

Australia-Indonesia Institute denies funding to academic conference

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The government-funded Australia-Indonesia Institute (AII) admitted last week that it has refused to provide financial support for an academic conference to be held in Western Australia early next month because the organisers invited leftwing documentary filmmaker and journalist John Pilger as a keynote speaker.

Pilger, who is a well-known opponent of United Nations sanctions on Iraq and the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, will address the conference on the subject, “The War Against Terrorism: Truth, Silence and Lies”. The lecture will be followed by a screening of his latest documentary, *The New Rulers of the World*, which, according to pre-publicity, examines the role of western capital in the rise to power of the Suharto regime.

The two-day conference, entitled “Mediating Human Rights and Democracy: Indonesia, Australia and the Netherlands”, has already secured financial support from the Dutch and Indonesian governments, as well as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and private sources. Those attending include academics and journalists from Indonesia, Malaysia and Holland.

While the conference will proceed despite the lack of AII funds, the Institute’s response reveals that the Howard government is acutely nervous about any discussion over its involvement in the military attack on Afghanistan and is anxious to prevent wider exposure of Australia’s sordid human rights record in East Timor, Indonesia and throughout the region.

The AII, which was established in 1989 by the Keating Labor government, is run by key Howard government appointees and business figures. Chairman Philip Flood admitted to the *West Australian* newspaper last week that “Pilger’s involvement” in the conference had been “one of the reasons behind the decision not to

support it financially.” Another board member, the multi-millionaire Perth businessman Harold Clough, told the newspaper that he had led the opposition to providing financial backing.

When conference convenor Associate Professor Krishna Sen protested the Institute’s decision and demanded a written explanation she was told by an AII official not to make the matter public. If she publicised the issue, she was warned, she would be “burning [her] bridges with the Institute”. What this meant was not spelt out. At the very least, future applications for financial support may well be denied. At worst, any academic critical of the AII or government policy may find themselves isolated or victimised. Whatever the case, it shows the Institute’s threats reveals the sort of political pressure used to intimidate Australian academics involved in seminars and discussions that question government policy.

Sen told the *World Socialist Web Site* the conference had “invited senior diplomats and political figures from Indonesia and Holland. It seemed perfectly logical to have a figure like Pilger, who would be critical of the whole establishment.”

“It is disgraceful for an Australian government agency specifically entrusted with developing relations with Indonesia to not fund this conference... There is clearly something wrong when a government body like this can make decisions and not have to explain why.”

“Philip Flood has said in one newspaper article,” she continued, “that the AII was not prepared to fund Pilger, but we were not asking for funding for Pilger and Flood knows this. This is a deliberate attempt to create confusion and I’m disappointed the newspapers have not exposed this.”

The AII’s attempt to intimidate conference organisers over the invitation of Pilger as a keynote speaker is

matched by the virtual silence of the Australian media over the issue. Most significantly the press has chosen to publish nothing about the political record of the two AII figures who led the campaign to deny financial support to the conference.

Chairman Philip Flood, who was appointed to the position by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in September last year, is a senior government bureaucrat with close connections to Australia's security and intelligence network. He was Australia's Ambassador to Indonesia from 1989 to 1993, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade from 1996-98 and High Commissioner to Britain and Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2000. He also spent more than a year in 1996 as director-general of the Office of National Assessments, one of Australia's key intelligence gathering agencies.

In October 1999, while serving as High Commissioner to Britain, he wrote to British newspapers denouncing an article by Pilger exposing Australia's complicity in the suffering and suppression of the East Timorese by the Indonesian military. Flood accused the journalist of "denigrating" Australia.

Pilger later revealed that Flood had close relations with the Suharto dictatorship and met with senior Indonesian military officials just after the Indonesian military killed hundreds of East Timorese at Santa Cruz Cemetery in Dili in 1991. While the Australian government claimed the event was an "aberration" and denied allegations of a second massacre at a hospital, secret documents later revealed that Flood, as Australian Ambassador, had met with Lieutenant-Colonel Probowo, Suharto's son-in-law and commander of the notorious Kopassus special forces massacre, who confirmed the second massacre. Flood is clearly complicit in the cover-up of these and other bloody events in East Timor and deeply concerned about any public discussion on these issues.

Similarly, Perth businessman, Harold Clough, who heads the Clough Engineering Group, will be nervous about any exposure of Australian business connections with the former Suharto regime and other financial interests in the region. Clough Engineering, which owns PT Petrosea, has oil, gas and mining contracts in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, India and the Middle East. It has a major stake in the Timor Gap oil fields, with contracts for the construction of drilling and

pipeline facilities.

Clough, who helps fund the rightwing think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs, is also a member of the *West Australian* newspaper's board of management and notorious for demanding the dismissal of editors who have failed to endorse his political views or criticised his company. Paul Murray, a former editor was forced to quit the newspaper in early 2000 after repeated clashes with Clough.

Associate Professor Sen has described the AII refusal to provide funds to the conference as "stupid bureaucratic decision" from an organisation "completely out of touch." The AII response, however, is no "stupid" mistake. It is another example of the measures to which the Australian political establishment will resort to suppress any broad-ranging public discussion on the US-led "war against terrorism" or any exposure of Australia's role within the region.



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