Australian Prime Minister goes "all the way" in Washington

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Amid mounting apprehension in European and international capitals over the Bush administration's increasingly unbridled militarism, Australian Prime Minister John Howard went out of his way to identify himself with Bush's policies, both foreign and domestic, on a visit to Washington last week.

Making his third trip to the United States in less than nine months, Howard reiterated his "firm and faithful" commitment to Bush's global "war on terrorism" which already involves Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. In an obsequious display, he lauded Bush as a champion of "freedom" who had provided "magnificent" and "exemplary" leadership, not only for the US but also "for mankind generally around the world". In one speech and media interview after another, he repeated *ad nauseam* that the US had "no better friend anywhere in the world than Australia".

The last time Howard journeyed to the US, at the end of January, he was alone in the world in praising Bush's now notorious "axis of evil" speech, in which the US president labelled Iran, Iraq and North Korea as terrorist states. On this visit, he became the first foreign leader to hail Bush's avowed intention to take pre-emptive military action, including nuclear strikes, wherever American interests are threatened.

Howard arrived in the US capital just after Bush unveiled a fundamental shift in US foreign policy, jettisoning the Cold War doctrines of nuclear "deterrence and containment" and adopting a "first strike" policy of unilaterally attacking so-called terrorist and "rogue" states. Many governments in Europe and some in Asia, notably China's, quickly opposed the US first-strike plan, warning it could heighten international tensions.

But Howard immediately backed Bush. "The point that is made by the President is that when you are dealing with people who are prepared to launch terror attacks, simply waiting for an attack to occur even though you may have a capacity to defer something by pre-emptive action is negligent to say the very least," he said. "[It's] downright indifferent to the interests of your country." When Vice President Richard Cheney, speaking at a White House dinner, made clear that the new doctrine could mean unprovoked nuclear strikes on countries alleged to be harbouring terrorists or "weapons of mass destruction," Howard insisted on thanking him for "the clarity of his message".

The fawning continued throughout Howard's five-day stay. After a short meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell, Howard could hardly wait to tell reporters about the prospects of an US-led attack on Iraq. While Bush had "no plans on the table" yet, Howard indicated his support for a strike, declaring that he expected to be consulted before the operation began.

Following lunch with CIA chief George Tenet, Howard immediately adopted the Bush administration's support for Israeli military assaults on the Palestinians and refusal to negotiate with Palestinian Authority chairman Yasser Arafat. Echoing Bush almost word for word, Howard branded Palestinian suicide bombings as "evil" and "insidious" and insisted that "you can understand the anger and frustration and the retaliatory instincts of the Israelis".

Fresh from a White House briefing, the Australian prime minister publicly shifted ground on the proposed International Criminal Court, which the Bush administration has opposed because US military personnel could be indicted for war crimes in Afghanistan and elsewhere. For the past four years, the Howard government has campaigned for the court internationally, touting it as a "key human rights objective". After his briefing, Howard described Washington's argument as "very powerful".

Howard made a particular point of backing the White House in flouting international law and suppressing basic democratic rights. He emphasised that he had no objection at all to the indefinite detention of two Australian citizens—David Hicks and Mamdouh Habib—by the US military at Camp X-ray in Cuba. Together with hundreds of other alleged "enemy combatants," Hicks and Habib have been held incommunicado without any charge or hearing and interrogated for months in clear violation of the Geneva Conventions. Howard insisted they had been "properly taken into custody".

He also explicitly aligned himself with Bush's right-wing domestic policies, claiming there was a close affinity between Australian and American national and social values. He extolled the virtues of "competitive capitalism", "decency and hard work" and reliance on families as "the best social welfare system".

Howard made it somewhat obvious that he was angling for US backing for Australian military operations in the Asia-Pacific. He urged the United States to pursue its new doctrine in the region; US troops, already stationed in Japan and South Korea, are now back in the Philippines. "Australia welcomes and encourages a full and active engagement by the United States in the Asia Pacific," he said. "We stand ready to work in partnership with America to advance the cause of freedom, particularly in our shared Pacific region."

For his efforts, the Bush administration rewarded him with fleeting access to the corridors of power, including meetings with several cabinet members and congressional leaders. Howard also addressed a joint session of Congress, where administration officials filled the chamber with staffers, military officers, school children and diplomats in order to camouflage the tiny turnout of some 50 legislators—less than 10 percent of the total. Bush attended a dinner where Howard was elected to chair the little known International Democratic Union,

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a grouping of right-wing conservative parties launched in the 1980s by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

At a final White House photo opportunity, the US president expressed gratitude for Howard's support, describing it as "comforting" that Australia would be with the United States "at the end of this war". Bush even indicated a personal liking for his visitor. "The United States has a got a great friend in Australia and I've got a personal friend in the prime minister," he declared.

