

Why is Canberra backing the US in the gulf?

Mike Head
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The Australian government of Prime Minister John Howard has formally announced its participation in Washington's plans for a large-scale military attack on the Iraqi people. The announcement came five days after Howard received a phone request from US President Bill Clinton.

The Liberal-National Party coalition government will send 250 troops, two refueling aircraft and specialist intelligence and medical units to join the bombing operation. The US-Australian communications and satellite monitoring stations at Pine Gap, Nurrungar and North West Cape will also assist.

Howard's cabinet made the decision to go to war without the slightest suggestion of consulting voters, or even convening parliament, which is in recess until next month. Before the government announced its commitment, it was assured of bipartisan backing by the Labor Party. Labor leader Kim Beazley, who was defense minister in the Hawke government which sent naval frigates to join the 1990-91 gulf war, did not bother with the formality of holding a shadow cabinet meeting, let alone a meeting of the Labor caucus. He was confident that Labor's "left" faction would acquiesce, as it did seven years ago.

Beazley immediately asked for, and was granted, a briefing by the government, after which he declared it was "critical" to back the impending US strike. Beazley commented that the American action would be "pretty fierce."

Before his cabinet met, Howard also phoned his Canadian and New Zealand counterparts, Jean Chretien and Jennifer Shipley, in a bid to give the appearance of an international coalition. In the face of opposition to the US plans by some of its major capitalist rivals, including UN Security Council members Russia, China and France, Howard has closely identified his government with Washington.

In an effort to justify the decision, Howard and his

Defense Minister Ian McLachlan have launched a media scare campaign. On radio and television they raised the specter of anthrax and other biological weapons being used by Saddam Hussein not only against Iraq's neighbors, but against millions of Australians. However neither man sought to explain why, if such threats were real, Iraq's neighbors—such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Turkey—have refused to publicly support US bombing strikes.

The media blitz began in earnest after the *Australian Financial Review*, one of the most direct voices of big business, issued instructions to the government in a February 9 editorial, the day before the cabinet announcement. "After consulting his cabinet, Mr. Howard must swing Australian public opinion behind the Clinton administration's attempts to lay down the law to President Hussein," it said.

"To do this, Mr. Howard needs to persuade Australians that it is in their nation's interests to back Washington against Baghdad, to help President Bill Clinton reassemble at least part of the international coalition put together by President George Bush to drive Iraq's invasion force out of Kuwait in 1991."

The problem for the Australian capitalist class is that seven years after the devastation of Iraq, followed by crippling UN economic sanctions, broad layers of youth and workers are far less inclined to believe that the US war drive has anything to do with peace and democracy.

The *Financial Review* editorial went on to identify the "national interest" in the following way: "With East Asia's economic turmoil likely to translate into political instability, Australia has a keen interest in keeping the American security presence anchored in the Pacific." To put it bluntly, corporate Australia insists that the Australian military participate in the looming Iraqi slaughter because similar US interventions could soon

be required in East Asia.

In fact, such a scenario is already under active discussion in the Pentagon, according to a report by Michael Richardson, Asia editor of the *International Herald Tribune*, which was published in Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian* on February 9.

"Concern is mounting among US officials and other analysts that instability in Indonesia could jeopardize the security of a key Southeast Asian strait that enabled about two-thirds of the American warships and planes to reach the Persian Gulf in the shortest possible time from their Pacific bases," it began.

"US officials said such instability might unleash nationalist or Islamic forces hostile to the US, which Mr. Suharto's generally pro-Western regime had suppressed. This could result in policies that opposed the presence of US forces in the region and challenged the free movement of US aircraft carriers and other warships through the Malacca Strait."

(The Malacca Strait—which runs north from Singapore between the Indonesian island of Sumatra and the Malay peninsula—provides the shortest route for ships between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Indonesia is so strategically placed that 40 percent of the world's shipping tonnage passes through its territorial waters.)

The article went on to refer to "unusually candid comments" made last week by the commander of US forces in the Pacific, Admiral Joseph Prueher, in a speech to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies in London.

"I worry about the stresses and strains on the [Indonesian] government," Prueher said. "It's a really tough situation. Even if all the good decisions are made, there is trouble ahead. There is no economic and political stability. We're trying to work in an economic, political and military way to be as supportive as we can to try to bring this back in line."

Referring to recent riots in Indonesia triggered by price rises and rumors of hoarding by ethnic Chinese shopkeepers, Prueher reportedly said, "the word 'amok' is a Malay word. Indonesians will riot at the drop of a hat, so it is a very tough issue."

Prueher's language indicates how quickly the government and mass media demonizing of Saddam Hussein as a "madman" and "butcher" could be whipped up against the Indonesian workers and peasants if the Suharto dictatorship loses its grip.

The Australian ruling class is certainly conscious that the US assault on Iraq, and Australia's involvement in it, can provide a precedent as financial turmoil, social unrest and political instability sweep not only Indonesia, but also Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and South Korea.

This calculation is underscored by the fact that involvement in the US onslaught against Iraq is not in the short-term economic interests of Australian business. Lucrative exports of grain and livestock to Iraq and other Arab states may be affected, as well as markets in Asian countries, such as Malaysia, which have criticized the US plans.

Moreover, the aggressive trade policies already being pursued by Washington in Asia, where it is striving to exploit the financial meltdown by helping US firms grab new markets, have sharply cut across the efforts of Australian companies to do the same. Only last week Howard announced government-backed emergency credit insurance for companies exporting to Indonesia, accusing the US of using "actively avaricious" export insurance schemes to steal Australian markets.

However, when it comes to suppressing unrest among the oppressed masses of the region, the two sides stand together. One of the first actions of the Howard government in taking office in March 1996 was to seek to strengthen the post-World War II military alliance with the US.



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