Australian foreign minister grovels in Washington

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If any further demonstration were needed of the Howard government's slavish support for Washington's criminal war in Iraq, it was provided last week by Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

On March 31, Downer flew to Washington supposedly to use Australia's so-called special relationship with the US to persuade the Bush administration to accept a central role for the UN in the postwar administration of Iraq and to lobby for a share in the spoils, including reconstruction contracts for Australian companies.

Prior to departing, Downer told parliament that the government supported a UN role in line with proposals made by British Prime Minister Tony Blair. "We believe that the UN should have a role in the administration of Iraq and possibly there should be the appointment of somebody such as a special representative of the Secretary General. There is for example, one in East Timor at the moment," he said.

Downer's comments reflect the Howard government's concern that some form of international legitimacy, no matter how threadbare, is required for the one-sided slaughter now underway and for the neo-colonial regime that Washington plans to install in Baghdad. While the size of the Australian military contingent in the Middle East is small, the Howard government is criminally complicit in the illegal, predatory war that is claiming the lives of tens of thousands of Iraqi troops and civilians.

The Bush administration, however, has repeatedly made clear that it has no intention of handing over administration in Baghdad to the UN or anyone else. It is openly preparing to install retired three-star US general Jay Garner to run Iraq and wants any role for the UN to be restricted to soliciting aid funds to ease the humanitarian disaster that is currently unfolding.

Any notion that Downer's visit might create some kind of rift between Canberra and Washington was quickly dispelled. US officials long ago sized up the calibre of Downer, and the government he represents, and they prepared accordingly.

The foreign minister was accorded the full red carpet treatment, a rare event for an Australian politician. He was a guest at the home of US Secretary of State Colin Powell and shown around the Pentagon by senior officials. His visit was followed in the American media, which normally has difficulty recalling the name of the prime minister, let alone a foreign minister.

As Downer was settling down to a high-level briefing by Vice President Dick Cheney and other senior officials, Bush himself "unexpectedly dropped in" for half an hour. Flushed with pride and self-importance, Downer, as he excitedly told a broadcaster later, made the "appropriate response" and immediately stood up. "It's kind of a human reaction, Neil. He is the most powerful man in the world, so I think one pays due respect to that," he gushed.

The fawning of the US media was in line with its unquestioning support for the war. Not a reference was made, for example, to the overwhelming opposition that the Howard government continues to confront within Australia. Nevertheless, while feting Downer in public, US officials refused to give an inch in their private discussions, and Downer rapidly fell into line.

The minister emerged from the talks on April 2 to effect a 180-degree turn. Dropping any reference to a central role for the UN in postwar Iraq, he declared: "To transfer Iraq from immediate United States control at the end of the war to some international body, the UN, the whole of Iraq to be run by the UN, would delay the passage of control of Iraq to Iraqis."

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Downer also abandoned his suggestion of a UN interim administration based on the one in East Timor, simply remarking, “that was a different model”. Likewise, the special representative of the UN Secretary General in Iraq, previously advocated by Downer, suffered a severe downgrade to coordinator of international aid.

After returning to Australia, Downer went one step further, reversing the government’s previous opposition to playing any role in postwar Iraq. On April 7, he told the media that a number of Australian officials would work in US-occupied Iraq, “possibly in the area of agriculture”. It also appears that Australian military forces may remain longer than previously expected.

Even the prospect of lucrative reconstruction contracts in Iraq has gone by the board. Downer told Sky TV, “it was impossible to say,” if Australian companies would get building contracts—“they would have to bid for them”. He admitted that prime contracts would “rightly” go to American firms with other non-US companies restricted to contending for sub-contracts.

Downer’s groveling underscores the relationship of the Howard government to the US. Under conditions where Washington is tearing up the entire system of international relations established after World War II, Howard has concluded that the only option for Australia, a third-rate imperialist power, is to ally itself unconditionally with the world’s foremost superpower.

From the beginning, the Howard government has unconditionally backed every twist and turn of the Bush administration’s preparations for war. Australia has been the only country, other than Britain, to commit troops to the invasion of Iraq and to participate in the carnage and destruction of the past three weeks, despite mass opposition at home. In doing so, Howard hopes to guarantee Washington’s continued patronage for Australia’s strategic, economic and military interests in the increasingly volatile and unstable Asia-Pacific region.

Sections of the ruling elite have criticised Howard, fearing that his subservience to the US could isolate Australia and damage its considerable economic interests in Asia. There are concerns, moreover, that for all the kowtowing to Washington, Canberra could, in the end, simply be ignored—a sentiment reinforced by signs that the US is preparing to muscle in on Australia’s wheat market in Iraq.

But, if Downer’s performance in Washington is any indication, the Howard government has no intention of changing course. The political logic of Canberra’s trajectory will mean an ongoing Australian commitment to further US military adventures.

Interviewed on Channel Nine’s *Sunday* program, Downer was asked whether the Howard government would commit Australian troops to US military action against Iran and Syria. After an initial attempt to brush aside the question as “hypothetical,” he eventually declared: “We wouldn’t be involved in such activity”.

Just how long this latest stance lasts remains to be seen. Howard is due in Washington at the end of the month. It is highly likely that his current “opposition” to involvement in yet another criminal US war will evaporate just as quickly as his foreign minister’s insistence on the UN’s pivotal role in postwar Iraq.

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