

Conga line of the left behind Obama forget their old beliefs

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Anti-American attitudes disappear when a Democrat is president.

WHEN the American president addressed joint Houses of the Australian Parliament back in 2003, Senator Bob Brown interjected. In fact so worked up was he that the Speaker ordered his removal from the chamber. He was yelling about Iran and Guantanamo Bay.

This time Brown joined a conga line of MPs clamouring to shake hands with the President, Barack Obama. He had to jostle with Greens MP Adam Bandt (who has a PhD on Marxism) to get his chance. Both of them were beaming. It was a good speech. The President declared America's commitment to a military presence in the Asia-Pacific region, including a new proposal to train up to 2500 marines in the Northern Territory. One can only imagine what Bob's reaction would have been had George Bush announced that 2500 US marines would be stationed on Australian soil. They would have had to cart him out of the House of Representatives.

What a difference a few years and the election of a Democrat as president makes. Once upon a time the left railed against joint Australian-American military bases. That was one of the main issues that made the left the left. It was a key dividing line between the ALP right wing, which backed

such bases, and the left wing, which opposed them.

But those were the days of the Cold War. In those days the bases were part of the Western alliance against the Soviet empire. Some on the left were Soviet supporters who wanted to help the communist cause, but most were fellow-travellers who fell for the line that somehow these bases were provocative and would tempt the Soviets to do something they would not do if only people were a whole lot nicer to them. The left never seemed to worry about Soviet military power. It was only the Americans that got them agitated.

In the end the policy of American military strength cracked the Soviet Union — not the policy of disarmament. When the Soviet Union collapsed so too did the disarmament movement and the "peace rallies". Back in those days there were enormous marches on Palm Sunday to protest over the American military build-up. You'd have to look hard to find a Palm Sunday peace rally these days. Most of the demonstrators and left-wing church leaders have moved on to climate change. When peace rallies were all the rage in the 1980s, Peter Garrett was writing songs against US bases and running for the Senate as the candidate for the Nuclear Disarmament Party.

It was long before he joined this government and long before this government decided it was in favour of ramping up uranium mining and the number of US marines on Australian soil.

I sometimes wonder how all those people who voted for Peter back then feel about him now. Have they taken the same pragmatic political journey or do they feel betrayed? Should he write a "Sorry" song — for demonising the uranium industry that the government now wants to promote? Or were his previous views just a stage persona — part of the leftist costume of rock'n'roll.

Which is better? To hold sincere beliefs that are proved wrong or to be insincere about your views in the first place? I guess a person who has genuinely changed would explain their reasons. But we are not going to get that from Bob or Julia or Peter.

Bob Brown was all worked up about Guantanamo Bay when George Bush visited Australia, but he does not seem to worry so much now that Obama is in charge. Julia Gillard used to complain that Australia was subservient to America. Now she claims she has made our alliance stronger than ever before.

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In opposition, Labor harvested votes on the left. In government it wants to appeal to conservatives. The Coalition should not be tempted to switch sides just because Labor has done so. The Coalition supported joint bases when the youthful Carrots and Gillards were against them. It supported uranium mining and the sale of uranium to India. It should see Labor's about-face as a massive vindication. It was proved right.

Labor MPs may feel happy to see Obama and Gillard standing in front of troops in the Northern Territory — it is a great photo opportunity for their side of politics. But alliances are between

countries. They are designed to outlive the political office-holders of the day. In the future it could be Newt Gingrich and Tony Abbott standing there being cheered by US marines in the NT. The principle is either right or it is wrong and it doesn't turn on who happens to be in office.

That is why it is so useful to have the left of Australian politics now locked in to traditional Coalition policies. Bipartisan support has been firmly established. And in the future if there is ever a complaint about marines based in Australia, just pull out the footage of a beaming Bob Brown grasping the hand of the president who announced it.

Peter Costello was federal treasurer 1996-2007.