

# Australian cabinet rubberstamps military commitment to Iraq war

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In the face of overwhelming international and domestic opposition, the Australian government formally committed troops to the US-led war against Iraq in what is the country's most significant military mobilisation since the Vietnam War. This infamous decision constitutes a criminal act of aggression against a poverty-stricken and virtually defenceless nation. By ignoring the UN, breaching its protocols and embracing the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war, Canberra has joined Washington in breaking entirely with the post-World War II system of international relations.

For months Howard has maintained the absurd fiction that no decision had been made to commit Australian troops to a war on Iraq. In fact, agreement was reached last June. High-level planning between Washington and Canberra continued through the year and led in December to a major expansion of Australia's commando units and new equipment purchases in preparation for Iraq operations. In mid-January, the Howard government, without reference to parliament, "pre-deployed" 2,000 troops as well as naval and airforce units to the Gulf.

For all Howard's talk about defending "democratic values" over the last year, the government's commitment to war has been carried out completely undemocratically. Howard's claim that no decision had been made was a convenient device for refusing to publicly debate the issue and fobbing off media questions as "hypothetical". Once President Bush rang Howard on Monday indicating the US would ignore the UN, the pretence was dropped and the prime minister rapidly rammed through the prearranged plan.

Howard convened his cabinet on Monday night and briefed it. After a 6 a.m. call from Bush on Tuesday morning confirmed war was imminent, cabinet met at 8.30 a.m. and rubberstamped Australia's military commitment. Government MPs were called together shortly after and presented with a *fait accompli*. Howard told them that cabinet had taken its decision and there would be no caucus vote.

Parliament convened a few hours later and was treated with the same contempt. It could debate the issue—at length over three days—but outside of bringing down the government nothing that the MPs said would reverse the decision. The government used its majority in the lower house to pass a resolution backing the war. The Senate, where it does not have a majority, rejected the decision and passed a protest motion condemning the government and calling for the withdrawal of Australian troops. The motion

will have no effect on the government's actions.

Howard has increasingly adopted an autocratic presidential style and used federal executive power to bypass his own party and the parliament. In the course of the parliamentary debate, Howard made clear his disdain for the proceedings and for broader public opposition to the war by ostentatiously turning his back on Simon Crean when the Opposition Leader rose to speak. As one commentator noted in the *Australian Financial Review*, the gesture was a symbol. "The deeper he has become enmeshed in George W. Bush's international adventurism, the less the issue has been open for any real debate anywhere."

Howard's speech to parliament was a farrago of long-discredited lies and half-truths. He claimed, without presenting a shred of evidence, that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and that urgent military action was needed to prevent these weapons being given to terrorist organisations. The main thrust of the speech was his unqualified support for the US doctrine of pre-emptive military attack. The world "changed forever" on September 11, he declared, and "now faces new and previously unknown menaces." Howard made clear that any nation deemed a "rogue state" was a target for military attack, not because it constituted an immediate threat but because of its potential danger in the indeterminate future. His support for unilateral wars of aggression constitutes a complete break with the entire structure of post-war relations, including the UN and international protocols.

The Labor Party, Australian Democrats and Greens all opposed the war, but not from the standpoint of condemning its predatory and neo-colonial nature. In the case of Labor, it was a matter of political survival. In the midst of a wave of antiwar opposition, the ALP's feeble and equivocal stance threatened to consign the party to irrelevancy. For months, Labor leader Simon Crean has refused to categorically oppose the impending war. He left open the possibility that his party would support an attack on Iraq even without UN Security Council support.

The extent of opposition was evident during the parliamentary debate. As Howard walked through parliament's Great Hall a choir singing antiwar songs confronted him and when he rose to announce Australia's commitment, a man in the public gallery loudly condemned him as a "murderer". Angry demonstrations were held outside the prime minister's residence and two protestors circumvented security guards and daubed a giant "No War" slogan in bright red paint on the tallest section of the Sydney Opera House, Australia's best-known landmark.

Anxious to make some political mileage, Crean denounced the war against Iraq in parliament as “reckless and unnecessary”. But his main argument was that the Howard government had subordinated Australian interests to those of the United States. “What we have got from the prime minister,” he declared, “is a commitment to deploy our troops based on no evidence, ignoring the reports of Dr Blix and based solely on a phone call—a phone call from Air Force One on the way back from the Azores.”

