

Australian government deploys military forces to the Persian Gulf

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Despite growing domestic opposition, Australian Prime Minister John Howard is dispatching military forces and equipment to join the massive US military buildup in the Persian Gulf. While the Australian commitment is small in military terms, its main purpose is political: to send a message of continuing and unconditional support to the Bush administration and help bolster Washington's claims of an "international coalition of the willing" for its impending invasion of Iraq.

Late last week, two P-3C Orion maritime patrol aircraft, 30 members of the Number 92 Airwing and 50 ground staff flew out after being farewelled by Defence Minister Robert Hill and senior military leaders in Adelaide, South Australia. Defence Force chief Peter Cosgrove told crew members and their families that the mission would be "difficult" and was expected to last 12 months.

Tomorrow the HMAS Kanimbla will sail from Sydney and other forces will soon follow, including a navy diving clearance team, 150 SAS commandos, up to 14 FA-18 jet fighter planes and three naval ships. Two frigates presently on duty in the Gulf enforcing United Nations sanctions against Iraq will be redeployed and joined by an amphibious command vessel. In all, around 1,650 Australian military personnel are likely to be involved.

Howard's is one of only a handful of governments, most notably Blair's in Britain, to commit forces in readiness for an imminent assault. Since the September 11 terror attacks, the Australian prime minister has done everything possible to ingratiate himself with the Bush administration. His government has slavishly followed every twist and turn in US foreign policy, backing the open-ended "war on terrorism", deploying Australian military forces to the war in Afghanistan and

parroting every new threat and demand from the White House.

Howard represents that wing of the Australian ruling elite that sees its future strategic interests in the Asia Pacific as dependent on continuing US patronage. With political, economic and social tensions in the region escalating, the government has concluded that the quid pro quo for US military backing in the future depends on unconditional Australian support for the Bush administration's ambitions in the Middle East.

But among ordinary Australians, anti-war sentiment is rapidly mounting. An AC Neilsen opinion poll published last weekend in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* reported that 62 percent of the population opposed any involvement in a war on Iraq unless sanctioned by the United Nations, while 30 percent were against a war under any circumstances. Only 6 percent of those polled supported a unilateral US-led strike, down from 37 percent last year, demonstrating that, as the prospect of war draws closer, more and more people want nothing to do with it.

The poll also revealed that a majority of Australians believe Howard's backing for US global ambitions is responsible for exposing them to increasing dangers at home and abroad. Of those polled, 65 percent believed that terrorist attacks on Australian citizens, such as the Bali bombing in October last year, will become more likely if Australia participates in the US-led war on Iraq.

With such widespread opposition, the Howard government has only been able to proceed with its war policies because of the role of the opposition Labor Party. Having extended bi-partisan support to the Howard government's domestic agenda—the ongoing assault on refugees, dismantling of democratic rights under the pretext of fighting terrorism and unrelenting

attacks on social conditions—the Labor Party has leapt into line on the war against Iraq.

Late last year, Labor leader Simon Crean declared the party would offer support to the deployment of Australian troops only if a military intervention were sanctioned by the United Nations. At the time, this was also Howard's position, following a cosmetic adjustment by the Bush administration to temporarily accommodate itself to the UN inspections regime. But with the rhetoric from the White House becoming increasingly bellicose, both the government and the Labor party have made the necessary modifications.

One week ago, following Howard's announcement of the military commitment, Labor leader Simon Crean declared he would not endorse a unilateral US strike against Iraq "under any circumstances". Within a couple of days, he had qualified his position, pointing out that "a scenario under which Labor could support a unilateral invasion would be if clear evidence emerged of weapons of mass destruction but a permanent Security Council member still vetoed military force".

What will constitute "clear evidence" has already been redefined by Washington. Last week Bush administration officials announced that if UN inspectors fail to find evidence that Iraq holds prohibited weapons, this could also provide the trigger for military action, declaring that the onus was on Saddam Hussein "to show he has destroyed his banned stockpile".

Picking up on Washington's line, Defence Minister Hill confirmed Australia's support for a unilateral US strike if Iraq failed to "fully cooperate with weapons inspectors and the international community".

The willingness of both major parties to back the US without the UN's blessing is creating considerable consternation in ruling circles. On January 20, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported senior Liberal Party identities admitted the issue was "deeply dividing the party".

Former Victorian Liberal premier Sir Rupert Hamer attacked any commitment of troops "without international support" describing his position as "a widely held view in the Liberal Party," while a former Liberal Defence Minister Sir James Killen declared that America's "conduct of international affairs raises a very large question mark over any involvement by Australia." Killen, who served in the Liberal

government that was thrown out of office in 1972 during the Vietnam War, is acutely aware of the political and social ramifications of aligning with the US in a deeply unpopular military conflict.

Last week the *Australian Financial Review* intoned: "Australia should be cautious about ensuring that all avenues for a diplomatic solution have been tried before a recourse to war". The *Sydney Morning Herald* spelled out its concerns even more openly, after its publication of the AC Nielsen poll: "The looming war against Iraq... is deeply unpopular" and went on to warn, "The Howard government must have known for some time what the poll shows. That is, it does not have the people behind it as it leads Australia drifting to war behind the United States, and dispatches our troops."



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