

# Question mark over the future of Australian prime minister

Linda Tenenbaum  
23 March 2002

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has been implicated in a third grubby scandal in a matter of weeks, prompting speculation about his political future. Pointed suggestions are being aired that his apparent, Treasurer Peter Costello, should start counting the numbers for a leadership challenge. Behind the deepening crisis lies a factional war within Australian ruling circles.

The latest incident involves an attempt by one of Howard's key parliamentary supporters to force the removal of a High Court judge on the basis of homophobic slanders and fake documents.

Last week, Howard's cabinet secretary Senator Bill Heffernan utilised the protection afforded by parliamentary privilege to accuse Justice Michael Kirby, a Labor appointee to the High Court, of using a Commonwealth car (Comcar) to "trawl" for under-age male prostitutes in Darlinghurst, Sydney's red light district. Justice Kirby, a self-declared homosexual, is one of the country's most eminent legal figures. Head of the International Commission of Jurists since 1995 and founding chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission, he has served on numerous national and international judicial bodies, including UNESCO, the Human Genome Organisation and the UN. Kirby is well known as a leading advocate of human rights and international law.

Heffernan's allegations, which amounted to charges of pedophilia and the criminal misuse of a government vehicle, provoked a storm of protest from the legal profession and gay rights organisations, among others, who leapt to Kirby's defence. Kirby denied them as "false and absurd", accusing Heffernan of homophobia.

On Monday night, Heffernan's case collapsed when the Comcar records were exposed as fraudulent. Moreover the prostitute's credibility was shattered when it was revealed he gave evidence that was rejected as entirely unreliable in a recent unrelated pedophile court case.

Faced with the damning exposure, Howard had no option but to call for Heffernan's resignation as Cabinet secretary. On Tuesday, under Howard's instructions, Heffernan made an unconditional apology to the Senate and to Kirby, which was accepted by the judge. The Senate passed censure motions against both Howard and Heffernan.

On Wednesday Howard, speaking from London where he was attending a Commonwealth meeting, told ABC radio he regarded the matter as closed. He stressed that the senator remained a close friend and that he would not be calling for his resignation from the Senate. At the same time he felt obliged to note that Kirby's position on the High Court remained secure.

Kirby is one of seven High Court judges—four appointed by Labor governments and three by the conservatives. Once selected, a High Court judge can only be removed by a vote in both houses of parliament on the basis of proved misbehaviour. Described as an "activist" judge, Kirby has repeatedly clashed, during the past six years, with Howard and his ministers over a number of issues: the Wik and Mabo cases, involving Aboriginal land rights; funding for public education; mandatory sentencing in Western Australia and the Northern Territory, which

particularly targets Aboriginal youth; the importance of international law and international legal conventions; the rights of homosexuals. It is no secret that Howard is profoundly hostile to Kirby's views and would like a more socially and politically conservative bench.

As for Heffernan, he is notorious as Howard's personal hatchet man. A farmer from rural New South Wales, a devout Catholic and extreme conservative, he became state president of the New South Wales Liberal Party in 1993, was placed on the Liberal ticket in the 1996 federal election and subsequently elected to the Senate. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "It was in the couple of years before that poll that Howard and Heffernan forged the close personal bond that's catapulted the farmer from Junee to 'boundary rider', stalking the parliamentary corridors as the PM's eyes and ears, and to a formal place in the inner sanctum as parliamentary secretary to the Cabinet."

Reportedly "dog-devoted" to Howard but "hated" by many Liberal MPs, he has been variously described as "a cardinal at the prime minister's elbow, a fixer and head-kicker, as the rottweiler who rounds up stragglers for his political master." He functions as Howard's personal representative on the state executive of the Liberal Party, and was the prime minister's chosen appointee to sit on the upcoming Senate inquiry into the "children overboard" scandal.

Heffernan is also an obsessive crusader against alleged pedophiles and public figures he regards as their protectors, and a pathological homophobe who has spent years compiling dossiers on high-profile homosexuals, including Justice Kirby. The current media-provoked furor over the governor-general's cover-up of child sex abuse in the Anglican Church apparently tipped him over the edge. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* he told his Liberal colleagues that "the boil is about to be lanced." One Liberal MP surmised: "He is becoming more manic and more vehement."

