The Australian election and the war in Afghanistan

James Cogan
26 August 2010

The death of three Australian soldiers in Afghanistan over the past week, two last Friday and another on Tuesday, has brought into stark relief the virtual censorship of the war in the course of the still unresolved Australian federal election. Both major parties, Labor and Liberal, aided and abetted by the Greens and the establishment media, sought to prevent any public discussion on a nine-year conflict that is opposed by the overwhelming majority of the population.

Ten Australian troops have been killed since June—the highest rate of military casualties since the Vietnam War and nearly half the 21 total fatalities suffered by Australian forces since 2001. More than 150 Australian soldiers have been wounded.

The three most recent deaths took place in the southern province of Uruzgan, where most Australian forces are stationed as part of the US-led occupation. The Dutch contingent, with which they were operating, is currently withdrawing and will have left Afghanistan by the end of the month. American troops are replacing the Dutch, with overall command of Uruzgan assigned to a relatively junior American officer.

According to the head of the Australian armed forces, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, the Australian forces, along with the pro-occupation Afghan Army units they are responsible for training, have intensified their activities and are "going into areas" where they have not been before, resulting in bloody engagements with local resistance fighters.

At least four of the other recent deaths occurred in the nearby province of Kandahar, the main stronghold of the Taliban regime that ruled Afghanistan prior to the US invasion in 2001. These deaths were the direct result of a decision taken by the Labor government to make Australian special forces' units available to the US military for use in the current Kandahar offensive.

Neither Labor nor Liberal raised or explained the escalation of Australian combat operations in Afghanistan during the election campaign. It was not mentioned in any of the so-called debates between Labor leader Julia Gillard and Liberal leader Tony Abbott. Nor was it made a point of political opposition by the Greens, which claim to oppose the war but are seeking to enter a post-election de-facto coalition government with either of the major parties.

The bipartisan support within the Australian political establishment for the war in Afghanistan and the indefinite commitment of Australian troops was on display again yesterday, as news broke of the death of Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, a 28-year-old father of one young child, whose widow is expecting a second. MacKinney died during a three-hour "intense firefight" in an area to the west of Tarin Kowt, the main occupation base in Uruzgan.

Gillard declared the death was "dreadful", then went on to insist that while the Afghan war was "dangerous and difficult" it was "also vital work." She again refused to put a timetable on withdrawing Australian troops, stating only that they had a "defined mission" to train Afghan government forces, which would most likely be completed within two to four years.

Abbott likewise stated that the war was "vital for the security of our country and the wider world and now is not the time to waver in our commitment". Repeating the standard propaganda employed to justify the criminal operation, Abbott declared: "I'm not going to put limits on Australia's commitment to do its bit to rid the world of terrorism."

The utter fraud of the claims that Australian troops are killing and being killed in Afghanistan to fight terrorism gained a rare airing in the media yesterday, after Andrew Wilkie, an independent candidate for the lower house in Saturday's election, attacked the justification as a lie.

While counting has not yet been finalised, Wilkie, who stood against both the Labor and Liberal parties, will likely win the seat of Denison, in Tasmania. In 2003, as the US and its allies, including the Howard government in Australia, were ramping up their "war on terror" rhetoric to justify the invasion of Iraq, Wilkie, a former Army officer, resigned in protest from his position as an intelligence analyst for the Office of National Assessments, attacking the claims that the Iraqi regime possessed large quantities of "weapons of mass destruction".

Under conditions where neither Labor nor Liberal has won a majority of the vote, and a hung parliament is almost certain, Wilkie, along with three rural-based independents and one Green, may well hold the balance of power—and determine which party forms the next government. As a result, he has become the focus of media attention. He used the opportunity yesterday to denounce the Afghan war in a national interview.

Speaking to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Wilkie declared: "One of the big lies of this federal election campaign—a lie told by both the Labor Party and the Liberal Party—is that we have to

be there to fight terrorism, for Australia's national security. And that became a lie years ago once the global Islamic extremist threat morphed into a network around the world…. If western forces, the US in particular, had stayed [in Afghanistan] in 2002 and finished the job we wouldn't be there now. But instead they raced off to invade Iraq and to prepare to invade Iraq… Ultimately, we have to get out as quickly as we can and let Afghanistan find its own natural political level. A lot of people will die in the process, and it is not my fault. It's the fault of the decision makers who got us there in the first place."

