

Australian government under pressure to drop its attack on UN committees

Terry Cook
26 September 2000

International and domestic criticism of the Australian government's continuing attack on the United Nation's treaty committee system sharpened last week following an address by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer to the UN's General Assembly in New York. Downer declared that Australia would "spearhead a high level initiative" to force a change to the way the committees operate.

Downer's statement followed on the heels of Prime Minister John Howard's speech to the UN Millennium Summit earlier this month, in which he lashed the human rights committee system for giving "too little weight to the views of democratically elected governments" and claiming that, "they go beyond their mandates".

The Howard government's attacks on the UN committees began in August, following a number of reports by the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination that were highly critical of Australia's record on internal human rights issues. The criticisms included the treatment of Aborigines and asylum seekers and the use of mandatory sentencing laws in some Australian states to jail minor offenders, primarily Aboriginal youth. The government responded by threatening to scale down its participation in the committees and by refusing to sign the UN Optional Protocol on the elimination of discrimination against women, which allows women to take their complaints directly to the UN.

The *New York Times* on September 17 dedicated an editorial comment to slamming Howard and Downer. The *Times* warned: "The [Australian] government has set a horribly destructive example at a time when ethnic minorities in a number of less enlightened countries must increasingly rely on international vigilance to ensure their survival."

It went on to opine: "[T]o stop cooperating with UN fact finders monitoring the treatment of Aborigines is distressing. Australia is a resilient enough democracy to take strong criticism, even if the government thinks it is unfair or misguided."

The fact that the *New York Times* warrants it necessary to comment on the issue indicates growing concerns in US government circles about the consequences of the Howard government's stance. Washington is worried that Australia's image could become permanently compromised, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, if it continues to question UN findings on human rights.

During the past decade Australia has extended unstinting support to US military interventions, helping to legitimise Washington's claims that they have been conducted for humanitarian reasons. Most of the recent operations by the major powers, including the Australian-led UN operation in East Timor, have been carried out under the pretext of protecting the country's inhabitants against human rights abuses by the government or other domestic forces. Maintaining this illusion will become ever more critical to the US as it pursues its economic and strategic interests in the region, especially in Indonesia.

Ruling circles in the US and Britain also fear that the Australian government's anti-UN broadside could endanger delicate moves they are undertaking to strengthen the UN's capacity for increasingly rapid and aggressive interventions. At the Millennium Summit, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair called for the development of a rapid deployment force, with a "more professional military staff," capable of carrying out "more robust peacekeeping." "When the moment comes," Blair declared, "a field headquarters must be ready to move, with an operational communications

system up and ready to go, rather than weeks into the deployment.”

Washington's anxiety over the Howard government's rift with the UN is also shared by ruling circles in Australia, where the government is coming under increasing pressure to drop its attack. Following Howard's speech at the Summit, the *Sydney Morning Herald* bagged his position, while heaping praise on the speech delivered by Blair.

Chief political correspondent Michelle Grattan pointed out that in the face of recent criticisms by a UN committee on Britain's race relations, Blair had not resorted to “chastising” the UN committee system. “He urged the need to reform the UN's peacekeeping operations,” Grattan remarked, “whereas Howard raised the reform issue on a much narrower and more self-interested front.”

“Narrower self-interest” is a reference to the Howard government's tendency to put immediate electoral considerations before the broader political and economic agenda being demanded by the Australian ruling class and its international allies.

The Howard government, like its counterparts around the world, lacks any broad popular electoral base. In condemning UN “interference” in Australian affairs, particularly on the subject of the rights of Aborigines and asylum seekers, Howard and Downer are seeking to cultivate and consolidate a rightwing, nationalist and racist constituency.

The government's attack on the UN in no way signifies, however, a withdrawal from future imperialist operations under the UN's human rights flag, especially in those areas in which Australia has substantial economic and strategic interests.

The prime minister has taken pains to make this clear. Even as he was attacking the UN committees at the Millennium Summit, Howard insisted that after East Timor had reached “full independence” in 2001 there would be a “possibility for the need of the presence of a UN peacekeeping force” and that “Australia would continue to play its part in that.”



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