of over-compensation—that she was maybe too determined to assuage any fears she was 'of' the left."

There is no contradiction between Gillard's current role and her political history on Labor's "left". The Labor Party, including its left faction, has long been the most enthusiastic force behind the US alliance in Australia. During World War II, Labor Prime Minister John Curtin made the strategic shift to Washington, while the conservatives were committed to the old relationship with the British Empire. Even in the 1950s, the right-wing parties remained closely tied to London—backing the former colonial power, for example, in the 1956 Suez Crisis—while the Labor Party urged a consistent turn to the new global hegemon, the United States.

Gillard's record certainly proved no obstacle to her rise to the top of the Labor leadership, assisted by the US embassy. Washington had identified her at least two years earlier, in 2008, as a favourable replacement for then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, after concerns began to be aired that he was something of an unreliable quantity with regard to both China and the war in Afghanistan. A network of trade union and Labor Party factional bosses secretly worked with American State Department and intelligence officials in the lead-up to the coup that replaced Rudd with Gillard in June last year.

Among the somewhat less well known figures who functioned as American assets—or "protected sources" as WikiLeaks exposed diplomatic cables euphemistically identified them—was Michael Cooney. A former senior adviser to Labor leaders Mark Latham and Kim Beazley, he now serves as Gillard's chief speechwriter and penned the prime minister's address to Congress yesterday.



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