As Wilkie's remarks make clear, he was not an opponent of the Afghan war in 2001. At the time, he accepted the entire framework of the so-called "war on terrorism" and supported the initial invasion. He also ardently supported the Australian military interventions into both East Timor and the Solomon Islands. His comments, however, underscore the fact that Al Qaeda has virtually ceased to operate from Afghanistan. US intelligence has estimated that there are as few as 50 individuals with links to the terrorist network in the entire country. Yet there are now close to 150,000 American and allied troops, including 1,550 Australian forces.

Throughout the election campaign, the Socialist Equality Party—through its statements, candidate interviews and speeches and public meetings—exposed the real motives behind the criminal occupation of Afghanistan. Far from being a war against terrorism, for democracy or the liberation of women from the medieval social attitudes of Islamist fundamentalists, it is part of the predatory ambitions of the American financial and corporate elite to dominate the oil, gas and other natural resources of Central Asia and prevent them coming under the sway of rival powers such as China and Russia.

Long before 2001, US strategists had been planning military interventions into the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. The events of September 11, and the presence of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, were used as the pretext to invade.

The Australian ruling class and its political parties have extended their unconditional support and participation in the war as a *quid pro quo* for their military alliance with the United States, under conditions where Chinese influence is rising rapidly, and American influence declining, in the South Pacific and broader Asian region. Since World War II the Australian government and corporate interests have depended on Washington's backing to dominate over the Pacific Island states like Papua New Guinea, East Timor and the Solomon Islands, and exert influence in South East Asia.

While there was no discussion on the issue during the election, both major parties are preparing for rapidly rising social, economic and geo-political tensions within the Asia-Pacific region. The 2009 Australian Defence White Paper, commissioned by the Rudd Labor government warned: "There are likely to be tensions between the major powers in the region, where the interests of the United States, China, Japan, India and Russia intersect… There is a small but concerning possibility of growing confrontation between some of these powers."

The White Paper called for $100 billion to be spent on new military hardware in order to equip Australian armed forces for potential regional conflicts, involving the US and China; to contribute to new US-led wars around the world; and to carry out further neo-colonial interventions against small Pacific states, such as those already launched against East Timor and the Solomon Islands. At the same time, the document specified that the Australian military had to be prepared for "domestic security and emergency response tasks"—in other words, deployment against political, economic and social upheavals at home.

While the Greens try to present themselves as opponents of the Afghan war, their support for Australian militarism, and a military build-up against Chinese influence in the Asia-Pacific, was spelt out by leader Bob Brown in an opinion piece in today's *Herald Sun*.

Brown wrote that while the focus was on Afghanistan, "we are neglecting neighbours in need like Timor-Leste [East Timor], which is, this week, exploring new defence ties with China! The Greens' strategy is to have our defence forces personnel at home to secure our own arc of stability."

Brown's did not condemn the war in Afghanistan for its predatory and neo-colonial character. Instead, he condemned the United States for withdrawing troops in 2002 to prepare for the invasion of Iraq and declared that the corruption of the pro-US Afghan puppet government, headed by Hamid Karzai, made the danger to Australian troops unwarranted.

Significantly, both Gillard's caretaker Labor government and Liberal leader Abbott came out yesterday in support of the call by the Greens for a parliamentary debate on Australia's involvement in the Afghan war. Any such debate would be dominated by claims of terrorist threats and hysteria over the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women. In a community debate during the election, senior Labor minister Anthony Albanese went as far as to liken the Taliban to the German Nazi regime, and compared calls for a withdrawal from Afghanistan with support for the fascist takeover of Europe and the Nazi Holocaust during World War II. As the death toll of Australian troops—and of Afghan civilians, and other foreign troops—rises, such cynical and false claims will be wheeled out to try to dissipate public opposition to the war and justify even more troops being deployed.

The working class must draw the necessary conclusions. The growing threat of war cannot be opposed through the framework of parliament, by voting Greens or by pressuring the political establishment. It can only be ended through the development of an independent socialist movement of the working class, in Australia and internationally, against the source of war—the capitalist profit system itself.

Click here for full coverage of the SEP 2010 election campaign

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact