

Australian journalist Glenn Milne's "twisted logic" on Northern Territory deployment

By Laura Tiernan
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Last Thursday the Howard government unveiled one of the most shameful chapters in Australian political history: a military deployment into poverty-ravaged Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, along with punitive cuts to welfare, under the shabby guise of halting child sexual abuse.

The measures announced by Prime Minister John Howard and his Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough—a throwback to the days of tea and flour rations and the infamous Aboriginal "Protector"—received immediate backing from Labor opposition leader Kevin Rudd, along with virtually every section of the media and political establishment.

A comment by Glenn Milne however, which appeared in Monday's *Australian* newspaper, struck something of a shrill and desperate note, indicating that things will not be plain sailing for the government.

Milne is a long-time Murdoch columnist and his commentary typically exudes the smug tones of a headmaster's favourite school prefect. He is generally "in the know" and likes his readers to be aware of it.

His Monday column was headlined: "PM's haters parade their own defects". A subhead below reads: "Memo to John Howard's cynical critics: stop sniping about this noble and just cause". What follows is a defensive and self-defeating attack on what he describes as "a vocal and influential minority" that has criticised Howard's Northern Territory intervention.

The premise of Milne's laboured piece is that Howard is "standing between a wave of continuing sexual abuse and the next generation of unborn Aboriginal children". This, he claims, "is, or should be, a moral imperative against which it is impossible to argue." Milne's problem however, is that it is precisely this underlying premise that is being challenged by growing numbers of ordinary people—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

And this is a problem not simply for Glenn Milne, but for the Howard government and the political establishment as a whole. Milne provides more than a hint that the task of dressing Howard as a humanitarian is no easy one. He implores his readers that the military takeover of Aboriginal settlements by Howard and Brough is "a heartfelt initiative". "Yet", Milne writes, "it is Howard's burden that at this stage of the political cycle his critics can immediately question his motives, even on an issue as clear-cut and emotional as this one."

In other words, so rotten is the legacy of the Howard government, so despised have Howard's timeworn lies, scare-tactics and fear-mongering become, that wide layers of the population now smell a rat and are alert to the government's underlying motives. It is this new factor that has thrown Milne and his fellow commentators off-keel. Things simply aren't going to script.

If one is to believe Milne, criticism of the Howard government is the work of a "vocal minority" of "sniping" latte-drinkers, while Howard's actions represent the views of... "ordinary Australians". What an inversion of reality! The contempt of Milne for the democratic rights—and intelligence—of ordinary people is revealed in his own column. Referring to ACT Chief Minister Jon Stanhope's brief statement that the actions of the Howard government are "racist"—a belief shared by millions—Milne claims that Stanhope's remarks are an appeal to "the cable-knit mung beans that pass for voters in my home city".

There must be a great many "cable-knit mung beans" in Australia! Within days of Howard's 'policy' rollout, significant voices of opposition were heard, from child welfare experts, health professionals, civil libertarians, and from Aboriginal residents of Mutijulu and other remote communities. So regressive is the Howard government's military take-over plan, that even some state and territory leaders—who share responsibility for the desperate plight of indigenous Australians—have criticised it.

South Australian Labor Premier Mike Rann condemned what he described as a "shock and awe" approach. While West Australian Premier Alan Carpenter posed the following question: "Does anybody in Australia honestly believe that what John Howard's doing is not related to the federal election? Does anybody honestly believe that? Come on. We've ... seen it with the 'Tampa', we've seen it with other pre-election periods."

The Tampa incident, when Howard defied the Law of the Sea and prevented a Norwegian freight ship with 438 refugees on board from entering Australian waters, is just one among a long list of dirty pre-election stunts pulled off by the Howard government since 1998. The MV Tampa arrived off the coast of Christmas Island in August 2001 after its crew rescued refugees from their sinking 20-metre wooden fishing boat. With sick, injured and unconscious passengers on board, Howard refused them asylum with the ignominious words that: "We will decide who comes to Australia and the conditions under which they arrive."

