

Desperately searching for allies: Washington fetes Australian prime minister

Richard Phillips
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Confronted with mass anti-war protests on a global scale and diplomatic resistance from France, Germany and Russia, the US government has been summoning some of its most reliable allies to Washington in a desperate effort to present an image of a growing international alliance for war.

Those visiting over the past two weeks include Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller and Bahrain's King Hamad. They have all been given the red carpet treatment, told what will be required of them in the coming military onslaught in the Persian Gulf and then paraded before the US media.

Last week it was Australian Prime Minister John Howard's turn. Howard, who began planning for participation in the war last June and recently forward-deployed 2,000 troops to the Middle East, cynically told the media his trip was a "peace mission".

Howard faces increasing public hostility to his commitment to the Bush administration's war against Iraq. For this reason he continues to argue in parliament and the local media that his government has made no final decision on whether to participate. This blatant lie, which Howard has maintained for months, was blown apart on the second day of his Washington visit.

A journalist at a White House press conference asked Bush if he considered Australia to be part of his "coalition of the willing". "Yes, I do," Bush replied, in front of a visibly blushing and somewhat shaken Howard. Belatedly sensing his *faux pas*, Bush then declared: "You know, what that means is up to John to decide."

But the clearest indication that the Australian prime minister has given an unconditional commitment to the impending US-led war was demonstrated by the extraordinary treatment he was accorded by the White House.

Howard was given unrestricted access to senior administration officials, who flattered him wildly before

the US media. He lunched with Vice President Dick Cheney, met Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld and held a "fireside chat" meeting and private dinner with the president.

President Bush told a joint press conference in the Oval Office that Howard was a "close personal friend of mine, a person whose judgement I count on, a person with whom I speak frequently. I believe he's a man of clear vision. He sees the threats that the free world faces as we go into the 21st century... I'm proud to work with him on behalf of a peaceful world and freer society. He's a man grounded in good values and I respect him a lot."

At Bush's private dinner, according to one gushing Australian media report, the president took Howard "out on the balcony to take in the view of the Washington Memorial, floodlit against the snow. The informality of the evening was reflected in the presence of Barney, the president's black Scottish terrier."

This sycophantic reportage and the royal reception extended to Howard by both the Bush administration and the Washington press gallery is a remarkable turn around. In September 2001, a few days before he arrived in Washington to mark 50 years of the US-Australia alliance, Howard was bluntly criticised in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and other leading US newspapers over his government's brutal treatment of asylum seekers and refugees. To add insult to injury, a *Los Angeles Times* editorial not only denounced the Australian leader, but also repeatedly referred to him as "John Hunt".

And when Howard committed 1,500 Australian troops to the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in October 2001, the event was given little public recognition by Bush and virtually ignored by the US media, much to Howard's chagrin. In fact, one of the few mentions of the Australian troop deployment was in the *Seattle Times*,

which went on to describe Howard as “dull as dishwater”.

But, as one unnamed senior US government official told the *Australian Financial Review* last week, Howard’s current elevation to celebrity status is bound up with two related factors.

“For the US domestic political and media audiences it was important to show there were respected countries that support us, and Australia is one of those,” he said. “The other is that it’s important that we are seen sitting down and consulting with other countries and not just charging ahead. Domestically, it cuts against the unilateralist charge.”

Kurt Campbell, former Pentagon official and head of security programs at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told the newspaper: “The fact that Howard is here today is huge. Any country that steps up to the plate now in support of the administration will get a lot of credit and will be remembered for a long time.”

Puffed up by his treatment in Washington, Howard attempted to posture as an international heavyweight, repeating the latest US policy spin to anybody who would listen. At a joint press conference with Rumsfeld he declared: “Australia does not believe that all of the heavy lifting on something like this should be done by the United States and the United Kingdom alone.

“[H]ope is to be found in the whole world saying the same thing and saying it very loudly to Iraq and most particularly, the Arab states saying, ‘Mate, the game is up,’” Howard said. This transparent attempt to present himself as an ordinary fair-minded “bloke” from “down under” was entirely out of character and obviously scripted by Howard’s media advisors.

In New York, Howard met with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Chief UN Weapons Inspector Hans Blix. According to press reports, the Australian leader told Annan that his organisation could be “permanently damaged” if the UN Security Council did not force Iraq to disarm. Howard said Iraq should either disarm or face the consequences and called on the UN Security Council to enforce its resolutions on Iraq in a “very direct, authentic way”.

Before the Blix report was handed down, Howard insisted its delivery would be “a very important event”. But after the weapons inspector’s report failed to provide the US with the military trigger it wanted, Howard simply dismissed it. “I don’t think in the end it adds to anything much,” he intoned, aping the Bush administration’s responses.

Washington’s elevation of Howard into a statesman-

like figure is laughable. One of Australia’s most intellectually limited, uncultured and unashamedly provincial prime ministers in recent years, Howard has developed his political career by appealing to the most backward-looking and insular elements in Australia. His newfound praise in Washington last week provides a measure of the increasingly isolated position of the US government on the world arena.

On return to Australia last Sunday morning—after meetings with Tony Blair in London and Indonesian President Megawati in Jakarta—Howard told the local media that he would not be swayed by the mass anti-war demonstrations and arrogantly described the protesters as “the mob”.

He went on to make clear the real motivation underlying his decision to back a war. After repeating the obligatory lies about “weapons of mass destruction” and “defending world peace,” he stressed the importance of the US-Australian alliance. “Given our position in the world,” he said, this “is a very important consideration”.

While Howard refrained from providing any details, Murdoch’s *Australian* obliged by publishing an article the next day entitled “Spoils of war a US free trade agreement,” which listed those Australian industries that would most benefit from a free trade deal.

“For the first time in half a century,” the newspaper declared, “Australia stands to gain a potential economic benefit after participating alongside the US in a war”. It predicted the sugar, beef, dairy, filmmaking, drug testing and research, and service industries would gain the most.

Far from “fighting terrorism” and “making the world a safe place”, the Howard government’s slavish support for a criminal US-led war is bound up with the mercenary interests of corporate Australia, its economic relations with the US and its broader financial and strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region.



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