

Australian PM glorifies Afghan occupation at event attended by accused war criminal

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Prime Minister Anthony Albanese glorified Australia's role in the US-led invasion and occupation of Afghanistan at a ceremony in Canberra on Sunday attended by former SAS soldier Ben Roberts-Smith, who is awaiting trial on five charges of war crime murder.

Albanese's celebration of the neo-colonial occupation was a declaration of the Labor government's unwavering commitment to US-led imperialist wars, past, present and future, including the ongoing criminal assault on Iran and preparations for a catastrophic conflict with China.

The decision to hold an event marking the 25th anniversary of the invasion was itself strange and provocative.

The longest imperialist occupation in modern history against one of the poorest countries in Central Asia and the Middle East, after all, ended in a complete debacle. When the US withdrew in 2021, to focus on its confrontations with Russia and China, its puppet forces were immediately routed by the Taliban. That proved in practice that the occupation was opposed by the vast majority of the Afghan population.

The year before, an official report commissioned by the Australian military, underscored why the occupiers were so hated. The Brereton Report, though covering up the responsibility of governments and military command, acknowledged "credible evidence" that Australian troops had murdered at least 39 Afghan civilians and prisoners among a slew of atrocities.

Albanese did not reference either the outcome of the war or that horrific record. Instead, his speech was substantially a repeat of the utterly discredited justifications given for the invasion in 2001. The remarks closely paralleled those delivered by conservative Prime Minister John Howard when he announced Australia's participation and favourably cited them.

Albanese presented the invasion as a legitimate response to September 11 declaring it as "an attack on a

way of life that belonged just as much to us" as to Americans.

He continued: "As Prime Minister John Howard put it at the time: 'If we left this contest only to America, we would be leaving it to them to defend our rights and those of all the other people of the world who have a commitment to freedom and liberty.'"

Albanese was retrospectively anointing the US administration of President George W. Bush, which came to office by stealing an election in 2000 and then went on a global militarist rampage, as the guarantor of "freedom and liberty." Howard, like Bush, is despised by masses of people for his role in the illegal US invasion of Iraq that utterly destroyed that society.

The invasions were themselves acts of state terrorism on a vast scale. The many questions over 9/11, including the role of Saudi Arabia and the failure of the American intelligence agencies to prevent it, have only grown louder. And in the interim, the US has openly allied with Al Qaeda linked forces, including in the regime-change operations in Libya and Syria beginning in the early 2010s.

Labor, in opposition at the time, supported Australia joining the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while briefly posturing over the need for a United Nations mandate for the latter. But even by that standard, Albanese's remarks were striking as a direct repetition of the line of the most hawkish and criminal sections of the US military-intelligence apparatus.

That tenor continued in a series of remarks Albanese directed to Australian troops who had served in Afghanistan. He proclaimed that their actions represented the "truest spirit of humanity."

"Through the sheer power of example, you have shown us what is worth fighting for, no matter how elusive it can sometimes feel. What Australians serving in Afghanistan embodied is something we must never lose."

There was no disclaimer. No suggestion that his effusive characterisations were reserved for soldiers that had refrained from allegedly murdering innocent civilians. In repeated phrases of a relatively short address, Albanese deliberately and ostentatiously emphasised that he was referring to “all” Afghan veterans.

Roberts-Smith, who was heavily promoted by the political and media establishment for years, including being awarded the Victoria Cross in 2011, was earlier this year charged with five war crimes. The allegations include that Roberts-Smith machine-gunned a disabled Afghan prisoner to death; kicked a civilian off a cliff before instructing a subordinate to murder him, and other instances of “aiding, abetting, counselling or procuring the war crime of murder.”

Nor was Roberts-Smith’s presence, despite the fact that he is essentially charged with being a serial killer, a low-key one. He was seated in the front row, permitted to place a wreath and then to give interviews to the media.

An account in the *West Australian* noted that “Mr Roberts-Smith received a celebrity reception at the event, sharing hugs, photographs and signing autographs with dozens who approached him after the National Commemorative Service.” The event, addressed by Albanese and attended by other government and opposition ministers, as well as former prime ministers including Howard, came close to being a rally in support of Roberts-Smith.

That raises several issues.

The first is that Roberts-Smith is being treated with kid gloves by not only the judiciary but those nominally prosecuting him. His bail variation application allowing him to travel from Queensland to Canberra for the event was not opposed by lawyers representing the Director of Public Prosecutions.

That is all the more extraordinary, given that if the criminal charges are ever heard, they will likely depend upon testimony against Roberts-Smith by other former soldiers. Roberts-Smith’s bail conditions were varied so that he would not be punished for “inadvertent” contact with such potential witnesses at the event. The distinct impression is that a risk was taken of tainting a criminal trial, so that Roberts-Smith could attend a function.

Second is the significance of Labor’s glorification of the Afghan war. This was its war, and its war crimes. All of the murders and atrocities alleged in the Brereton Report and elsewhere occurred under the Labor governments of Prime Ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, in which Albanese and a number of his present-

day colleagues were prominent ministers. Most of the war crimes are alleged to have occurred in the aftermath of Labor’s support for the murderous 2010 troop surge of the Obama administration, which included Australian special forces participating in US-led “kill or capture” raids.

More generally, Labor is signalling that there are no “red lines” in its support for imperialist war. The Albanese government has supported the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and was among the first in the world to explicitly endorse the utterly criminal US-assault on Iran earlier this year. Its signature policy is completing Australia’s transformation into a frontline state for war against China.

Finally, there was an unmistakable whiff of authoritarianism and far-right politics surrounding Sunday’s event. Soldiers as the exemplar of “national values,” support the troops no matter what and imperialist war as an exhibition of heroism... All of these are the tropes of the far-right, which Albanese was openly embracing.

Amid a crisis of the official two-party system, the traditional parties are increasingly competing with One Nation, whose own far-right appeal has been prepared by their record of reaction. If it were One Nation leader Pauline Hanson or another of its fascistic demagogues speaking on Sunday, their remarks would have sounded very similar to those delivered by Albanese.

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