

Australia: Key 2010 coup plotter quits government after leadership vote

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Within hours of Prime Minister Julia Gillard's defeat of Kevin Rudd in yesterday's Labor Party leadership ballot, Labor Senator Mark Arbib announced that he was quitting politics. A career apparatchik within the powerful New South Wales Right faction, Arbib played the key role in removing Rudd and installing Gillard as prime minister in the June 2010 coup. In this, he worked closely with Washington, having been a secret "protected source" for the US embassy in Canberra from early on in his political career.

Arbib indicated that his decision to resign was centrally bound up with the coup. While insisting that he "stands by the decision" to axe Rudd, the senator declared that "we need to close the door on that period and we need to start afresh." He continued: "I want to be able to mend some of the conflict that has happened in the past... What I'm trying to do is try to ensure that the party gets over the past week, the past period, it's a gesture of goodwill to the party."

The media's universal response was to declare Arbib's decision to resign completely inexplicable. The 40-year-old senator was regarded as an ambitious soon-to-be cabinet member, whom Gillard had promoted to the position of assistant treasurer less than three months ago. Moreover, in an apparent attempt to modify his image as a factional boss, Arbib had previously quit his roles as national convenor of the Labor Right faction and as a member of the party's national executive committee. The *Age's* political editor Michelle Grattan described the resignation as a "complete mystery", while the newspaper's national affairs editor Tony Wright reported: "Confused hacks in the press gallery ventured increasingly wild theories."

No one in the media has raised the possibility that US

officials might have played a role in Arbib's decision. During the 25-minute press conference held yesterday afternoon, not a single question was put to the senator about his ties to the American embassy. This is consistent with the continued blackout of the real reasons behind the 2010 coup, and the extraordinary insistence that there were no policy differences behind Rudd's decision to resign as foreign minister and challenge Gillard for the Labor leadership.

Diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks, however, have provided details of aspects of Arbib's intimate relations with American officials, and his role in the lead up to Rudd's removal. Before he even entered federal politics in 2007, Arbib was plugged into the long-established network between the NSW Labor Right and the US diplomatic-intelligence apparatus.

A US embassy profile of Arbib, sent to Washington in July 2009, noted the politician "has met with us repeatedly throughout his political rise" and described him as a "right-wing powerbroker and political rising star." Arbib was among the American assets within the Labor factions and trade union bureaucracy who worked closely with the US embassy before the 2010 coup. In October 2009, that is, eight months before Gillard was installed in unprecedented circumstances, the senator informed American officials about the emerging leadership tensions, about which the Australian people knew nothing.

The WikiLeaks' cables established a growing concern among US officials at Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's practice of launching important diplomatic initiatives without first securing their approval. These initiatives included the proposed Asia Pacific Community, which Rudd regarded as a potential means for mediating

between US and Chinese strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific. This orientation, however, cut across the Obama administration's "pivot" to Asia, which focussed not on accommodating China's rising diplomatic and strategic influence, but on aggressively countering it, including through a heightened military presence in the region.

At the same time as dissatisfaction with Rudd escalated, Gillard curried favour with the US and Israel. One diplomatic cable dispatched in mid-2008 notably wondered if Gillard had suddenly become more enthusiastic for US operations or if her dealings with embassy officials merely reflected "an understanding of what she needs to do to become leader of the ALP."

The June 2010 coup laid bare the extent to which the US state is involved in every aspect of Australian political life. It marked only the latest episode of American interference, following the CIA's involvement in the destabilisation campaign against Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1975, which culminated in the infamous Canberra Coup. The axing of Rudd also demonstrated the hollowed out and rotten character of the Labor Party apparatus. It provided a glimpse of how power is really wielded, behind the facade of parliamentary democracy, and made clear the Australian ruling elite's willingness to resort to extra-parliamentary methods of rule. For all these reasons, discussion of the real issues involved in the coup remains entirely off-limits in political and media circles.

Many questions remain about Arbib's statements yesterday. One possibility is that he was told by the US embassy that his services within the Australian Labor government were no longer required, because he was too closely associated with the political stench of the coup and because too much detail about his relationship with Washington had been publicly revealed.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard, addressing journalists yesterday after beating Rudd in the leadership ballot by 71 votes to 31, emphasised that there should be no further discussion on how she was installed. "I have had the opportunity to explain the circumstances of 2010 and how I became prime minister," she declared. "I accept that I should have explained that at the time. I have now had the opportunity to do so, but having taken that opportunity, I believe the discussions about 2010 should now be at an end, our focus is on 2012 and all the years that lie beyond for the Australian nation."

According to Gillard, her recent bitter denunciations of Rudd's leadership—that it was chaotic, dysfunctional and caused the government to become "paralysed"—constitutes an explanation of the unprecedented events of June 2010. This is an attempt to rewrite history. Gillard's account, moreover, is absurd on its face. It has been established that on the night of June 23, 2010, Gillard met in Rudd's office, together with Senator John Faulkner, and agreed to give the prime minister four months to improve the government's standing. She then left the room and returned, 10 minutes later, to renege on the deal and insist that Rudd had to go. Why did she give her initial undertaking if the government was effectively on the brink of collapse? And even more importantly, with whom did she speak when she left Rudd's office? What was said to her to make her change her mind?

Gillard has never shaken off the deep public hostility to the antidemocratic events of June 2010, and her latest attempt to evade the issues involved will prove no more successful than her previous ones. Nevertheless her government is desperately trying to distance itself from the events of June 2010 in order to try to prove to the corporate and financial elite that it can implement the agenda being demanded.

Gillard has declared her determination to proceed with various pro-business "reforms" and to return the budget to surplus, inevitably involving significant cuts to public services and major layoffs in the public sector. The prime minister was issued clear directives today in newspaper editorials for austerity and further cuts to working conditions.



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