That such a character serves as the prime minister's closest aide is revealing enough. But the issue is: what was Howard's own role in the effort to discredit Kirby? Now that the allegations have exploded, Howard is carefully distancing himself. But when they were made, he pointedly sided with Heffernan, refusing to defend the judge. Moreover, he fanned the slanders by tabling, in the House of Representatives, a letter from Heffernan containing further details of Kirby's alleged activities. In a radio interview, Howard suggested that "proved misbehaviour" could be the grounds for dismissing a High Court judge under the constitution, even if it did not involve "criminal misbehaviour."

Refusing repeatedly to apologise to Kirby himself, Howard has fobbed off questions about his own role—and what he knew and when—as "boring".

But doubts are being raised in many quarters, including the inner sanctums of Howard's Liberal Party. Former Liberal leader John Hewson, for example, wrote in yesterday's *Australian Financial Review*: "It would appear to be an orchestrated strategy... The fact is, John Howard has used Bill Heffernan to distribute dirt and to run his agenda against individuals

for almost as long as I have known him.”

The use of fake documents and homophobic innuendo to smear a member of the High Court is the latest in a series of extraordinary incidents involving the prime minister and his closet political collaborators. It follows hard on the heels of the “children overboard” affair, in which Howard and other government ministers were recently forced to admit that slanders they circulated against a group of asylum seekers were completely false. The lies were used to foment anti-immigrant racism and xenophobia and help the government win last November’s general election.

More recently, Howard was obliged to defend his appointee for governor-general, a former cleric, who has come under sustained fire for covering up instances of child sexual abuse when he was Anglican archbishop of Brisbane.

Behind the scandals—all of which have erupted since February 12, when parliament resumed and Howard officially embarked on his third term in office—lies a bitter internecine war between rival factions within the ruling establishment.

The conflict cuts right across party lines. Significant sections of the bourgeoisie—those more attuned to the changed international environment, the more globally competitive sections of capital—regard Howard as a liability and want him removed. Their social constituency is the upper middle class, the residents of “global Sydney” and “global Melbourne”—the beneficiaries of globalisation and “restructuring” during the past two decades.

They advocate shifting Australia’s economic and strategic focus to Asia, where their most lucrative investments are based, as opposed to Britain and the US, favoured by the traditionalist Howard. They want ties to the British crown severed, and the establishment of an Australian republic, while Howard remains a staunch monarchist. They want a more “progressive” human rights image with which to intervene in the Asia-Pacific region, whereas Howard has become internationally infamous for his savage treatment of asylum seekers. Former Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating was their favoured spokesman, but their ranks include media baron Rupert Murdoch, high-powered business executives and longstanding Liberals.

Domestically, Howard’s opponents want the government to pursue a far more aggressive pro-market agenda, including the full privatisation of public assets, further labor market reform (a euphemism for slashing wages and working conditions), a rapid dismantling of the welfare state, corporate tax cuts, the removal of capital gains tax.

Howard broadly agrees with this economic agenda. But his government has been plagued with major difficulties in carrying it out. Let us recall: Howard only won the 1996 election because of a huge anti-Keating vote. The Labor government, which had ruled for 13 years, was defeated in the biggest landslide against Labor in history. Concentrated in working class electorates, the vote expressed the widespread anger and disgust that had built up against Labor’s pro-market, anti-working class policies.

Committed to deepening the assault waged by Labor, Howard quickly concluded that, to avoid his predecessor’s fate, he needed to develop a social constituency through populist rhetoric. He soon began making open appeals to “White Australia” racism and xenophobia. When, just months after the election, the renegade Liberal Pauline Hanson made her maiden parliamentary speech, railing against Asian immigrants and welfare payments to Aborigines, Howard lent encouragement, utilising the ensuing controversy and media sensationalism to whip up support for her deeply reactionary social views. At the same time he initiated what was to become a sustained attack on “politically correct intellectual elites”.

