

Australian government unreservedly backs Bush's open-ended war

By Mike Head
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Visiting New York last week, Australian Prime Minister John Howard aligned his government unreservedly with US President George W. Bush's State of the Union address. While European powers expressed consternation at Bush's unilateral declaration of hostilities against any government that threatens US interests, Howard was anxious to demonstrate that Australia remained a staunch ally.

The prime minister declared that he understood "exactly" why Bush had named Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an "axis of evil" and promised to consider any request for further involvement in the US military campaign. Australia would not give the US a "blank cheque" but Bush's speech had been "a sober reminder that terrorism doesn't have any boundaries".

Speaking to guests of the American Jewish Committee, Howard restated his government's unequivocal backing for the bombing of Afghanistan. He went on to praise Bush for making "a very logical and forceful point... I think he was right to make the point that the campaign against terrorism doesn't end with a successful operation in Afghanistan... I think it signals a determination to go the distance in fighting terrorism."

Howard gave the clearest indication that his government would, if asked, join a "second front" against terrorism, including a campaign against any of the countries named by Bush. Australia's response would be determined on a case-by-case basis, "but against the background of our broad support and very strong support for the American response to terrorism".

Howard also used an address to the United Nations Security Council on the future of East Timor to suggest that the UN should contribute in "action as well as words" to the "international front against terrorism". He sought to link the two issues, urging an extension of the UN mandate in East Timor, where Australian troops are leading an ongoing intervention.

Howard's Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, had been more cautious, expressing concerns immediately after Bush's address that an extension of the US military offensive might cut across some of Australia's economic and strategic interests. The term "axis of evil" was Bush's expression, he pointed out. "We're an ally of the US, but we choose our own language." Downer noted that he had visited both Iran, where "we have a strong trading relationship," and North Korea, with whom Australia had restored diplomatic relations in order to "engage" with its government.

Downer voiced no such reservations, however, about Iraq, against which the Howard government has already committed the bulk of its contribution to the US war. While Australian SAS troops were, with their British counterparts, the first to join US operations on the ground in Afghanistan, three Australian warships are involved in enforcing UN sanctions against Iraq and an Australian naval officer is currently commanding the blockade fleet.

Howard lost no time in making clear that he harboured none of Downer's reservations. Speaking at the World Economic Forum, he declared: "I will join others who are saying that the campaign against terrorism is by no means over. And we must recognise that the possibility of activity elsewhere in the campaign against terrorism is very real."

As in 1990, when the Hawke Labor government was the first in the world to volunteer military support for the US-led war against Iraq, the Howard government has rapidly drawn the conclusion that the long-term benefits of backing the US administration outweigh any short-term commercial or diplomatic costs.

Since taking office in 1996, the Liberal-National Party Coalition government has undertaken a shift away from the Keating Labor government's policy of "engagement" with Asia—notably Japan, China and Indonesia. The present government's orientation to the US was

underscored during the East Timor crisis in 1999. Howard required US diplomatic, logistical and intelligence backing before he could send troops to secure Australia's interests in the former Indonesian territory. Washington, in turn, was happy to allow Canberra to police the unstable enclave. At the height of the crisis, Howard enthusiastically outlined a new "Howard Doctrine" in which his government would act as a regional "deputy" for the US. When governments and the media throughout the Asia-Pacific region denounced the analogy, Howard was forced to drop it.

But the prime minister has an organic affinity with the extreme rightwing cabal in the White House, supporting both its foreign and domestic agenda. Moreover, he calculates that Bush's indefinite war has advantages for his government both at home and abroad. In the first place, sending troops to assist the US in establishing its hegemony in Central Asia is only a short step away from deploying forces in East Timor, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Bougainville or anywhere else in the Asia-Pacific region where the Australian ruling elite has significant financial and strategic interests.

Secondly, just as Bush, backed by a compliant media, has utilised the "war on terrorism" to make unprecedented inroads into democratic rights, and to divert attention away from worsening unemployment, social inequality and corporate swindling, so Howard uses Australia's participation in the war, along with vicious anti-refugee chauvinism, to buttress his own government against mounting opposition. Aided by bipartisan support from the Labor party for his policies on "terrorism" and asylum seekers, Howard clung onto power at last November's election in the face of widespread hostility to his government's program of slashing wages, conditions and living standards for ordinary working people while enriching a small corporate elite. Like Bush, his government is using terrorism as a pretext to dismantle civil liberties and boost the power of the security apparatus. Vast new powers are being handed to ASIO, the domestic intelligence agency, and lengthy jail terms introduced for leaking damaging official information.

Howard's commitment could soon lead to Australian military forays closer to home. The US operation has already been extended to the Philippines, and deployments in Indonesia have been mooted. In its cover story this week, the *Bulletin* magazine reported that authorities in Canberra were "just starting to grapple with" a number of potential scenarios, including "the

implications of extending Operation Enduring Freedom into the Philippines and possibly Indonesia".

Any escalation of military involvement will sharpen underlying social and political tensions within Australia. According to a recent report in the *Financial Review*, the cost of sending 1,550 military personnel, plus equipment and naval ships, to join the war in Afghanistan, has consumed the government's projected 2001-2002 budget surplus of about \$500 million. Defence Minister Robert Hill has reportedly asked for an extra \$450 million to cover the blowout in this year's military budget and for nearly \$1 billion in extra funding next financial year. These sums will inevitably be cut from spending on health, education and other essential social services.

The Murdoch-owned media has been unequivocal in urging support for Bush's plans. "Global security that is lasting and sustained economic growth in the world's largest economy are in Australia's interests," the *Australian* insisted in an editorial on Bush's speech. Its foreign editor Greg Sheridan weighed in with a column entitled: "No way to avoid Iraqi involvement." After canvassing the prospects of military action against Iraq, Iran and North Korea, he concluded: "Rest assured, whatever option the Bush administration ultimately chooses, Australia will be there too."

Other media outlets have been less enthusiastic, reflecting concerns within the business and military establishment about the potential impact on Australia's lucrative trade relations with China, Japan and South Korea, as well as its influence in South-East Asia, particularly Indonesia and Malaysia. For example, the *Australian Financial Review* yesterday carried a cartoon recalling Stanley Kubrick's brilliant—and extraordinarily prescient—movie, *Dr Strangelove*. George Bush is Slim Pickens, the war-crazy cowboy, riding a nuclear warhead labelled "Foreign Policy" into oblivion. "How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb," is the caption. Beneath the cartoon, columnist Geoffrey Barker warns that: "European and Australian economic and security interests are not always or necessarily identical to US interests as outlined by Bush last week."

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