Australian government calls snap election for November 10

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard yesterday called a federal election for November 10, allowing a short five-week campaign—the legal minimum—for a poll that will be dominated by unprecedented bipartisanship between Howard's Liberal-National Party Coalition and the opposition Australian Labor Party (ALP).

Howard, whose unpopular right-wing government seemed headed for almost certain defeat several months ago, has seized upon the September 11 events in the United States to grandstand as a key US ally and dependable leader in times of political and economic turmoil, in order to divert attention from growing unemployment, deteriorating living conditions and decaying social services at home. According to the pollsters the government's electoral prospects have brightened considerably in the past weeks, even though the Labor Party needs a national swing of just 0.8 percent for victory.

At his press conference, the Prime Minister urged voters not to opt for change at this time of "immense security and economic challenges". Three years ago, he resorted to almost identical language—"a very turbulent and hostile environment"—in calling the last federal election. Then, the government used the Asian and Russian financial meltdown to insist on continued austerity. Now, it is using the "war against terrorism" and accelerating world slump to demand further sacrifices.

Howard's determination to strut the political stage as an indispensable US ally was underscored by his announcement that he will attend the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in China, even though it occurs in the middle of the campaign, and he has displayed decided disinterest in APEC forums during his five years in office. But he is anxious to be photographed in the company of US President George W. Bush and other international leaders.

Before formally calling on the Governor-General to request the dissolution of parliament, Howard ensured that he was photographed discussing war plans with Australian military leaders, including armed forces chief, Admiral Chris Barrie, who had just returned from talks at the Pentagon in Washington. He then flanked himself with Australian flags and his ministers of defence and foreign affairs to announce that "up to" 150 Special Air Service personnel and two ageing air-to-air refuelling aircraft would join a naval frigate—already in the Persian Gulf—as part of the US-led mobilisation against Afghanistan. "Should the need arise" the government would also send surveillance aircraft and an amphibious command vessel.

Howard's ability to offer a larger force is constrained by the fact that much of the navy and the SAS squadron is tied up intimidating and chasing refugees away from Australia's northern coast. The amphibious craft that is likely to be sent to help attack Afghanistan—the *HMAS Manoora* —has spent the past six weeks transporting some 700 Afghani, Iraqi and Palestinian asylum seekers—including several hundred fleeing the Taliban regime—to be locked up on the remote Pacific island of Nauru.

Like Bush, Howard emphasised his defence of "democracy and liberty". Yet, the decision to join the US mobilisation was announced the day before the election was called. Moreover, parliament had already been shut down for the election, ensuring that there could be no parliamentary debate, let alone a public discussion or vote.

Howard's pledge to the US war drive was open-ended, with no detail as to where or how long the Australian units would serve, or what their combat role

would be. He issued a dramatic warning that Australian casualties were likely, while refusing to provide any details.

Military analysts immediately pointed out that the commitment was a token one, made for symbolic purposes only. The Australian contingent, if it is even utilised, will be dwarfed by the gathering US strike force, which already includes 28,000 troops, more than 300 warplanes and two dozen warships in the region near Afghanistan and Iraq. The US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher nevertheless delighted the government by praising Howard's offer and declaring that the United States had "no more steadfast ally".

The media has fallen into line, with banner headlines such as "Nation prepares for war" in the *Australian* and "PM commits troops to fight terror," in the *Australian Financial Review*. The Murdoch-owned *Australian* went so far as to describe the decision as "Australia's biggest war commitment since Vietnam," despite the fact that Howard sent more than 4,000 troops to East Timor in 1999, an operation that is still underway.

ALP leader Kim Beazley unconditionally endorsed Howard's military commitment. Seeking to outdo the prime minister's military credentials, Beazley invoked his experience as defence minister in the Hawke Labor government, which participated in the Gulf War bombing of Iraq. For his enthusiastic embrace of the military, the ALP leader earned the nickname "Bomber Beazley."

In his first campaign statement Beazley declared: "The simple fact of the matter is that we are in agreement on what is the appropriate stance for Australia in the contemporary international circumstances. We will have some slight disagreements on what are the appropriate domestic reactions to those circumstances." He went on to echo Howard's warning of "economic challenges" ahead, indicating that the country faced "a difficult Budget situation" that would restrict election promises.

The unity between the Liberal and Labor parties is the culmination of three years of growing bipartisanship on virtually every major economic, political and social issue. Since the Howard government scraped back into office by a few thousand votes in 1998, Beazley and his shadow front bench have endorsed one Coalition policy after the other.

Both sides have increasingly vilified refugees and worked together to abolish their basic democratic and legal rights. In the last weeks, Labor supported the introduction of draconian new laws to back up the government's brutal treatment of the *Tampa* refugees. At the same time, Labor has embraced the government's private health insurance system, its boosting of private schools at the expense of public education, and its introduction of a "work for the dole" and "mutual obligation" regime that has slashed welfare payments and forced the unemployed into low-paid jobs. Labor's promised "roll back" of the punitive Goods and Services Tax has been reduced to a farcically thin list of proposed exemptions.

As the social chasm dividing the wealthy corporate elite and ordinary working people has widened, both parties—and their state government counterparts—have resorted to repressive "law and order" measures, boosting the powers of the police, the intelligence agencies and the military. As Louise Dodson, writing in the Melbourne *Age*, noted with evident nervousness: "Voters may find little difference in the positions of the Labor Party and the Coalition." The *Australian* conceded that "the main political parties have swapped so much on the big policy issues that the differences are largely rhetorical".

For its part, the ruling establishment is already insisting that the next government, whether Liberal or Labor, intensify the assault on jobs, wages, working conditions, social facilities and democratic rights begun under Labor during the 1980s and continued by the Liberal-National Coalition since it came to power in 1996. Yesterday's *Australian* editorial accused both sides of "economic retreatism" for "backpedalling" on dismantling workers' rights, reducing corporate taxation and selling off public services. The previous day, the *Financial Review* insisted that the "big issues" in the election included competition policy, privatisation, labour market reform, taxation, and continued trade liberalisation.

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