Since then, the prime minister has seized every available opportunity to promote backwardness, parochialism and racism. His targets have been small businesspeople, farmers, lower sections of the middle class and working families struggling to make ends meet in regional areas and the

outer suburbs of the major cities. Beset by economic insecurity, the loss of social supports and, above all, the total absence of any alternative perspective from the Labor party or the trade unions, these layers have been the most susceptible to Howard’s rhetoric.

Notwithstanding his populist campaign, Howard lost the popular vote in the 1998 election, and, except for an electoral quirk, would have been tossed out of office. By 2001, his government was staring certain defeat in the face. His carefully cultivated rural and regional constituency, stung by the effects of a new Goods and Services tax, growing unemployment and the rundown of public services, began turning against the government, reflected in huge electoral swings in a number of state elections.

Howard’s response was twofold. First, he began a series of desperate economic back flips on taxes and privatisation to stem the tide of revolt. Second, he set about accelerating his government’s attacks on asylum seekers—creating hellish conditions in its six detention centres, designed to create provocations; establishing a naval cordon on Australia’s north-west coast to turn back boatloads of refugees; slandering Muslim refugees as terrorists.

For the bourgeoisie, the 2001 election demonstrated that Howard’s populist strategy, aimed at consolidating a conservative social base for his economic agenda, had backfired. The very layers he had cultivated began raising their own demands—cuts to the fuel tax, a halt to the further privatisation of Telstra, changes to the Goods and Services Tax—that directly cut across Howard’s capacity to deliver to big business. Moreover, the almost daily military confrontations with asylum seekers badly undermined Australia’s international image.

A few days before the poll, in an editorial entitled, “The election takes nation to a political low point,” Murdoch’s *Australian* lambasted the government for its “phony campaign,” for “porkbarrelling in marginal seats and reversals in policy,” for “handing out money here, and doing deals there” and for its “policy vacuum”.

In another pre-election editorial the newspaper castigated both the Labor and Liberal leadership and insisted on a “generational change across the board.” It went on to advocate a Liberal victory, in the hope that “the Coalition, if not under Howard then under someone else, will renew itself and its ideas.”

Events have largely followed this script. Howard’s government was returned—due in large part to the Labor opposition, which parroted his anti-refugee slanders and helped divert attention from the Coalition’s policies and record. Then, almost at once, the campaign to undermine Howard began in earnest. By the end of November cover-up allegations were already swirling around the governor-general. In February, the “children overboard” scandal blew up, followed by the rapid exposure of Heffernan’s smears against Kirby.

The frustration within ruling circles at Howard’s policy paralysis was voiced by the *Australian Financial Review* on March 20. The scandals, it complained, “have distracted the Howard government from developing a meaningful third-term agenda.”

The modus operandi of Howard’s opponents deserves comment. Why have they not called openly for Howard’s replacement, directly attacked his program and policies and outlined the program and leadership they would prefer?

The answer lies in the fact that there is no significant social base among broad masses of the population for their agenda—which amounts to a wholesale attack on the jobs, wages, living standards and basic rights of the working class. In other words, it is simply impossible to mobilise popular support for the replacement of Howard by Treasurer Costello—or, for that matter, by any other politician, Liberal or Labor.

Despite the constant media barrage, portraying Howard and his reactionary views as overwhelmingly popular, the reality is that the vast majority of ordinary working people are profoundly alienated from the entire official political establishment. Traditional loyalties have eroded.

Workers feel betrayed by the Labor party, while the Coalition parties have largely lost their support in the middle classes—where deep insecurity and the threat of bankruptcy or unemployment are ever-present.

Both parties stagger on from one crisis to the next, attempting to do the bidding of corporate Australia, but constantly coming face to face with growing hostility from broad masses of the population.

While the political situation is dominated by confusion and disorientation, this will not last forever. Without ever stating it openly, the bourgeoisie is well aware that class tensions are deepening and that, at some point, they will explode onto the surface.

That is why neither side of the factional conflict can call things by their right name. Instead, they seize upon various scapegoats—refugees, the governor-general, Kirby—to arouse public passions, manipulate public opinion and blind the population to the real political issues involved.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**