

Australian Labor Party defends its “heartfelt” celebration of Ariel Sharon

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In a revealing episode in the Australian parliament on Tuesday, deputy Labor leader Tanya Plibersek denounced any suggestion that her fulsome eulogies for Israeli war criminal Ariel Sharon were anything other than “genuine and heartfelt.”

Her remarks were made in the course of a formal condolence motion passed by the parliament. Plibersek joined tributes to Sharon by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop and Labor opposition leader Bill Shorten. Education Minister Christopher Pyne then asked to be associated with “the genuine and heartfelt remarks” of Abbott, Bishop and Shorten, and “the remarks made by the deputy leader of the opposition.”

Pyne’s statement—an unsubtle insinuation that Plibersek’s comments on Sharon had not been genuine and heartfelt—drew howls of protest from Labor’s parliamentary benches.

The Liberal-National government was obviously seeking to gain some political mileage over a statement by Plibersek in September 2002 criticising Israel and Ariel Sharon.

During a parliamentary debate on the preparations being made by Washington to invade Iraq, Plibersek, then an opposition backbencher with Labor’s so-called “left” faction, declared that she would only support the war if it enjoyed a UN rubber stamp. In the course of the speech, she accused Washington of hypocrisy in its denunciations of the Saddam Hussein regime: “I can think of a rogue state which consistently ignores UN resolutions, whose ruler is a war criminal responsible for the massacres of civilians in refugee camps outside its borders. The US supports and funds this country. This year it gave it a blank cheque to continue its repression of its enemies. It uses US military hardware to bulldoze homes and kill civilians. It is called Israel,

and the war criminal is Ariel Sharon.”

As Plibersek moved up the ranks of the parliamentary Labor Party, she repudiated these comments. In 2011, she told the *Australian* that she had “spoken injudiciously” and “no longer held the views” she expressed nine years earlier. At the same time, Plibersek cultivated ties with powerful Zionist lobby groups, who backed her last October when she was promoted to Labor deputy leader and shadow foreign minister.

On Tuesday, after Pyne’s attempt to use Plibersek’s 2002 criticisms of Sharon against her, Labor’s leader of parliamentary business Tony Burke protested with a point of order. Appealing to the speaker to “preserve the dignity of this House,” Burke complained of “point-scoring on the death of a person.” Plibersek angrily added that she was “personally offended” by Pyne’s remarks and asked him to withdraw them.

The episode again shed light on the Australian Labor Party’s long and close association with Israel and its crimes against the Palestinian people. A slavish support for the Zionist state is an essential prerequisite for any Labor MP aspiring to become party leader and prime minister. A network of Zionist groups, plugged into the Labor and trade union factional hierarchy and backed by Washington and its assets in Canberra, help veto the rise of any Labor careerist who voices concern over Israel’s brutal suppression of the Palestinians and wars of aggression against neighbouring states.

This was well understood by Julia Gillard, who like Plibersek began her career in Labor’s “left,” before promoting her pro-Zionist credentials as part of her campaign to win US support in the lead up to her installation as prime minister in the 2010 coup orchestrated inside the Labor Party.

Plibersek is now being touted by sections of the

media as a potential future prime minister—and her eulogies for Sharon were undoubtedly pitched with this prospect in mind. When the war criminal died last month, Plibersek issued a statement declaring that Sharon “embodied fearless leadership” and was a “giant in the history of Israel.”

She elaborated on these obscene paeans in her statement to parliament in support of the motion of condolence. Plibersek provided a truncated and highly dishonest summary of Sharon’s political and military career, whitewashing his numerous crimes. She declared, for example, that Sharon’s “time as defence minister ended in controversy after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon.”

The Labor deputy leader could not even bring herself to mention the cause of this “controversy”—the massacre of up 3,500 Palestinians at the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps. Sharon earned himself the sobriquet of the “Butcher of Beirut” for his role in invading west Beirut in 1982, sealing off the refugee camps, and unleashing the fascistic Phalange militia forces against the thousands of men, women and children trapped inside. For 36 hours, Sharon and his troops watched as their proxies raped, tortured, and murdered thousands of refugees with knives and guns.

The atrocity sparked outrage internationally and within Israel, where 400,000 people, or 10 percent of the population, demonstrated against the government. An official Israeli government inquiry whitewashed the crime, but was nevertheless compelled to conclude that Sharon had been “personally responsible” for what happened.

Towards the end of her eulogy, Plibersek claimed that Sharon’s time as prime minister between 2001 and 2006 “saw a shift towards a two-state solution in the peace process, as well as a large removal of settlers from Gaza.” Sharon, she continued, broke with the Likud party to form “the centrist Kadima” and this “took courage, and the fact that it was Ariel Sharon who made such a courageous stand is worthy of praise.”

These are all complete lies. Sharon’s entire career was bound up with promoting the project of a “Greater Israel,” based on the subjugation and expulsion of the Palestinian people. In 2005 (a year after, some evidence suggests, that he had ordered the assassination of Yasser Arafat) Sharon withdrew 8,500 Israeli settlers

from Gaza. This was in order to give the Israeli military a free hand in its operations throughout the densely populated Palestinian territory. Sharon’s “disengagement” policy paved the way for the “Operation Cast Lead” bombardment in January 2009 that destroyed basic civilian infrastructure throughout Gaza and killed around 1,400 Palestinians. At the same time, the Gaza policy was designed to provide a degree of political cover for the Sharon government’s expansion of Israel’s illegal colonisation projects in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

Tanya Plibersek’s Damascene conversion on the record and legacy of Ariel Sharon does not merely reflect crass political opportunism. Her “genuine and heartfelt” defence of past war crimes is another indication of the Labor Party’s preparedness to defend and participate in future war crimes carried out by the US and its allies.

The author also recommends:

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[13 January 2014]

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