

Australian politician justifies Pinochet's coup in Chile

By Eduardo Ballesteros
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Last month, an Australian Liberal Party parliamentarian openly aligned himself with dictatorial forms of rule in a speech commemorating the 40th anniversary of the CIA-backed Chilean coup that installed the fascist-military regime of General Augusto Pinochet.

Peter Phelps, the chief government whip in the New South Wales upper house, the Legislative Council, said he wanted to “make the case for Augusto Pinochet.” He declared: “There are many who believe that General Pinochet was a reluctant hero, a morally courageous man, who not only saved his country from communism but also whose adoption of the Chicago school of economics brought prosperity to his country.”

Phelps's chilling justification of Pinochet's crimes caused outrage and real concerns in Australia's Chilean émigré population, many of whom were forced to flee the military junta's repression following the overthrow of the social democratic-led coalition government of Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973.

American imperialism and the Chilean bourgeoisie feared that the Popular Front government headed by Allende's Socialist Party and the Stalinist Communist Party would be incapable of indefinitely suppressing a massive militant movement of the working class. They plotted and organised a violent counterrevolution during the three years that Allende's coalition held office.

This was a major defeat inflicted on the Chilean and international working class. During its 17 years in power, Pinochet's regime—aided financially, politically and militarily by Washington—rounded up, tortured and slaughtered tens of thousands of workers, students and left-wing intellectuals. Thousands more lost their lives

in the US-inspired Operation Condor, in which Latin America's military regimes assassinated political opponents throughout the continent.

Until now, support for Pinochet's bloodbath has not been publicly voiced within the Australian political establishment, although Pinochet received lavish praise within ruling circles internationally—from the likes of the late British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and former US National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, who was closely involved in the coup. More recently, the *Wall Street Journal*, following July's military coup in Egypt, after nearly two and a half years of revolutionary ferment, expressed in an editorial its hope that “the new ruling generals turn out to be in the mold of Chile's Augusto Pinochet.”

Phelps, a fervent libertarian, is a disciple of the free market nostrums of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman, which were put into effect with brutal results in Chile and later emulated by Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and the Hawke-Keating Labor governments in Australia, among others.

Although a relatively minor and little-known figure, Phelps was elevated into state parliament in 2011 on the back of top-level connections. He had served as chief of staff or adviser to a string of senior Liberals, including Eric Abetz (now employment minister), Ian McLachlan and John Moore (both former defence ministers), Chris Ellison and Bronwyn Bishop.

Phelps's comments went beyond offering support for the bloody events in Chile 40 years ago. They sought to justify resort to dictatorships whenever necessary to defend the profit system. “It is all too easy to say, ‘We believe we should never sanction dictatorship’ or that we should have no truck with evil, but such principles are foolish and self-defeating in the real world,” Phelps told the parliament. “Yes, Pinochet killed people. If

anyone knows of any other way to overthrow a government than by military force, then let me hear about it.”

These remarks point to the kinds of discussions taking place in ruling circles behind closed doors. Phelps argued that as a “requirement for survival,” it is “sometimes necessary to do bad things to prevent terrible things from happening.”

The comments were made under conditions of deepening public disaffection with the existing political order and its program—adhered to by the Liberals, Labor and the Greens alike—of imposing austerity measures at the behest of the financial elite and supporting the aggressive militarism of the US government.

Significant layers of the ruling strata have concluded that the kind of wholesale assault on the social position of the working class being demanded by big business is incompatible with the maintenance of “democratic,” parliamentary forms of rule. That is why, in Australia, and around the world, the past ten years has seen successive governments utilise the fraudulent “war on terror” to erect the framework for a police-state, with unprecedented surveillance and detention powers.

Phelps’s comments drew no condemnation from within the political and media establishment. His state party leader, Premier Barry O’Farrell, made no move to dismiss or even discipline him. O’Farrell merely declared that Phelps should have found a better example “than a murderous, military dictator” to highlight the excesses of communism. Federal Liberal leader, Prime Minister Tony Abbott, made no comment whatsoever, nor did a single Labor Party or trade union leader.

Phelps’s speech was clearly pre-prepared. It came a day after Labor MP Lynda Voltz and Greens MP John Kaye had criticised the involvement of the Nixon administration, the Pentagon and the CIA in the Chilean coup and its aftermath.

In their contributions on the anniversary of the coup, Voltz and Kaye promoted Allende’s Popular Front coalition, which included Allende’s Socialist Party, the Stalinist Chilean Communist Party and a section of the Christian Democrats. The Popular Front coalition played the pivotal role in politically disarming the Chilean working class and strangling its struggles, directly paving the way for the coup. Allende and his

Stalinist partners, in particular, sowed fatal illusions in the supposedly “democratic” character of the armed forces, and invited the generals, including Pinochet, to join the government to assist in suppressing the mass workers movement, which included workers taking over factories.

Phelps’s recent outburst is a warning to the working class, in Australia and around the world, of the contempt for democratic rights in ruling circles and the moves already underway towards authoritarian forms of rule as mass resistance grows to the global capitalist agenda of war, social austerity and repression.

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