

Antiwar protests follow Australian Prime Minister Howard during New Zealand visit

John Braddock
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Australian Prime Minister John Howard was confronted with antiwar protests throughout his three-day visit to New Zealand that ended on Monday. The visit, which was timed to mark the 20th anniversary of the Closer Economic Relations (CER) free trade agreement between the two countries, was dominated by the looming war against Iraq. Howard's meetings with Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark followed his recent appearance at the White House, where he confirmed Australia's unconditional support for a US-led invasion. Australia has sent 2000 troops to the Gulf and is set to participate in a military assault even without a UN mandate.

The largest demonstration took place outside parliament in Wellington on Monday. Over 600 protesters chanted "No blood for oil!", whistled, thumped drums and set fire to New Zealand and Australian flags during an official state luncheon in Howard's honour. Two separate marches, one beginning at Victoria University, and the other in the central business district, had earlier converged on parliament grounds. The demonstrators included secondary school students in uniform, workers from nearby offices, university students, youth and elderly people. Immigrant families, including many Iraqi refugees, were prominent.

A Wellington teacher and member of the "Anti-Capitalist Alliance", Paul Hopkinson, burnt New Zealand and Australian flags, amid loud cheering. "Both flags stand for imperialism," he said. "New Zealand has been supporting the sanctions on Iraq, just like Australia has. They've killed about one and a half million people." Wainuiomata pensioner Mike Rigg also set fire to a New Zealand flag. He said he was angry Clark was inside talking to Howard, when she had earlier refused to talk to parents who took court

action against a government decision to disestablish school units catering for disabled students.

Green MPs boycotted the state luncheon after co-leaders Jeanette Fitzsimons and Rod Donald called Howard a "warmonger". The Greens, however, attempted to turn the protest towards anti-Australianism. Three Green MPs held a sign saying "Unsanctioned war is like an underarm bowl"—a reference to a well-known cricketing incident often used by sporting commentators to promote popular rivalry between the two countries. Greenpeace made one of the most visible statements, putting an Uncle Sam hat on top of a giant statue of Gollum that was advertising the film *Lord of the Rings* at the Embassy Theatre, and dangling a puppet of Howard from his fingers.

Five demonstrators were arrested at the end of the protest, when proceedings had all but ended. The five, who had been singled out by police as "ringleaders", were pushed and manhandled after a piece of dirt was thrown at Howard's departing limousine. Cops assaulted one demonstrator as he lay on the ground. In the course of the ensuing melee, police flattened the Philippines Ambassador as they tried to grab another protestor. A police spokesman was subsequently forced to apologise for the incident, in which the ambassador was left cut and bruised.

Security was the most intense it has ever been for the visit of an Australian prime minister. In Wellington, 200 police were mobilised, forming a line across parliament's forecourt, while marksmen with binoculars and high-powered rifles were posted on the roof of parliament buildings. Earlier in the day, armed black figures could also be seen on top of a tower during a wreath-laying ceremony attended by Howard at the National War Memorial.

In several post-meeting press conferences throughout the weekend, Clark and Howard announced they had “agreed to disagree” but “stay friends” over a US-led invasion of Iraq. The New Zealand government has said if the Security Council authorised the use of force against Iraq, it would consider humanitarian, medical or logistic support.

Clark said both leaders were very clear on the other country’s role. “We register the difference of opinion over the timetable and the means, but there is not daylight between us on the objective” which was to see Iraq “effectively disarmed and contained”.

Both leaders were at pains to point out that no tensions existed between the two countries. In what one news commentator described as a “trans-Tasman love-fest,” Howard promised to support New Zealand in the event of any US attempt to retaliate by locking it out of trade talks.

In another demonstration of common ground, the two leaders agreed to promote a South Pacific anti-terrorism unit, purportedly to help protect small states with limited resources. The South Pacific Forum in Auckland in August would look at how a “regional capability” to “fight terrorism” could be established. Clark was reluctant to discuss details, but a spokesman indicated police anti-terrorism training would be an obvious first step and that a “regional institution” could be established. Such a move would be aimed at securing more direct control by New Zealand and Australia over their small Pacific neighbours, with Howard declaring Australia was also keen to “improve governance arrangements” in the islands of the Pacific.



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