Among the 438 stranded refugees were 26 females (including a pregnant woman with acute abdominal pain) and 43 children. Veteran Norwegian captain Arne Rinnan, a sailor since 1958, and a captain since the 1970s, had this to say of the incident: "I have seen most of what there is to see in this profession, but what I experienced on this trip is the worst. When we asked for food and medicine for the refugees, the Australians sent commando troops onboard." The troops—from the SASR—were sent on board on Howard's orders, not to provide medical help, but to prevent the refugees from landing.

Yet according to Milne, any suggestion of political opportunism and wedge politics by Howard is simply outrageous. He is particularly incensed (if one is to take the column's tone seriously), at comments by Australian historian

Tim Rowse which appeared in Melbourne's *Age* newspaper last weekend: "Howard was very successful in 2001 with the children overboard story. He loves to present himself as someone who protects vulnerable children. This is another children overboard moment."

For Milne, this is "twisted logic". Rowse's observation throws him into a complete lather: "the notion that Howard would use the sexual abuse of children as a vehicle for his own political advancement is simply vile."

While Milne is aghast at the "vile" proposition that Howard is motivated by anything other than "just and noble" sentiments, the prime minister has most definitely seized on the plight of sexually abused children as a vehicle to 1) bolster his government's plunging fortunes, and 2) enact "market based" policies aimed at stripping aborigines of their most basic democratic and legal rights.

In 2001, in a similar way, he seized on the plight of child refugees. In this case, he actually **manufactured** claims that asylum-seekers, whose boat was stranded and taking in water, threw their "children overboard" in a "cynical" and "manipulative" attempt to force Australian naval officers to come to their rescue. And, six years ago, Milne and his fellow journalists at the Australian were involved in a similar cover-up of Howard's actions, aimed at stoking every form of racial bigotry and backwardness.

The Howard government has repeatedly abused the rights of children for its own wretched political ends. For most of the past decade the prime minister kept hundreds of traumatised refugee children—deemed "illegal entrants"—behind barbed wire fences. Their imprisonment at the Port Hedland and Villawood "facilities" caused ongoing psychological damage, yet Howard and his senior ministers rejected warnings by countless doctors, psychiatrists and refugee advocates. Howard defended the barbaric regime of mandatory child detention (introduced by the Keating Labor government) in direct defiance of international law, including the (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child.

And then there is Iraq. The mountain of lies used to justify the US-led invasion and occupation of that devastated country has long-since been exposed. But Australian troops and military personnel have remained there, part of an occupation force which has decimated Iraqi society and culture. And what of Howard's alleged "heartfelt" sentiments for the fate of small children? They are of course non-existent, particularly when it comes to protecting US and Australian control over strategic resources like oil.

On Tuesday the *Washington Post* ran a story headlined: "Iraqi Youth Face Lasting Scars of War". It detailed the horrifying toll of war on Iraq's children. Since the US invasion, half of the four million refugees that have fled the country are infants and teenagers. And, according to UNICEF, in the past year alone, tens of thousands of children have lost either one or both parents. Orphanages and Iraq's barely-functional health system simply cannot cope. The emotional impact on an entire generation is impossible to measure, but the World Health Organisation recently surveyed 600 three- to ten-year-olds in Baghdad, finding that 47 percent had been exposed to a major traumatic event in the previous two years. There are only 60 psychiatrists in the whole of Iraq.

For the ruling class, the victims of imperialist policy—in Iraq or central Australia—are just so much small change. In 1996 UN Ambassador Madeline Albright spoke for all of them. Challenged by a "60 Minutes" correspondent over the impact of the UN sanctions on Iraq, which had by then killed half a million children, Albright responded: "we think the price is worth it."

For Glenn Milne it is "simply vile" to suggest that Howard would use the plight of small children for his own political ends. "If that truly is the case," he concludes, "as a political class we may as well simply pack up and go home. We are barbarians without souls or hope of salvation."

Mr Milne should be told: "If the cap fits, wear it." As to the nature of the "political class" which he represents, readers will no doubt draw their own conclusion.

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