

Australian parliamentarian calls for Iraqi war crimes trial

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In response to the publication of the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq war in the United Kingdom, former intelligence official and now independent parliamentarian Andrew Wilkie has called for the prosecution of George Bush, Tony Blair and former Australian Prime Minister John Howard in an international war crimes trial.

The Howard government played a key role in promoting the lies used to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq and committed Australian military forces in defiance of international law.

Wilkie told journalists on Thursday: “Every time it [the Howard government] said that Iraq had a massive arsenal of weapons of mass destruction and it was cooperating with Al Qaeda, it knew that that was not the case—that it was either clearly not the case, or at best for them, it was ambiguous.

“They took us to war on a lie. No wonder John Howard and Tony Blair and George W. Bush do stand accused of war crimes. I’d like them to see an international court. I would like them to defend their position and try to prove their innocence because all of those people who do accuse them of war crimes I think make a pretty compelling case.”

Wilkie continued: “The terror threat that we face in this country right now is a direct result of the decision by the Australian government under John Howard in 2003 to join in that invasion. Frankly, there are a number of political leaders who in my opinion have blood on their hands. The Bali bombing of 2005 would not have occurred if we hadn’t have joined in in the invasion of Iraq. The Lindt Cafe siege would not have occurred if we hadn’t helped create the circumstances for the rise of Islamic State.”

Wilkie is in a unique position to know the claim that the decision to invade Iraq was made on the “best available intelligence” was false. In 2003, he was working as a top level officer in the Office of National Assessments

(ONA), a branch of Australian intelligence that reports directly to the prime minister and cabinet national security committee. On March 9, 2003, he publicly resigned from the ONA and denounced the preparations for war.

Wilkie, based on the intelligence he was privy to—the same intelligence that was available to the Bush, Blair and Howard governments—stated at the time: “Iraq does not pose a security threat to the US, or to the UK or to Australia... Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction [WMD] program is, I believe, genuinely contained... As far as I’m aware there was no hard evidence and there is still no hard evidence that there is any active cooperation between Iraq and Al Qaeda.”

Wilkie concluded an interview he gave to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation on March 9, 2003 by saying: “I don’t believe I could stand by any longer and take no action as this coalition marches to war. I think the interests of the thousands of people, perhaps tens of thousands of people or even more who could be injured, displaced or killed in a war, I think their interests are more important.”

Thirteen years later, the consequences of the illegal Iraq invasion include the death of over one million Iraqis, millions more wounded and traumatised, the devastation of what was once a modern society and ongoing ethno-sectarian carnage. The endless wars waged by US imperialism and its allies, including Australia, have claimed hundreds of thousands of lives in Afghanistan, northwest Pakistan, Yemen, Libya and Syria and created the greatest refugee crisis since World War II.

Wilkie’s call for war crimes trials have not been taken up by any section of the political establishment or the media. Instead, in an interview on the ABC’s “Lateline” program, Howard, who is living in comfortable retirement, was allowed to avoid questions over the criminality of his government’s decision to invade Iraq by blaming “flawed” intelligence advice.

The Greens have issued a mealy-mouthed statement calling for an “urgent independent inquiry into Australian involvement in the Iraq war.”

Wilkie himself has signaled he does not intend to pursue the issue, putting out a press release on Friday declaring that he will support the Coalition in forming a new government once the results of the July 2 election in Australia are finally known.

The Labor Party has consistently protected Howard and his senior ministers, including Peter Costello, Alexander Downer and Robert Hill, from being held to account for the atrocities resulting from the invasion of Iraq. It has opposed even a limited Chilcot-style inquiry into the Iraq war, which was proscribed from the outset from considering the question of criminal culpability.

Labor’s only disagreement with the 2003 war was that it was not formally sanctioned by the UN. Once the invasion was complete, the Labor opposition backed the UN endorsement of the US-led occupation and Australia’s military involvement.

In the 2007 election, Labor cynically used a promise to withdraw Australian forces from Iraq to appeal to the mass anti-war sentiment among workers and youth. Upon winning government, however, it continued Australian military operations and only withdrew the majority of troops in late 2008 and early 2009, on a timetable worked out with the Bush administration. Under both Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and then Julia Gillard, Labor proceeded to substantially increase the Australian contingent in the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Labor unconditionally supports the US military alliance and during Gillard’s government, committed Australia to the US “pivot to Asia” and its preparations for war against China. In 2014, it fully backed the Coalition when it ordered Australian combat forces to Iraq and Syria.

A socialist movement of the working class will be the only social force, in Australia and internationally, that can secure justice for the millions of victims of the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath.



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