

Australian government commits to US-led war in face of growing opposition

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The Australian government is pressing ahead with its deployment of troops to the Persian Gulf, despite a groundswell of anti-war sentiment across the country. Three C130 Hercules transport planes and a squadron of 14 FA/18s flew out late last week, following the HMAS Kanimbla and 150 crack SAS troops dispatched two weeks ago. The rest of the 2,000-strong force will leave next week to join the massive build-up of US and British troops, warships and military aircraft being readied to launch an onslaught against Iraq.

Prime Minister Howard timed the latest deployment to ensure that the full Australian contingent will be firmly in place by the third week of February—widely touted as the Bush administration’s preferred date for launching its long-planned invasion. It was also aimed at sending a public message of “international” support for the White House as key US officials ratchet up pressure on France, Russia and China to sanction a US-led war at the UN Security Council meeting of February 14.

Howard will meet with President Bush in Washington today for “consultations” in advance of the Security Council meeting. While keen for a second UN resolution, to help lend a semblance of legitimacy to the US war, he has made clear that the vote will have no bearing on Australia’s participation. The United Nations would be rendered “irrelevant” he declared before departing, if it didn’t bow to US demands. Australia would, in any case, make “its own decision”.

Both the government and the Labor opposition failed to anticipate the level of mass popular hostility that has been triggered by the prospect of the vast destructive might of the world’s leading superpower raining down on innocent and defenceless Iraqi civilians.

Recent estimates put opposition in Australia to a US-led war as high as 90 percent, with the number opposed to any war, even if sanctioned by the United Nations, also climbing. Howard has become increasingly isolated as animosity grows to his servile backing for Bush and his unilateral decision to commit troops behind the backs of the

Australian people, without any prior discussion in parliament.

As a result, unprecedented tensions have surfaced within both major parties. Five leading figures in Howard’s own party have launched Liberals Against War, while 15 Labor MPs have publicly challenged Labor leader Simon Crean’s support for a UN-backed war.

In an effort to stem the torrent of criticism, the prime minister made an hour-long address to parliament last week aimed at justifying his stance *ex post facto*. Delivered to the first sitting since the Christmas break, the speech began with the lie that the government had made no “final decision to commit to military conflict”. Outside, hundreds of anti-war demonstrators mounted a protest, including representatives of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War who demanded the parliament oppose an “obscene holocaust” and an impending “humanitarian disaster”. Inside, Howard claimed that the “pre-positioning” of Australian forces was simply aimed at pressuring Saddam Hussein to “disarm” and the government could still withdraw its contingent. Iraq, Howard cynically argued, was the only nation that could “determine whether force will be necessary or not.” He would, he said, prefer “a peaceful solution.”

In reality, the very composition of Australia’s contingent was organised in line with specific requests from the US military and its presence has already been factored into the US plan of attack. As long ago as last July, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was attacking as “appeasement” any prevarication over a full scale war, whether sanctioned by the UN or not, while Howard and Defence Minister Robert Hill were both publicly suggesting that Australian troops would be made available.

Most of Howard’s speech consisted of a regurgitation of the lies about the “threat to world peace and stability” represented by Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. These claims have been circulated by the White House and Pentagon to cover up their real agenda—to seize Iraqi oil and embark on the re-organisation of the Middle East and Central Asia in line with the global economic and strategic

interests of US imperialism.

In virtually the only mention of the word “oil” in the two-day debate, the prime minister slammed as “outrageous” the criticism that the US was after Iraq’s oil reserves. “Self evidently, if cheap oil supplies were America’s dominant motive, then years before now the United States would have done a deal with Iraq to lift the sanctions in return for plentiful supplies of low-priced oil,” he maintained. In fact, the US has continually thwarted any lifting of the crippling sanctions placed on Iraq for the past 12 years, because this would have enabled its European rivals, in particular France and Germany, to consummate lucrative construction and oil deals with the Iraqi government, thereby challenging the domination of American corporate interests.

While Australian imperialism has no significant stake in a new carve-up of the Middle East it does have major economic and strategic interests elsewhere. Unwilling to expound in public on the real reasons for Australian participation in a US-led war, Howard nevertheless felt the need to briefly allude to them. “The crucial long-term value of the US Alliance should always be a factor in major national security decisions taken by Australia,” he said. “In an increasingly globalised and borderless world, the relationship between Australia and the United States will become more and not less important.” In other words, the Australian ruling elite is preparing for future military interventions in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the recent invasion of East Timor, to protect its lucrative corporate investments. In an area now dubbed by the Howard government as the “arc of instability”, such aggressive, even “pre-emptive,” acts will require the backing of the US.

This was underscored by one of Howard’s closest (but unnamed) advisors who reportedly told *Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Paul Sheehan last week: “The PM is losing sleep over this. He knows this policy doesn’t have the feathers to fly with the public. But he thinks it’s the right thing to do. He’s thinking long-term. If one day we ever have to face a militant Indonesia, we’ve only got one ally who can do the job.”

Outside parliament house, four Coalition MPs briefly joined a “parliamentarians for peace” protest, but none of them raised a murmur of opposition during the debate. Several Laborites noisily denounced the government’s war policy, but only insofar as the UN failed to sanction it. One even demagogically attacked Bush as “the most incompetent and dangerous president in living memory” but, as with the Coalition, no one strayed from the party line. The weapons of mass destruction lies went entirely unchallenged, while the great unmentionable throughout the entire debate was the imperialist ambitions of the US.

One striking feature was the sympathy expressed by

several government ministers, including Howard, for the plight of ordinary Iraqis at the hands of Saddam Hussein. Only insofar as they remain in Iraq, it seems, do they qualify as “victims.” Those who dare flee and claim refugee status in Australia are routinely vilified, thrown into concentration camps and denied democratic rights. Many have been refused asylum and deported back to Iraq.

In the Senate, where Labor and the minor parties constitute a majority, Howard was censured in the first no-confidence vote ever passed against a sitting prime minister. Moved by Labor and supported by the Democrats, Greens and two independents, the resolution also declared “opposition to a unilateral military attack on Iraq by the United States” and attacked the government for “forward-deploying Australian troops to a potential theatre of war with Iraq in the absence of any United Nations authorisation and without revealing to the Australian people the commitments on which that deployment was based.”

While deferring to the almost universal opposition to the impending war, the resolution made no declaration against a war *per se*. Its primary aim was to send a warning to Howard that his unabashed toadying to the Bush administration could create a dangerous political crisis. Without United Nations and parliamentary backing, a US-led war could see the development of oppositional movements spinning out of official control.

Well aware of the rapid shifts in public sentiment, the Greens unsuccessfully moved an amendment calling for opposition to any war against Iraq, even if sanctioned by the UN. The Greens, who have begun attracting growing support for their anti-war stance, are trying to keep the opposition well within the safe confines of parliamentary politics. Their differences with Howard remain purely tactical. Representing significant sections of the ruling elite they consider a war in Iraq to be contrary to Australia’s “national interest”. For the Greens, the Democrats and the “dissident” Laborites, like former frontbencher Carmen Lawrence, the interests of Australian capitalism can best be served by dispatching troops closer to home, in Australia’s own sphere of influence, not the far-flung shores of the Persian Gulf.



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