

# Australia: Labor reignites governor general scandal

**Linda Tenenbaum**  
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An unprecedented crisis engulfing Australia's head of state concerns more than just the individuals directly involved. It points to the deep-seated rot affecting the country's political institutions and parties and the yawning gulf between official politics and the lives and aspirations of ordinary people.

An Administrator, Sir Guy Green, was appointed yesterday to replace Australia's head of state, Governor-General Dr Peter Hollingworth, after changes to the "Letters Patent" were dispatched by Prime Minister John Howard to Buckingham Palace in London and hurriedly signed by the Queen.

Hollingworth, who "stood aside" last Sunday, will share his official residence, Government House, with Green—the Governor of Tasmania—who is "standing in". Both will represent the Queen. Nothing like this has happened before in the 102 years since Australia was established as a federated nation.

The crisis brings to a head a campaign that has been waged for more than a year against the governor general over his mishandling and cover-up of cases of child sex abuse when he was Anglican archbishop of Queensland's capital city, Brisbane.

Two weeks ago, Queensland Labor premier Peter Beattie tabled in the state parliament a report investigating nine cases of abuse in the Anglican Church. His action made the church-commissioned report publicly available for the first time, after Howard had earlier refused to table it in the federal parliament.

The report was highly critical of Hollingworth, finding he had not acted "fairly or reasonably" in two cases—one of which involved permitting a known paedophile to continue working as a priest—and that his recollections were at odds with those of other witnesses.

"The board considers that no bishop acting reasonably could have reached the decision to continue a known paedophile in the ministry. There are no extenuating circumstances nor can the board imagine any that could have justified continuance," it stated.

Hollingworth maintained he was "denied natural justice" in the course of the investigation and refused to accede to demands by Labor's state and federal leaders, along with the Democrats, Greens and a growing public chorus, for his resignation.

Opposition Labor leader Simon Crean warned that the office of governor general would be "diminished" as a "symbol of national unity" if Hollingworth refused to go and that the "PM must terminate his appointment."

Prime Minister Howard, who was solely responsible for the appointment of Hollingworth in the first place, continued to defend his man. Hollingworth was guilty not of a crime, he insisted, but an error of judgment and moreover had done nothing while in the position of governor general that warranted such a measure.

"I'm not going to sack the governor general. I do not regret the appointment," Howard declared, as flew out of the country to join US President Bush at his Texas ranch.

Admitting he had not bothered to read the report he added: "I'm told there's no findings ... of any deliberate misconduct...."

Howard's primary concern was to prevent a new precedent being created in which the head of state could be dismissed on the basis of popular sentiment, i.e., where popular approval or disapproval could become a factor in determining the fate of a head of state.

This tenuous situation blew up last Thursday after federal Labor MP Lindsay Tanner placed on the parliamentary notice paper two questions about whether Hollingworth had sought a suppression order sometime earlier in the year involving a court case.

In response Hollingworth issued an extraordinary public statement, revealing that he had, indeed, sought a suppression order. The order involved civil proceedings "seeking financial payment by a woman who has subsequently and tragically died. As part of those proceedings, this woman alleged that I raped her in the 1960s, when she was 19 or 20 years of age"—i.e., some 40 years ago.

That evening, Australians watched in amazement as the head of state appeared on their television screens to declare: “I did not know this woman, I did not rape her, I did not sexually assault her. I deny absolutely that I have ever raped, or in any way sexually assaulted any person.”

Although informed about the matter last December, Howard only concluded that time was up for the governor general when the rape allegation became public knowledge. Having stood down, Hollingworth is preoccupied with preparing his defence. The dead woman’s family is proceeding with the civil case, which is due to return to the Victorian Supreme Court on May 23.

Aside from constituting a major crisis at the very apex of the state, the most significant feature of the Hollingworth affair is what it reveals about the state of Australian politics.

Labor initially seized on the issue in early 2002 as a means of attacking Howard and trying to differentiate itself from the coalition. The party had just suffered its third electoral loss in a row, having failed to provide any opposition or alternative to Howard’s policies.

When the church report came out, Labor immediately reignited the affair. Then Tanner upped the ante with his parliamentary questions.

The woman who has made the rape allegations, Annie Jarmyn, was deeply disturbed, having suffered a traumatic life from early childhood. She apparently “recognised” Hollingworth only recently from a 1960s photograph and committed suicide just a few weeks ago. The evidence to date suggests that Hollingworth was not posted to the area where the alleged rape occurred.

Despite the fact that there is no independent evidence pointing to Hollingworth’s involvement in such a crime, Tanner defended his move on the basis that the governor general was “a senior public figure”. “My motive,” he said, “was concern about transparency and openness in our society.”

This raises two issues. Would Tanner and the Labor party like this to become the new standard for every public figure? Under conditions where allegations of sexual or financial impropriety and personal slurs have increasingly become the modus operandi of official politics, should every charge, no matter how untested and far-fetched, be regarded as sufficient reason for forced resignations or dismissal?

Even more significant is the political context in which the scandal has erupted. While loudly demanding the sacking of Hollingworth, the Labor leaders are noticeably silent on other issues.

The criminal onslaught against Iraq, for example, has just claimed the lives of tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of people, and laid waste to the country’s entire infrastructure. Howard, who collaborated with Bush and

Blair, has just completed his global “victory” tour, raising the demand that questions about the war’s “legality” should be immediately dropped.

But the pretext on which it was prosecuted—“weapons of mass destruction”—has been exposed as totally fraudulent. Not one biological, chemical or nuclear weapon—or the means to manufacture them—has been discovered after two months of invasion and occupation.

Howard advised the Australian parliament that Iraq’s “weapons of mass destruction” represented a “threat to world peace and stability.” He said there was an imminent danger that Al Qaeda would get hold of them.

If Labor is concerned about “transparency and openness” why has it not demanded an inquiry into Howard’s lies and deceptions to parliament and the Australian people?

Who created the weapons of mass destruction fiction? Who was involved in the cover-up? How far did it extend? Who knew what?

And what, then, was the real reason for Howard’s decision to commit troops? Where was this discussed?

Moreover, why haven’t war crimes charges been laid against Howard, Defence Minister Hill and other senior ministers?

The reason is that, while Labor—together with the Democrats and Greens—wanted an intervention into Iraq to be carried out under the auspices of the UN, they accepted the entire weapons of mass destruction fiction.

Yesterday in the Senate, the three parties used their majority to pass a motion demanding the resignation of the governor general and the establishment of a full public inquiry—a Royal Commission—into child sexual abuse.

Yet again they are using this issue—unquestionably a complex social problem—to divert public attention from the criminal conduct of the Howard government—which on this occasion has contributed to the wanton destruction of an entire country—and the lies that have been concocted to cover it up.



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