

Al Gore's strange meeting in Canberra: More at stake than the carbon tax

Peter Symonds
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A political event took place last week in Australia's Parliament House that brought together two strange bedfellows—Al Gore, former US vice-president, Democrat presidential candidate in 2000, and Nobel peace prize laureate, with Clive Palmer, Australian multi-billionaire, mining entrepreneur, right-wing populist, leader of the Palmer United Party (PUP) and recently elected parliamentarian.

The occasion was Palmer's press conference on June 25 to announce his party's stance on the Abbott government's plans to abolish the significant aspects of the previous Labor government's environmental policy—particularly its carbon tax. Palmer holds a key bloc of votes and effectively the balance of power in the Senate, having funded a multi-million dollar election campaign that exploited widespread disaffection with Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition.

Palmer has vigorously opposed the carbon tax, even refusing to pay it for his nickel refinery. As recently as April, he told the media that he did not believe the scientific consensus that climate change would affect Australia. However, just months later, the mining tycoon declared a road-to-Damascus style conversion, announcing that while the PUP would still vote against the carbon tax, it would block the government's plans to abolish the Renewal Energy Target, Climate Change Authority and Clean Energy Finance Corporation. Moreover, the PUP would seek to amend legislation in order to establish an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS), conditional on similar moves by Australia's major trading partners.

Palmer's sudden about-face from climate change denier to climate change advocate would have been sufficient cause for comment. But the presence at the press conference of Al Gore, known globally as a

climate-change campaigner, left journalists, to use the words of one, "gobsmacked." Gore rose to declare that, while he did not agree with the repeal of the carbon tax, he endorsed the remainder of the PUP's proposals, saying they represented "an extraordinary moment in history."

None of the media commentary has explained why Gore would lend his name and reputation to enhance the credibility of an Australian billionaire, known for his erratic, and at times outlandish, views. Some suggested that Gore had been paid—an unlikely possibility given that Gore himself has amassed a fortune estimated at more than \$200 million, including from lucrative "green" investments.

The Fairfax press noted that the joint appearance had been the outcome of months of negotiations, involving key figures linked to the Australian Greens and environmental lobby, who were desperate to retain as much as possible of Labor's environmental policy. While the carbon tax and various environmental agencies have done nothing to reverse carbon emissions, a substantial layer of "green" entrepreneurs and financiers has, like Gore, profited from the new business opportunities that were opened up under Labor.

According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, former CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation, Don Henry, suggested that Gore meet Palmer as part of his visit to Australia to undertake his "climate reality" education program. Ben Oquist, former chief-of-staff to Australian Greens leader Christine Milne, was also a facilitator and took part in the dinner that immediately followed the Gore-Palmer press conference.

From the standpoint of Palmer, Henry and Oquist, the outcome was all positive. However, for Gore personally, there was nothing much to gain from being

publicly associated with an unpredictable Australian right-wing populist. Indeed, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on Wednesday that Gore's own top advisers in the US had all urged him to pull out of the press conference.

The fact that Gore decided to ignore the advice indicates that other, unstated issues were involved. The prospect of political instability in Australia, fuelled by widespread alienation from the major parties, reflected in a fractured Senate, and deep opposition to the government's austerity budget, is undoubtedly raising concerns in Washington.

The Obama administration regards Australia as an indispensable ally in its military build-up in the Indo-Pacific region against China. Kevin Rudd, whose calls for a US-China accommodation had cut across Obama's confrontational policy, was ousted as Australian prime minister in June 2010 by Labor and union powerbrokers, later identified in WikiLeaks cables as "protected sources" of the US embassy in Canberra.

Obama announced his "pivot to Asia" in the Australian parliament in November 2011 and since then Labor and Coalition governments, as well as the Greens, have fully committed to the US war preparations against China. Rudd's successor, Julia Gillard, signed an agreement with Obama to base US Marines in northern Australia—an arrangement that has only expanded under the current government to provide greater access to Australian naval and air bases.

A political crisis in Canberra would threaten those plans. The ousting of Rudd in 2010 and US involvement in the 1975 coup against the Whitlam government constitute a clear demonstration of the fact that Washington is not simply a passive observer of domestic Australian politics. It has long-standing contacts and operatives within all the major political parties, the trade unions, the media and across the Australian establishment, which it does not hesitate to use to prosecute US interests.

Palmer, the billionaire turned politician, is, however, something of a wild card. His business interests are closely bound up with Chinese investments and markets, and he repeatedly castigated the previous Labor government for antagonising Beijing. In November 2011, he refused to attend an official dinner with Obama, explaining to the media: "It's because we

aren't that stupid. We have real interests [in China] and know how the Chinese act." In 2012, Palmer rather bizarrely accused the CIA of funding a campaign by the Greens and anti-coal protest groups and thereby attempting to sabotage the Australian economy.

Palmer is now the leader of a minor party that effectively holds the balance of power in the Senate. Without the votes of the PUP and its ally, Ricky Muir from the Motor Enthusiasts Party, the government cannot pass legislation if it is opposed by Labor and the Greens. The immediate crisis looming in next week's Senate session is the passage of bills that are central to the demands of the Australian corporate elite to dismantle the welfare state.

Just as important from the standpoint of Washington is to ensure Canberra's unalloyed support amid sharpening tensions with China over territorial disputes in the South China and East China Seas. Given Palmer's pivotal role in the new Australian parliament, the White House requires a line of communication and leverage—something that Gore has conveniently provided.

Gore is not only a scion of the Democratic Party establishment with innumerable ties to the Obama administration but a tried and trusted defender of the interests of US imperialism. He is acutely aware of the danger of political instability, having been at the centre of the turmoil produced by the US stolen presidential election in 2000. He accepted the outcome rather than risk further political upheaval by challenging the Supreme Court decision that installed George W. Bush as president.

The fact that a figure of Gore's standing in American ruling circles stooped to put his imprimatur on Palmer's policies is a sign that both the political crisis in Australia and US war preparations against China are far more advanced than either Canberra or Washington is publicly admitting.



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