In the parliamentary upper house, Labor senators also attacked Howard for his “subservience” to the Bush administration, describing the war commitment as a “dark moment” in Australian history. Australian Democrats leader Andrew Bartlett said the cabinet and government MPs were “gutless”. Greens leader Bob Brown said Howard “did not speak for the Australian people” and would “bear responsibility for each drop of blood shed in Iraq”.

In all this sound and fury, the imperialist agenda of the Bush administration and the words “Iraqi oil” barely rated a mention. Like Crean, the opposition parliamentarians chiefly berated Howard for undermining Australia’s “national interest” and jeopardising its relations in Asia and elsewhere. MPs bitterly criticised Howard for “betraying Australia”, which was “best protected and advanced” by upholding the UN and international law.

Two features of the parliamentary debate warrant particular mention.

As well as parroting Washington’s lie that the war would bring peace and democracy to Iraq, speeches by senior government ministers were marked by vitriolic attacks on France for its opposition to an attack on Iraq. The Chirac government was variously denounced as “treacherous”, “World War II Nazi-collaborators” and “Hussein appeasers”. In a particularly foul attack, parliamentary secretary Warren Entsch described France as a “vulture” that “circled around and does nothing for itself, waiting for the opportunity to go and pick the benefits of other peoples’ hard work.”

These comments, along with Howard’s trenchant defence of Bush’s doctrine of pre-emptive strikes, point to the underlying political logic behind the government’s decision. If Howard were to speak openly, he would answer his parliamentary critics by insisting that it was in Australia’s national interests to unconditionally ally itself with the Bush administration. By committing troops to a war for US economic and strategic interests in the Middle East, the government is hoping to secure US backing for Australian ambitions in the Asia Pacific region over those of its rivals—France being high on the list.

It was left to Treasurer Peter Costello to hint at these cynical calculations. Responding to those who argued Australia benefited from the UN framework, Costello indicated that the government is contemplating its own unilateral actions closer to home. Australia could not afford “to fetter its foreign policy” or “military conduct” to the UN, he declared, because France “could veto Australia’s foreign policy”. “Suppose Australia wanted to take a strong stand against some area of French interest. Would we hand over to the French the right to veto that? I do not believe so,” he said.

France has its own interests in the South Pacific—in particular, in its colonies and former colonies Tahiti, Vanuatu and New

Caledonia—that cut across the aspirations of Australian big business. Canberra and Paris have already come to sharp political blows in recent years over French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Costello and Howard clearly calculate that support for the Bush administration in the Iraq war will help their case for Washington’s backing in future regional disputes and conflicts with France or other powers.

It is worth recalling the real motivations behind Australian military support for Britain in World War I. War against Germany opened the way for a major expansion of Australian capital into the South Pacific. Canberra used the conflict to seize control of German colonies, in particular German New Guinea, the Solomons and other islands. The quid pro quo for the sacrifice of over 60,000 young Australians in WWI was British support after the war for Australia’s control of these territories.

The second aspect of the debate worth noting was the Howard government’s preoccupation with the “legality” of its military engagement in Iraq. There is obviously a degree of nervousness among cabinet ministers about the criminality of their actions and the potential for war crimes charges. Howard made a point of tabling official advice from Attorney General’s department and Foreign Affairs lawyers justifying his government’s actions in terms of international law. The flimsy memorandum, which flies in the face of numerous experts in international law, consisted of selective references to previous UN resolutions together with the claim that Resolution 1441 sanctioned the use of force.

A further indication that the government is fully conscious of its criminal culpability came on Tuesday night during an interview with Defence Minister Robert Hill on the ABC’s *Lateline* program. Hill declared that Australian troops would not bomb schools, hospitals, mosques or domestic housing because Australian “targeting policies” were “more restricted” than the US. Asked to elaborate, he cited Protocol 1 of the Geneva Convention, which deals with military attacks on civilians, and admitted that the US military was not bound by these agreements.

But the logic of Hill’s pathetic attempt to establish a little distance from US military actions only underscores the Australian government’s complicity in this criminal war. According to Hill, Australian warplanes will not bomb schools and hospitals. But Canberra has no qualms about giving its full support to the US, which refuses to recognise long-standing conventions of war and has no compunction about murdering innocent civilians.

Notwithstanding Hill’s fine legal distinctions, the Howard government will not be able to claim “lack of knowledge” as a defence in any future war crime or human rights charges. They are direct partners in a criminal venture—an unprovoked military slaughter against a defenceless and poverty-stricken people that will claim tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of innocent lives.



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