

Australian prime minister assists US push for war

Terry Cook
30 January 2003

Australian Prime Minister John Howard is playing his part in the diplomatic offensive for war, launched by the White House following the report by UN weapons inspector Hans Blix to the UN Security Council on January 27. Within hours of the report's release Howard was insisting that Iraq was in "material breach" of UN resolution 1441 and that the UN Security Council had to "match the rhetoric of that resolution with action." The prime minister went on to threaten that failure to back a US-led war would "deliver an enormous blow to the authority and prestige of the United Nations".

Speaking on ABC radio Howard described the report—which failed to advance a shred of evidence that Iraq was harbouring or developing weapons of mass destruction—as "damning," and accused Iraq of "stubborn non-compliance."

Under conditions where a US-lead strike on Iraq still lacks the endorsement of any of the major world powers outside of Great Britain, Howard's unconditional backing—albeit from a decidedly second-rate power—is being touted by Washington as evidence of "international" support for its criminal intentions.

On the eve of the report's release, Washington sent an official message to Howard declaring: "The President is very grateful and today publicly thanks the people of Australia and the Government of Australia for their actions."

To comply with US demands, the prime minister has been prepared to ride roughshod over widespread popular opposition to Australian participation in an assault on Iraq that has even found expression within the ranks of Howard's own conservative Liberal Party.

This week former Liberal Party President John Valder revealed on ABC radio that he had received many phone calls from people inside and outside the Liberal Party supporting his recent letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* opposing war with or without UN backing. Recognising

the political dangers inherent in backing an unpopular war, Valder condemned the US military buildup as "out of all proportion to the end" and urged Howard to consider its "social and economic" cost.

Howard has not budged, however. Further evidence of his subservience to Washington surfaced as Australian military personnel left for the Persian Gulf. Claims emerged that both the size and the composition of Australia's commitment were determined directly by Washington. According to a front-page article in last weekend's *Sydney Morning Herald*, US Secretary of State Richard Armitage delivered precise requests on the contingent's composition to senior Howard government officials during his visit to Australia in December. While the Australian government had originally considered dispatching a very limited number of FA-18 strike aircraft, on Armitage's insistence this was increased to a full squadron.

The article also revealed that Australian forces have already been factored into—and will be deployed in accordance with—Washington's war plan. The FA-18s, armed with laser-guided bombs and protected by US aircraft equipped with airborne anti-missile systems, will be used in the initial stages against Iraqi troops and command posts. Australian Special Air Service (SAS) teams will operate alongside their US and British counterparts. Australian commandos from the 4RAR battalion will carry out emergency rescue and backup for the special-forces units.

While the timing and composition of the Australian military deployment was decided in the closest collaboration with the White House, it was kept from both the Australian public and the parliamentary opposition parties until the very last minute. Opposition Labor Party leader Simon Crean said he was told that Australian troops were leaving for the Gulf less than 24 hours before they departed. At the same time, Howard ensured that the

military contingent was well underway before federal parliament resumes on February 4. Even now, the size and scope of the military commitment remains unclear. When first announced, the military personnel involved numbered 1,500, but this has grown steadily over the ensuing days and now stands at 2,000.

The existence of the detailed engagement plans, together with the dispatch on January 23 of supply ship HMAS Kanimbla loaded with 350 troops and war equipment, and the departure on January 24 of 150 elite SAS soldiers from Perth, make a mockery of Howard's continuing claims that he has made "no final, nor even tentative" decision to commit Australia to a war against Iraq.

Speaking at a highly publicised ceremony at Sydney's Garden Island naval dockyard to farewell the Kanimbla, Howard promised the government would continue to "work to bring about a peaceful solution" but that they [Australia's military forces] should be prepared for the prospect of war.

Subsequently, in an exclusive interview with the *Daily Telegraph* following the ceremony, all mention of a "peaceful solution" was dropped. Howard justified sending the troops by declaring "if we don't make sure that Iraq disarms, not only will she keep them and add to them and potentially use them but other countries will copy what Iraq has done."

A little later, on Melbourne radio, Howard blurted out his real motivation. "I have to take into account the importance of our alliance with the United States," he said. By evoking the US-Australian alliance Howard revealed that his continuing invective against Iraq's so-called "weapons of mass destruction" is nothing but a fig leaf for prosecuting the predatory needs of Australian capitalism.

Drawn up at the urging of Australia in 1951, the ANZUS treaty between Australia, New Zealand and the US reflected the major shift in world relations following World War II. Until 1941, the weak and dependent Australian ruling class had pursued its significant imperialist interests in the Asia-Pacific region under the patronage of Great Britain. But with Britain's final demise as the dominant world power, Australia looked to its alliance with the new world hegemon—the United States—to achieve its ends.

This relationship has continued to function as the cornerstone of Australian foreign policy. Whereas once Australian troops were dispatched to fight wars in far-flung corners of the globe—the Boer War in South Africa,

Gallipoli in World War I—at the bidding of Whitehall, since the Second World War, they have been deployed—in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan—at the discretion of the White House.

While posturing as opponents of Howard's subservience to Washington, the Labor Party is motivated by exactly the same considerations. Crean, whose popularity has been steadily plummeting since he became Labor leader some 15 months ago, has seized on the popular sentiment against war in Iraq to try and claw back support. Addressing the departing troops at the Kanimbla ceremony, Crean declared: "I don't think you should be going. I think the consequences of going it alone in a narrow group of people does potentially expose us to greater risk."

In a statement after the ceremony, Crean hastened to make clear that he was by no means opposed to a war—so long as it was sanctified by the UN. "The Australian people hope that the international community, acting with the legitimacy of the United Nations will ensure that Iraq disarms," he said.

Under the auspices of the UN, the Hawke Labor government—with Crean serving as a cabinet minister—sent forces to the Gulf in 1991. That first Gulf war resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Iraqi people, the destruction of Iraq's infrastructure and the impoverishment of its population. The Labor Party "lefts," under the banner of "sanctions not bombs," backed the imposition of UN sanctions that eventually resulted in the death of an estimated 600,000 Iraqi children and 500,000 adults.

In line with his Labor Party predecessors, Crean's concern is that the horrific slaughter being carefully prepared by the US be given the cover of United Nations respectability. At the same time, however, he has indicated that the Labor Party will support a US-led assault even without a majority vote in the Security Council.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact