

Australian government echoes Bush rhetoric on Iraq

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After months of signalling his government's support for a unilateral US assault on Iraq, Australian Prime Minister John Howard has, in recent days, performed a change of tack, in line with the latest shift by the Bush administration.

Howard now insists that any attack on Iraq be conducted under the auspices of the UN. During the past week he has issued his own demands that the UN act against Saddam Hussein, or be dismissed as "ineffectual". It is important, Howard has argued, to "make the point that the UN has obligations".

This is in sharp contrast to Howard's previous line. The Australian government was one of the first in the world to offer to enlist in the Bush administration's war, with or without any UN sanction. Visiting Washington in June, Howard pledged his "firm and faithful" commitment to an open-ended war on terrorism, hailing President Bush's "preemptive strike" doctrine. This was underscored by Foreign Minister Alexander Downer who, during a visit to Washington in July, characterised as "appeasement" any expression of caution against a US-led invasion. Downer even went so far as to denounce Labor Party leader Simon Crean for adopting the very position now embraced by Bush, likening Crean to Saddam Hussein for suggesting that UN approval be sought before launching an invasion.

Howard's shift came after a weekend phone call from Bush. Addressing a Queensland state Liberal Party convention on September 7, within hours of taking the president's call, Howard told the party faithful that Bush had assured him of a "shared concern" that the UN start to enforce Security Council resolutions.

Almost immediately, the government began demanding the UN Security Council force Iraq to comply with weapons inspection resolutions. In a September 10 interview with right-wing talkback radio host Alan Jones, Howard claimed "nobody wants military conflict". Instead, he declared, the issue was to call on the Security Council to "do its job".

Howard repeated the new line in an address to the National Press Club two days later, insisting both he and President Bush "hate military conflicts" and were "eager to go the extra distance" via the UN. At the same time, echoing Bush, he accused the UN of being "unwilling to date" to act against Iraq.

No one should be fooled by this tactical turn. The Howard government remains totally committed to joining the planned US invasion, on whatever terms the Bush administration decides. Even as the apparent about-face was being conducted, military preparations were being stepped up. Defence Minister Robert Hill this week announced that two patrol aircraft would join two Australian warships already in the Persian Gulf region, enforcing sanctions against Iraq. He also indicated that Australian SAS commandos currently in Afghanistan could soon be re-deployed in Iraq.

There are two major reasons for the shift in government rhetoric. In the first place, opinion polls demonstrate considerable opposition to the impending war. According to one poll conducted last month, 57 percent of Australians disapproved of participating in a US-led attack, while only 32 percent approved. Another poll conducted by the government-owned SBS television network found just 39 percent support, with 50 percent against and 11 percent undecided.

The government insists that it is undeterred by the polls. But, having failed to stampede public opinion, it is now hoping, like the Bush administration, to use the UN to provide a cloak of legitimacy for the planned war.

Having previously ruled out any parliamentary discussion prior to committing Australian troops, Howard has announced that Foreign Minister Alexander Downer will outline a case for action against Iraq in parliament next week, followed by a debate. This is also an effort to legitimise the war, with Howard supremely confident of the opposition Labor Party's backing. Labor leader Simon Crean's only criticism has been that Howard should lead the debate, rather than Downer. "What I'm saying to him is lead, like George Bush and Tony Blair and [French] President Chirac," Crean declared.

Crean has pledged full support for a military invasion, provided that Howard advances a clearer case. "Get the process right, produce the evidence, make the case, build the coalition and Labor will support the cause," he said.

It is already clear that the government has no evidence to produce. In his National Press Club speech and in repeated interviews, Howard has backtracked on earlier claims to have "mountains of evidence" that Iraq is compiling weapons of mass destruction. He has also admitted that there is no evidence

of any connection between the Iraqi regime and the terror attacks of September 11.

