

Australian government buries 2003 Iraq invasion documents

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17 January 2024

The Australian Labor government is trying to hide secret cabinet documents from 2003 that could further expose the lies and disinformation that the country's political establishment propagated to justify the criminal, catastrophic invasion of Iraq in 2003.

It announced a closed-door inquiry into the supposedly mistaken omission of 78 sensitive National Security Committee (NSC) papers from this year's annual release of 20-year-old cabinet documents by the National Archives.

That inquiry is being conducted by a long-time intelligence chief and top political operative, Dennis Richardson, who was a participant in all the NSC meetings. Any documents that are finally released will exclude all information deemed to threaten Australia's "national security" or relations with the US.

That means an ongoing coverup of the illegal invasion, which ultimately cost an estimated one million Iraqi lives, three million displaced and the destruction of food, water and health care for the majority of the 30 million population. It was launched in March 2003 despite huge global protests, involving some 10 million people on a single weekend in February 2003, including half a million across Australia.

What has been released so far of the cabinet documents confirms that the decision to go to war was made long before the formal rubberstamping of that decision by the cabinet on March 18, 2003.

A six-page minute on that day reveals Liberal-National Prime Minister John Howard had "extensive discussions over a period of time" with both US President George W Bush and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair about the "possible use of force against Iraq if it failed to disarm."

In reality, the Australian government and military had been deeply involved in US planning for the war, at least since Bush foreshadowed the invasion in his January 2002 State of the Union "axis of evil" speech, targeting Iraq, Iran and North Korea.

For the formal record, Howard gave his cabinet the official justification for the invasion, knowing it to be false. "The risk of weapons of mass destruction falling into the hands of terrorists constitutes one of the greatest present threats to the security of Australia and the entire international community," the document reads.

More to the point, Howard told his cabinet he had received a "request" from Bush for Australia to join the military operation, and the president would soon issue a "final ultimatum" to Iraq. That ultimatum came just hours later, followed by Bush's public announcement on March 20 that military operations had already commenced.

In all the 246 pages of released 2003 cabinet records, there is virtually no mention of the war, despite its increasingly barbaric and unpopular character. One minute, dated April 1, 2003, consisted of just a single sentence: "The Cabinet noted an oral report by the Prime Minister on the progress of military operations in Iraq and the contribution made by the Australian Defence Force."

Any discussion on the invasion occurred within the NSC, which met no less than 64 times in 2002-03. It consisted of key ministers plus senior officials and the military and intelligence chiefs.

Now Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government is trying to bury the NSC records under conditions in which it has just joined yet another disastrous US-led war. This time it is against the Houthi government in Yemen, deliberately widening the US-backed Israeli genocide in Gaza and seeking to provoke a military conflict with Iran.

As in 2003, the Labor government's decision to participate in the US and UK bombing of Yemen has been made without even the façade of parliamentary approval, let alone democratic discussion—all on the basis of another pack of lies.

Just like Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and his non-existent "weapons of mass destruction" (WMD), the Houthis in the tiny state of Yemen have been turned into new demons. Their vastly outnumbered forces have been declared such a threat to world trade that the US and its allies must urgently "defend" themselves.

This war, like the 2003 invasion, has an unstated and reckless agenda—that of asserting US global hegemony. The alleged "direct response to unprecedented Houthi attacks" on ships in the Red Sea is a political pretext, the same as the fabrications about WMD.

In this case, the US aggression is directly coordinated with the Zionist atrocities against the Palestinians. It aims to trigger a wider war for US domination over the Middle East as part of

the US-led war already underway against Russia in Ukraine and being prepared against China. The Labor government has totally committed itself to Washington's imperialist agenda, no less than the Howard Liberal-National government in 2003.

After the supposed "mistake" of the non-release of the 2003 documents was unveiled, Albanese stated: "Australians do deserve to know the basis upon which the decision was made to send Australia to war." Cynically, he added: "The National Archives of Australia should release all the documentation that has been provided to them, having account for any national security issues, of course."

