

Australian Greens on Afghan war crimes: Hypocrisy, hand-wringing and support for militarism

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In response to the official Brereton report, which found “credible information” that Australian Special Forces soldiers murdered at least 39 civilians and prisoners in Afghanistan, the entire political establishment has sought to downplay the scale of the war crimes and promote the military as a crucial “national institution.”

The Greens are no exception. While feigning “distress” over the killings, they have said nothing about the responsibility of successive governments for the neo-colonial occupation and the war crimes that resulted, and advanced proposals aimed at providing future predatory wars with a democratic figleaf.

The role of the Greens was summed up by their participation last week in a hysterical nationalist campaign over a Chinese condemnation of the war crimes.

Zhao Lijian, a mid-ranking Chinese official, posted a tweet expressing shock over the killings and calling for those responsible to be held to account. It was accompanied by a cartoonish graphic showing an Australian soldier holding a knife to the throat of an Afghan child. This was a reference to killings documented in the Brereton report.

Despite the factual character of the tweet, it was met with unconcealed fury by the Liberal-National government, the Labor Party opposition and the corporate media. The Twitter post was obscenely presented as a far greater crime than the killings, torture and abuses perpetrated by the Australian military.

The Greens immediately lined up with the government and Labor. Their leader, Adam Bandt, tweeted that the image was “contemptible.” He wrote, “criticism of Australia’s human rights record is legitimate, but this isn’t the way to do it,” before endorsing Prime Minister Scott Morrison’s demand that the tweet be removed.

As some comments noted in response, this was Bandt’s first post on Twitter mentioning Afghanistan since the release of the Brereton report on November 19. Despite being a prolific user of Twitter, the Greens leader did not bother to post about the killings themselves, but instead sprang into action to defend the military and support the anti-China campaign.

Bandt declared that the “focus needs to be on the crimes, the victims, the justice process...” Despite the mealy-mouthed reference to the “victims,” this was an endorsement of the military’s own Brereton investigation and an attempt to promote the fraud that it will result in “justice.”

In reality, the secretive investigation, which dragged on for more than four years, was a continuation of a protracted cover-up of the crimes, most of which occurred between 2009 and 2013. Its report is heavily redacted, and centres on the fatuous insistence that the military command above sergeant level, as well as governments, knew nothing about the killings when they occurred. David McBride, a former military lawyer who blew the whistle on some of the crimes, still faces a secret trial and decades in prison for breaching national security laws.

Meanwhile, government ministers have stated that prosecutions of the soldiers involved could take up to a decade, if they ever eventuate. The Special Forces regiments will not be disbanded. Instead, the investigation and the report are aimed at providing them with a new coat of paint, to ensure they can be deployed in future wars.

To the extent that the Greens have expressed “concern” over this whitewash, it has been from the standpoint of providing it with a greater veneer of “accountability.”

A statement by the party’s “peace spokesperson,” Senator Jordan Steele-John, called for Generals Angus Campbell and Richard Burr to resign. They are tasked with implementing the Brereton recommendations, even though Campbell was responsible for Australian troops in the Middle East and Afghanistan between 2011 and 2012, when many of the abuses were committed, and Burr was a Special Forces commander in Afghanistan.

Steele-John said they should stand aside to “enable the recommendations of the Afghan Inquiry to be implemented free from any actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and facilitate ongoing investigations by the Australian Federal Police.” Revealingly, he said his motivation was to ensure “public trust” and prevent “the process” from being “undermined.”

Making clear that he was not in any way challenging the official cover-up, Steele-John appealed to Campbell and Burr to “do the right thing by the Australian Defence Force.” If they did not, he said the prime minister “should sack them.”

The Greens are once again moving legislation that would require “parliamentary approval before Australian troops are sent to war.”

A party statement on November 30 spelt out the right-wing, militarist character of this initiative. It is not aimed at ending imperialist war, but at ensuring that “strategic failures” such as the

quagmires in Iraq and Afghanistan are avoided, and Australian troops are deployed in the “national interest.”

Bandt declared: “Under the Greens’ bill, the whole Parliament—not just the government—will receive regular updates about the need for our armed forces to be sent abroad, as well as the actions of our soldiers once their boots are on foreign soil.” In other words, there will be more wars, but they require a democratic façade and what the statement describes as “strategic direction,” including from Greens MPs.

