

Troop deployment announced

Howard plays the war card in Australian elections

Our correspondent
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Flanked by his defence minister and the armed forces chief, Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced in a national TV broadcast on Wednesday that, having received an overnight request from President Bush, he had decided to boost Australia's commitment to the war in Afghanistan. He brought forward the contingent's departure to early November, declaring that he and Labor Party leader Kim Beazley will farewell the troops before the November 10 election.

The timing is particularly fortuitous for Howard, who has been bending over backwards to present himself as a wartime leader and loyal ally of the Bush administration. Just months ago the government appeared to have almost no chance of winning the election as a result of widespread hostility to its regressive social policies. The prime minister clearly calculates that by strutting the stage as the commander-in-chief he can divert the attention of voters from domestic issues for long enough to win the poll.

The military commitment remains small—the government added a frigate, four jet fighters and some 500 personnel to the original announcement last week of 150 SAS troops, two refuelling planes, two surveillance aircraft and two warships. Nevertheless Howard milked the announcement for all it was worth, repeating a previous warning that the nation should expect casualties. Australians “could be killed and some could be badly maimed,” he emphasised, adding: “The possibility of death, the possibility of casualties is quite high.” As one media pundit dryly observed, “This seems to be one of his main election promises.”

Howard gave no details of where, when or how the Australian contingent would be deployed but invited speculation that the SAS unit could be engaged in hand to hand combat. “It will be quite dangerous—unprecedented

for many of our people,” he stated. “There will be no operational restrictions on what the SAS does.”

Howard admitted that the commitment was completely open-ended. He rejected any suggestion of a time limit and refused to rule out sending more troops. Speaking of the operation's aims in the most sweeping terms, he said: “The capture and bringing to justice of bin Laden and all of those responsible for the terrorist attacks on the United States and also the broader extermination of people who would launch terror attacks on other people around the world.”

Having dissolved parliament for the election, Howard dismissed any suggestion of recalling it to discuss the mobilisation. His government has committed the country to a potentially unlimited war without a parliamentary debate, let alone a vote by the people. “We don't need any parliamentary approval to deploy people overseas,” he asserted.

There has been no parliamentary discussion since both houses authorised the invoking of the ANZUS military treaty—committing Australia to the defence of the United States—immediately following the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington. Howard spoke disparagingly of not requiring “additional constitutional procedural benediction” for the war.

The following day, the prime minister travelled to the northern city of Townsville to farewell an army battalion headed for East Timor, relishing the opportunity to be photographed with soldiers. The army base happens to be in one of the government's most vulnerable electorates. Local Liberal Party MP Peter Lindsay—who holds the seat with a margin of just 0.1 percent—told the *Townsville Bulletin* that the battalion calls itself “Howard's Own”. No matter that none of the soldiers who mingled with reporters had ever heard of the phrase.

Howard's Liberal Party deputy leader and aspiring successor, Treasurer Peter Costello, attempted to further inflate the significance of Australia's role by claiming that the deployment of troops had placed the country third on the list of likely terrorist targets after the US and Britain. What list, which terrorist groups, why Australia rather than, say, Israel or India—all these were questions that Costello left unanswered. When later questioned by reporters, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was forced to admit that no list existed.

The Howard government has been able to play the war card in such an open and unabashed fashion because of the total support of the Labor Party for US aggression against Afghanistan and a compliant and uncritical media.

Labor leader Beazley quickly stated his agreement with Howard's decision. Repeating his slogan from last Sunday night's televised debate with Howard, Beazley declared that Labor stood "shoulder to shoulder" with Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "The commitment of Australian forces goes with our full support," he said.

Beazley also made clear his backing for a deployment of indefinite duration. "When ground forces ultimately are committed, they may be committed for a period of time, withdrawn and then redeployed," he said. "This special character to the conflict needs to be fully understood by the populations of all countries supporting this effort. It is a matter that will be there for the long haul, I believe."

As for the press, Thursday's edition of Rupert Murdoch's Sydney tabloid newspaper, the *Daily Telegraph*, devoted its first seven pages to Howard's announcement, beginning its special edition with a full-page SAS emblem and the headline: "Off to war". Its sister paper in Melbourne, the *Herald Sun*, went further, with 13 pages announcing "Australians go to war". It covered the country's entire wartime history, adding the "war on terrorism" to the list of Australian mobilisations, from the Boer War to Vietnam.

An editorial in Murdoch's national daily, the *Australian*, gave full support to the troop commitment but described Howard's presentation of himself as a resolute national leader as "increasingly disturbing" and concluded: "The last thing we need is for domestic support for the war against terror to fracture, in the way it did during the Vietnam conflict. Using these threatening times for political purposes risks such a division."

Sections of the military establishment also have reservations. Retired Brigadier Adrian D'Hage, former

head of defence force security planning for the Olympics, questioned the wisdom of committing Australian troops to an open-ended conflict with ill-defined goals. "[I]t has an eerie echo of Vietnam, when Australian soldiers were sent to fight the Vietcong. The bigger picture was unclear even in the US. No exit strategy. No exit plan," he wrote.

After warning of the dangers of becoming embroiled in a protracted guerrilla war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, he added: "And what if the anthrax attacks in the US are sourced to Iraq and the hard Right of the US administration prevails in widening the conflict to attacks on Baghdad? We will not get a say in that, but are we part of that plan too? We strongly support the plan. But which plan?"

Australian Defence Association executive director Michael O'Connor warned that the commitment would stretch the navy's resources, given that the government has already committed much of the navy to driving refugee boats away from territorial waters. He described Howard's decision as "bits and pieces without a great deal of coherence" and commented: "Essentially it is going to be a demonstration of alliance solidarity. The Americans don't want too much as it would just get in the way of their own operations".

These comments reveal two concerns. The first is that Australian strategic and economic interests are being blindly subordinated to those of the US, possibly at the expense of relations with Indonesia and other Asian countries. The second is that, despite Howard's grandstanding, a long war in Afghanistan and possibly other Middle Eastern countries could prove disastrous and increasingly unpopular.

Already there have been a number of anti-war protests. According to one talkback radio poll, the day after Howard's announcement, 42 percent of callers opposed the deployment of Australian troops to Afghanistan, despite all the patriotic flag waving of the government, opposition and the media.



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