As Albanese knows, the Archives Act provides a means of keeping secret any records that "could reasonably be expected to cause damage to the security, defence or international relations of the Commonwealth" or information that "was communicated in confidence by, or on behalf of, a foreign government."

This ensures that no material will ever be released to the public that in any way exposes the lies and crimes of the Australian military-intelligence-political establishment or its closest partners in Washington and London.

The Archives Act is policed by the domestic political spy agency, the Australian Intelligence Security Organisation (ASIO), which Richardson headed from 1996 to 2005. Having been appointed by the Howard government as ASIO director-general, he was a party to all the war moves discussed inside the NSC.

"There is no more respected civil servant than Dennis Richardson," Albanese declared. The truth is that under Liberal-National and Labor governments alike, Richardson has remained a central figure in the capitalist state apparatus.

Richardson functioned as Australian ambassador to the US from 2005 to 2010, secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade from 2010 to 2013 and secretary of the Department of Defence from 2012 to 2017. Then followed lucrative "security" consultancies, such as conducting the present review of the 2003 document release.

The Labor government's whitewash bid is in line with its move last August to retain unlimited powers to launch military operations without parliamentary approval or public discussion.

Already participating in the US-NATO war in Europe against Russia and preparations for a US-led war against China, the government welcomed a bipartisan parliamentary committee recommendation that "decisions regarding armed conflict are fundamentally a prerogative of the Executive"—that is, the backroom cabal of the NSC.

At the same time, the government rejected a committee proposal that such decisions be formally made in the name of the governor-general—as per the country's colonial-era 1901 Constitution—particularly in conflicts not rubberstamped by the United Nations Security Council or by a supposed invitation from the country invaded.

That proposal was a bid to shield the government from any

possible legal challenge or war crimes charges. It was another indication that preparations have been made for wars that are illegal under international law, such as in Gaza and Yemen, as well as against Russia and China.

In his response to the non-release of the NSC documents, Albanese peddled a further fraud. He claimed that Simon Crean, Labor's leader in 2003, had "made the courageous decision" to oppose sending military forces to join the Iraq invasion.

Crean only disagreed tactically with joining the invasion without the cover of a UN mandate to protect the participants against possible war crimes charges. His other preoccupation was to divert the massive anti-war opposition back behind Labor and promote illusions in the parliamentary system.

All along, Crean declared that Iraq had to be "disarmed"—endorsing the WMD pretext. He emphasised Labor's readiness to back the war once a UN rubberstamp was secured. As soon as the invasion began, Crean declared on Australian Broadcasting Corporation television on March 23, 2003 that the decision to send Australian forces was wrong but "what we've got to hope for, in the current circumstances, is that their task is completed quickly and successfully."

If Labor had been in office in 2003, its NSC would have done the same as the Howard government's. In 1990, the Hawke Labor government, including Crean as science minister, was one of the first in the world to join the first US-led Gulf War invasion of Iraq, and Labor has backed or conducted every Australian war operation since 2003.

Crean was dumped as Labor leader toward the end of 2003. But he remained on Labor's frontbench and was a cabinet minister from 2007 to 2013 under Rudd and Gillard, who signed up to the Obama administration's anti-China military and strategic "pivot" to Asia and joined Obama's criminal troop "surge" in Afghanistan.

Labor's filthy record, taken to a new level under Albanese, embodies the Australian ruling class's alignment behind US imperialism, on which it has depended since World War II to prosecute its own predatory imperialist interests in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Albanese government's move to bury the 2003 Iraq war documents and its assertion of untrammelled war powers must be taken as warnings. Labor's support for the US-backed Zionist genocide in Gaza is part of a wider war agenda. That also means deeper attacks on the conditions and basic democratic rights of the working class in order to suppress opposition and impose the immense costs of war.



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