Most remarkably, the statement holds up the US as a model to be emulated. “Australia must join other advanced nations like the United States, Germany and Sweden that protect against unilateral decisions by the government,” Bandt said, touting a nominal and routinely flouted requirement for congressional approval before American troops are dispatched abroad.

Bandt thus promoted the imperialist power that has launched more aggressive wars than any other over the past hundred years, with the willing backing of its Congress. The US, with the help of its allies such as Australia, has carried out continuous military interventions and occupations over the past 30 years, killing millions and destroying entire societies.

This pro-war position of the Greens is a continuation of their protracted support for imperialist militarism, in keeping with their character as a pro-capitalist party of the upper middle-class.

Afghanistan is a case in point. When the US-led invasion was launched in late 2001, the Greens promoted the fraudulent claim that the US was targeting the oppressed nation to rout out terrorists after the September 11 attacks. This covered-up the fact that a war against Afghanistan, aimed at securing control of the country’s resources and establishing a greater foothold in the geo-strategically critical Central Asian region, had been discussed in US ruling circles throughout the late 1990s.

Then Greens leader Bob Brown declared that the war was a “hunt for terrorists.” “Australia’s commitment should be under the auspices of the United Nations,” he said in early 2002.

In 2003, the Greens postured as opponents of the illegal US invasion of Iraq. The party had, however, supported crippling sanctions against the Middle Eastern nation which killed at least half a million children, along with other imperialist provocations.

Their position on the invasion was of an entirely tactical character. Brown repeatedly warned against Australian troops being bogged down in the Middle East, instead advocating their greater deployment in the South Pacific, to shore up Australian imperialist interests in “our backyard.”

Over the following years, Brown would similarly warn that the Afghan occupation had become “unwinnable” and lacked a “clear strategy.”

In practice, however, the Greens continued to support the war. In response to 2008 revelations that Australian soldiers had kept alleged Taliban fighters, at least one of whom was over 70 years of age, in dog cages, Brown issued a statement entitled, “Troops must get better support.”

The “apparent breach of the Geneva convention,” Brown wrote, “points to a failure by the government to provide back-up to ensure adequate transfer and detention facilities. Our soldiers are doing a lot to maintain good relations with the people in

Afghanistan and such events don’t help.”

In 2010, the Greens initiated a phony campaign for a parliamentary debate on the occupation. Brown complained that the occupation had not been successful, “because Bush, Howard and others like Tony Blair grossly mismanaged their international ascendancy in 2001-3.”

When the debate was held, Brown began by declaring that the Greens “stand in total support of our troops in Afghanistan... Regardless of political allegiance, this body politic gives the Australians in Afghanistan our thanks and our congratulations for their service at the behest of the government and in the cause of the nation.”

Bandt declared: “The Greens do not oppose the deployment in Afghanistan based on any absolute opposition to the use of military force or from any lack of commitment to our troops.”

Instead, the Greens repeated their call for a greater focus on ensuring Australian dominance of “our arc of stability to the north,” including through imperialist interventions in the region.

In June 2010, Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was ousted in a political coup orchestrated by “protected sources” of the US embassy in the Labor and trade union bureaucracy. His removal was motivated by US hostility to a vague “two to four year” timetable for Australia’s withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Rudd’s calls for Washington to make limited accommodations to China’s rising influence in the Asia-Pacific.

Julia Gillard, Rudd’s replacement, quickly declared that troops would remain in Afghanistan for at least a decade.

After the August 2010 federal election, the Greens entered into a formal alliance to prop-up Gillard’s minority government. The party provided the government with a guarantee of support as it aligned Australia with a major US “surge” in Afghanistan and with a vast American military build-up in the Asia-Pacific directed against China.

When US President Barack Obama announced the “pivot to Asia,” a comprehensive plan for war with China, from the floor of the Australian parliament in 2011, Brown and Bandt were among the first Australian parliamentarians to shake his hand. The escalating US campaign against China dovetails with the Greens’ insistence on ensuring US and Australian hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

Since then, the Greens’ support for war has become more naked. In 2011, the party agitated for the imposition of a “no-fly zone” over Libya, clearing the way for a US-NATO bombardment that has destroyed that country. The Greens similarly promoted the US-led regime-change operation in Syria, which has involved the CIA funding, arming and training Al-Qaeda forces to overthrow a government aligned with Russia.



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