

# Australia seeks to tighten its grip on Pacific island nations

**Frank Gaglioti****3 September 2002**

Australian Prime Minister John Howard used the recent Pacific Island Forum to push Canberra's plans to mould the gathering of South Pacific leaders into a more effective means for direct intervention in the region. The Forum includes the two regional powers—Australia and New Zealand—as well as a number of small and impoverished nations, mostly former British, Australian and New Zealand colonies.

In conditions where these island states are wracked by economic and political breakdown, Howard is responding to the demands of big business that his government take a more active role in defending Australia's substantial economic and strategic interests in the region.

Writing in the *Australian Financial Review* prior to the August 15-17 Forum meeting in Fiji, columnist Geoffrey Barker bluntly reiterated Australia's strategic interests, stating that "it matters little whether or not the PM [Howard] accepts that Australia has some moral responsibility towards these troubled neighbours. What matters is that these nations are now presenting potential threats to important Australian security interests."

Even before the meeting began, Howard announced he would be seeking a greater say in the day-to-day running of the Forum. In a break with the longstanding practice that the secretary general position be reserved for a Pacific islander, Howard indicated he would be lobbying for an Australian—Greg Urwin, former Australian High Commissioner to Papua New Guinea (PNG) and Fiji—to take over the post for the next three year term.

The suggestion provoked outrage among Pacific leaders, as an attempt by Australia to impose its will on the smaller Pacific nations. Noel Levi, the current secretary general, stated that Australia was trying to dominate the Forum and warned that the move could provoke the Pacific Island states to go it alone—excluding Australia and New Zealand. Australia's High Commissioner to Fiji, Susan Boyd, hit back, saying that

Levi's statement was "out of place".

The dispute over the position, which is not due to be decided until next year, was not resolved at the Forum meeting. Significantly New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark distanced herself from Howard's proposal, stating that she was aware of an agreement that prevented Australia and New Zealand having the secretary generalship. While the orientation of the two major economic powers in the South Pacific usually coincides, New Zealand has considerable interests in the region, which Clark is cautiously promoting.

At the Forum meeting in Kiribati in 2000, the two powers collaborated to bully the member states into adopting the Biketawa Declaration, which reversed the organisation's 30-year policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries. The declaration specified that future upheavals would trigger action by the Forum, including "targeted measures"—a euphemism for punitive sanctions.

Although prompted by the acute political breakdowns in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, the Biketawa Declaration stopped short of immediately intervening in those countries. In the two years since, the political and economic position of the island member states has continued to slide. The Australian press regularly refers to "the arc of instability," stretching from Indonesia to PNG, the Solomons and Fiji.

These nations are dependent on the export of a handful of commodities, all of which have been subject to falling prices. The failing economies have exacerbated the internal political crisis in these states, which range in size from PNG with a population of four million to Nauru, Niue, Tuvalu and the Cook Islands with less than 20,000 people each.

In the case of the Solomon Islands, the state apparatus has all but disintegrated amid bitter feuding between rival elites based on different islands. Most of the country's

basic industry is closed and the government has almost collapsed twice this year. Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza was stranded in the capital Honiara by an airport workers strike and had to be airlifted to Forum by the Australian Air Force.

The recent Forum not only reconfirmed the Biketawa Declaration but also, at Australia's insistence, adopted the Nasonini Declaration on Regional Security, which "recognised the need for immediate and sustained regional action in response to the current regional security environment". The final communiqué also paved the way for the first direct intervention in the affairs of a member state, mandating "the Secretariat to mobilise regional action and funds to support the Solomon Islands".

Australia has always used its economic and military predominance to exert its influence at the Pacific Island Forum. Howard's latest moves indicate that Canberra is seeking to convert the organisation into a front for direct Australian intervention. Hugh White, head of the Australian Security Policy Institute, a government-funded thinktank, explained the rationale in the *Australian Financial Review* last month. "Rejecting the binary logic that sees countries as either independent nations or colonies ... Australia has to find some middle ground on which it could help take responsibility for basic law-and-order and other services in ways that would not be seen as somehow neo-colonialist."

Howard has used Australia's aid budget—\$A500 million (\$US271 million), with \$A320 million specifically for PNG—as a means of pressuring the Pacific Island nations. He warned that future aid would be linked to the Pacific nations adhering to principles of "good governance". This is the catch phrase for implementing IMF and World Bank strictures, including slashing budgets and privatising government utilities, as well as suppressing any opposition through harsh law-and-order measures.

Pacific nations unable to meet Australian demands face aid cutbacks, exacerbating the social crisis engulfing their populations. Former chief of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Peter Urban, put Australia's argument most bluntly when he commented to the *Australian Financial Review* on August 16: "The message the Prime Minister [Howard] should have left... to the SPF [South Pacific Forum]... is very simple: the free ride is over."

Australian capitalism has a great deal at stake in the region. In 2001, Australia exported \$A9 billion worth of goods and services to South Pacific countries. Annual growth in trade has sharply slowed as a result of political instability, from about 15 percent prior to 1996 to 4

percent over the past five years. Australian big business has sizeable investments in the region—\$A3.52 billion in PNG, mostly in mining and petroleum, and \$A2 billion in Fiji. The Australian-owned Gold Ridge mine in the Solomon Islands was closed as a result of the country's civil war.

The Howard government is also bolstering Australia's security ties and presence. The army currently has troops stationed in East Timor and on the PNG island of Bougainville and has a rapid deployment battalion for use in the region. Major General Michael Jeffery from the Australian thinktank, International Strategic Analysis, is carrying out an inquiry into the restructuring of the PNG army, which has been hit by a series of revolts over the last two years. In May, Australia provided three patrol boats and military advisers to Fiji after previous sanctions were lifted.

The Howard government imposed the sanctions on Fiji in 2000 after the military responded to the coup attempt led by George Speight by seizing power, abrogating the constitution and installing an administration headed by the current Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase. His government, which still rests heavily on the military, attempted to legitimise its rule through an election last year that was based on racially segregated electorates and plagued by accusations of bribery and rigging.

Significantly Howard publicly praised Qarase, saying: "What's been done here in Fiji, given what happened two years ago, is a model for many of the parts of the Pacific that are struggling with governance challenges..." His comments are a warning of the type of anti-democratic regime that Canberra is seeking to impose on the increasingly unstable region in order to carry out "good governance". In Howard's eyes, the great virtue of Qarase's military-backed administration is that it is relatively stable and committed to pushing through the economic restructuring agenda demanded by foreign investors.



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