Nevertheless, Howard left empty-handed. One of the main purposes of his visit was to secure some commitment to a free trade agreement between the two countries in the face of increasing US protectionism. "If we achieve it, we would be linked with the most powerful economy the world has ever seen, and that is something worth trying for," he told reporters. Australian officials went so far as to describe his proposal as the most important Australian initiative since the ANZUS military treaty was signed 51 years ago.

In his address to Congress, Howard briefly raised concerns about the US Farm Bill, which allocates $US180 billion ($A370 billion) in agribusiness subsidies over 10 years, evidently in the hope of obtaining concessions from Bush. Before the speech, Howard held out his hand for a deal by dismissing talk of taking action against the US under World Trade Organisation rules. But Bush gave him short shrift, merely raising the prospect of negotiations with Canberra some time in the future, if Congress were to grant him "fast-track" powers to forge international deals.

Within days of Howard's return to Australia, Defence Minister Robert Hill officially endorsed the US "first-strike" doctrine, making Canberra the only government in the world to do so publicly. Hill announced an extension of Australian involvement in Afghanistan until November at least and further indicated that Australian troops would join an assault on Iraq.

As some media outlets noted, Howard's sycophancy revived memories of Liberal Prime Minister Harold Holt's "all the way with LBJ" speech in 1966. Holt's pledge committed Australia to full participation in the decade-long Vietnam War in which more than three million people were killed. That conflict ended in ignominious defeat for the US and its allies. Howard's policy embraces an even more reckless and potentially catastrophic war drive under Bush.

Howard was the first Australian prime minister invited to address the US Congress since another doting politician, Labor's Bob Hawke, in 1988. Like Hawke, who was the first in the world to commit military forces to the Gulf War launched by Bush's father in 1990, Howard regards unqualified support for Washington as essential, regardless of economic and diplomatic collateral damage.

Since World War II, Australian military and foreign policy has been predicated upon the "American alliance". As Howard reminded his audiences, Australian troops were dispatched to Korea in the 1950s, Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, the Persian Gulf in the 1990s and now Afghanistan.

Over the past three decades, however, the relatively weak Australian capitalist class has faced an historic dilemma. While it has remained militarily reliant on the US, its main export markets have shifted to Asia. During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Hawke and Keating Labor governments developed an orientation to key Asian regimes, particularly Indonesia, China and Japan, and pursued the establishment of an Asia Pacific Economic Community (APEC) free trade zone.

After winning office in 1996, Howard's Liberal-National Party government began to re-direct military and diplomatic policy toward Washington. Whereas Keating signed a 1995 military pact with Suharto in Indonesia without consulting the US, the demise of Suharto's dictatorship saw Howard fall back on the ANZUS Treaty as the linchpin of Australian foreign policy. Japan's economic slump throughout the 1990s and the stock market fed boom in the US during the second half of the decade added impetus to the shift.

These pressures have intensified under Bush's increasingly unilateralist policy, both militarily and economically. Washington's seizure upon the September 11 events to launch an indefinite global "war on terror" has been accompanied by "America first" protectionism on many fronts, including steel and agriculture. With hopes dashed of obtaining "free trade" access to regional and world markets via APEC and the World Trade Organisation, many in Australian ruling circles fear being left out in the cold as Bush pursues special deals with favoured regimes, such as Singapore, Mexico and Chile.

The Murdoch owned media has frequently poured scorn on Howard in the past for allegedly turning his back on Asia. It evinced a different tone on this Washington visit. "There's no doubting John Howard's considerable political achievements, which were recognised by the international fraternity of conservative politicians in the American capital this week," an *Australian* editorial claimed.

One of Murdoch's spokesmen, *Australian* foreign editor Greg Sheridan, weighed in with a comment piece subtitled, "More power to John Howard for a job well done in Washington". Only recently, Sheridan accused Howard of ignoring Asian governments and undermining Australian interests. In last week's praise for Howard, Sheridan pointed to Washington's abandonment of multilateral international relations. From the Farm Bill and other protectionist measures, it was clear that "the US is now going to discriminate in trading matters between friends, non-friends and foes".

Other media outlets revealed continuing anxieties about tying Australian interests so closely to Washington. In the *Australian Financial Review*, for example, Tony Walker panned Howard's visit as a "love fest" and a "puppy dog's trip" and warned that "a sort of global *pax Americana* does not necessarily correspond with one's own interests". An accompanying cartoon depicted Howard sitting on "sheriff" Bush's knee, directly invoking memories of Howard's debacle at the height of the 1999 East Timor crisis, when he was forced to retract comments suggesting that Australia would operate as the United States' "deputy sheriff" in the Asia-Pacific.

Financial Review reports also voiced nervousness about the concessions Washington was likely to demand under a free trade pact, including the scrapping of foreign investment controls, pharmaceutical price restraints and quarantine restrictions on US farm produce.

A *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial raised concerns about international opposition to a US war against Iraq, pointing to the growth of anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, another lucrative Australian export market. "With the new US doctrine on the table, Australia must urgently assess where the national interest and America's strategic agenda diverge," it declared.

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