

# New political turmoil over post of Australian foreign minister

James Cogan  
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For the second time in the space of a week, the question of who holds the position of Australian foreign minister has been engulfed in controversy, plunging the Labor government into another public crisis.

On Monday afternoon, Prime Minister Julia Gillard offered a vacant Senate seat and the post of foreign minister to the retired New South Wales state Premier Bob Carr. But Treasurer and Deputy Prime Minister Wayne Swan soon called Carr and withdrew the offer, just as Carr was preparing to fly to Canberra to announce he was joining the federal government.

These bizarre events unfolded just hours after Gillard had defeated a leadership challenge by Kevin Rudd, the man she ousted as prime minister in a political coup in June 2010 and who had resigned as foreign minister on February 22. Following Gillard's victory, Senator Mark Arbib, one of the main organisers of Rudd's removal, announced his unexpected resignation, creating the vacant seat that was offered to Carr.

Immediately after the leadership ballot, all sides proclaimed that the party would now unite to defeat the Liberal-National opposition at the next election. Gillard held a press conference to project her new political persona as a strong confident leader. All of this was rapidly undone by the divisions over the Carr appointment, exacerbated by Gillard's evasive denials of what had occurred.

On Tuesday morning, Gillard emphatically declared that the contents of an *Australian* article detailing her previous day's discussions with Carr were "completely untrue." In parliament, however, Anthony Albanese, a senior Labor minister, who had supported Rudd, went on record to assert that Carr had been invited to serve as foreign

minister. Gillard, well aware that any politician caught lying to parliament should resign, refused to repeat her categorical denial in answer to opposition questioning.

Gillard's position has only worsened. According to the *Australian*, Bob Carr answered "Yes" when directly asked by the newspaper on Tuesday afternoon if he had been offered the vacant Senate seat and the foreign ministry. Carr modified that statement later in the day, but Labor leaks confirm that Gillard made the offer. The *Australian* was told the offer was reversed after two of her most prominent cabinet supporters, former Labor leader Simon Crean and Defence Minister Stephen Smith, declared Carr's appointment was unacceptable, as Smith wanted the job.

The entire affair underscores Gillard's tenuous hold on the prime ministership. On Monday, after defeating Rudd 71 votes to 31 in the Labor parliamentary caucus, she declared she had the "strong" support of her colleagues. A day later, she had what Geoff Kitney of the *Australian Financial Review* described as "arguably her worst day in parliament" since becoming Labor leader. "The Carr affair," he wrote, "has left an unholy new political mess, of which she is the main victim."

Gillard has been exposed as little more than a pawn in the hands of others, changing her views and carrying out actions at their instruction.

The abrupt reversal of Gillard's offer to Carr is reminiscent of the anti-democratic events of June 2010, when she was chosen by inner party factional bosses to oust Rudd as prime minister in an unprecedented political coup. According to statements by Rudd last week, he and Gillard had agreed on the evening of June 23, 2010 that no challenge to his leadership would take place for four

months. Ten minutes later, she re-entered his office and declared that a leadership challenge would be launched the next day. As the WWSWS asked on February 28, “with whom did she speak when she left Rudd’s office? What was said to her to make her change her mind”?

The same questions arise over her plan to install Bob Carr as foreign minister. What was said, and by whom, that led to Swan’s phone call retracting Gillard’s offer?

In the Australian media, the Carr affair is being presented, like the Gillard-Rudd rivalry, as simply a matter of personalities. But it is no more credible to claim that the Carr appointment was blocked by Smith’s ambitions than to maintain that Gillard ousted Rudd in 2010 over his dysfunctional leadership style. Gillard has the sole prerogative to choose cabinet, but, according to the media script, her choice for foreign minister was overridden by her most prominent supporters for purely personal reasons.

The emphasis on personality conflicts serves to obscure the foreign policy issues that were central to the 2010 coup and have only sharpened in the subsequent 20 months. The Australian ruling class confronts a fundamental dilemma arising from the mounting tensions between its longstanding strategic ally, the United States, and China, now Australia’s largest trading partner.

Rudd, while completely committed to the US alliance, had sought to ameliorate tensions by encouraging Washington to accommodate Chinese geopolitical interests. The Obama administration is not seeking an accommodation with China. It has been intensifying diplomatic and strategic pressure throughout the region to undermine what it regards as a potential rival for influence.

Rudd was ousted by a handful of factional heavyweights with close connections to Washington. Mark Arbib, who was exposed by WikiLeaks as a “protected source” of the American embassy, played a pivotal role. On becoming prime minister, Gillard immediately fell into line with the Obama administration. Last November, during President Obama’s visit to Canberra, she announced that US Marines would be based in Darwin and Australia air and naval bases would be opened to the US military.

As Gillard has admitted publicly, however, foreign

policy is not her forte. That has been revealed in the Carr appointment. While he is strongly committed to the Australia-US alliance, Carr’s positions, as revealed in his blogs, are even more out of sync with the Obama administration than Rudd’s.

Following the Obama-Gillard announcement last November, Carr blogged: “The more thoughtful American policy would be to accept a growing Chinese role in the Pacific and to negotiate the terms and conditions that surround it... It is patently in this country’s national interest to see in the Pacific a peaceful accommodation between the US and China... As for American military on Australian soil, they should never be permanently here. That would reduce Australia to a mere Okinawa. Nothing wrong with rotating them or with ship visits, nuclear armed or not. That is what an alliance means. A treaty partner we are, unapologetically, not an aircraft carrier.”

On December 1, Carr wrote: “Do we have as our goal a peaceful accommodation between the aspirations of China and the national interests of the US? Why did we allow the announcement about Marines rotating in the Northern Territory to be made in association with the US President’s strange speech attacking China? Who makes these foreign policy decisions and what discussion is there?... The government looks like it has blundered into siding with the Americans in their clumsy lurch towards containment of China.”

There is a common thread to these events, from the 2010 coup through to the reversal of the offer to Carr. The upheaval inside the Labor Party—the country’s oldest political party—reflects the acute dilemma of Australian imperialism, due to its political and military alignment with the US and its growing economic dependence on China. The political crisis will only worsen in the coming period as US-China tensions intensify.



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