Throughout the year, Howard's rhetoric has become increasingly threadbare. In January, he hailed Bush's "axis of evil" speech, accusing Iraq, Iran and North Korea of orchestrating global terrorism. Later, he backed Bush in targeting Iraq, claiming that the war on terrorism had to expand beyond Afghanistan. Now, Howard has been reduced to arguing that the only "link" to Iraq is an indirect one: that September 11 has made the world feel more vulnerable to terrorist threats.

The second reason for the government's shift are misgivings expressed in European and Asian capitals, as well as by sections of the Australian ruling establishment. Recent days have seen leading media, business and military sources warn about the political, diplomatic and strategic dangers of backing Washington's blatant unilateralism.

A prime example was a September 11 *Sydney Morning Herald* editorial, which described the government's readiness to commit Australian forces as "disturbing". The newspaper accused Bush of seeking to secure oil supplies through war, inflaming resentment throughout the Middle East.

The editorial described the September 11 terrorist acts as "the most extreme expression of a powerful political sentiment infecting the politics of the Middle East—a political sentiment which disputes US policies in the region, especially in relation to oil and to Palestine".

"Mr Bush, too limited in his world view, has found the path of vengeance easier than the calm reassessment required to see a bigger picture—one which would include, among other things, knowing his enemy. Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda have strong links to disaffected elements in Saudi Arabia who deeply resent the humiliation of the client-state relationship they see existing between the Saudi royal family and the US."

The editorial concluded by condemning Bush for "betraying" the victims of terrorism, including those of September 11, by embarking on a "march to the brink of a new war fraught with terrible uncertainties for the peace and security of the world".

An editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* on the same day was less strident, but welcomed with relief Bush's decision to seek a UN mandate, claiming it was the "right course". The *Review* registered alarm about the prospect of a "wedge" developing between the US and Europe and the volatility of the situation in the Middle East, given the "fragility" of the US-backed regime in Afghanistan.

The editorial warned that Australia could be caught in the crossfire between the US and Europe: "These tensions are full of significance for Australia. We will be asked to take sides if the US's conviction that a pre-emptive strike may be necessary to avert the risk of Mr Hussein acquiring nuclear weapons cannot be reconciled with Europe's preference for acting through the UN."

Significantly, similar sentiments were voiced in the Murdoch

press, which previously insisted that Howard had no choice but to align himself unequivocally with Bush. Writing in the *Australian*, former editor Paul Kelly warned that if the US opted for unilateral intervention "using its military power in a neo-imperial manner to conquer and remake rogue regimes," it could "weaken the role of US allies, undermine the UN and international treaties and cripple multilateralism for a generation".

In part, these misgivings reflect concerns that by acting as a US surrogate, the Australian establishment risks undermining its lucrative markets in Asia and the Middle East. Iraq has already halved its grain imports from Australia.

Howard also faces criticism, and apparent divisions within the military and intelligence establishment, over the dangers of committing the already over-stretched Australian military to what will be a large-scale, if one-sided, operation against Iraq. With some 3,000 troops still in East Timor, there are concerns that the military might not be able to respond to threats closer to home, in the Asia-Pacific.

At the National Press Club, Howard was at pains to assure his audience that any commitment of forces to Iraq would not affect the capacity of the Australian military to intervene in the "arc of instability" that stretches from Indonesia through Papua New Guinea to Fiji.

Howard and his cabinet remain convinced that they can only protect Australian interests within its own sphere of influence—the South Pacific and South East Asia—by offering unreserved support to the White House. As a small and relatively weak power, Australia has historically relied on the predominant global power, first Britain and then the United States, to pursue its economic and strategic interests.

To drive the point home, US Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, a key Bush "hawk," made it abundantly plain last week that Washington expects Australian troops to join the assault on Iraq. In an interview with the *Australian*, he declared that the Bush administration regarded Australia as one of its "closest allies" with a "special status," because it had been "forthcoming when there are problems and hard things need to be done".



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