

Australian prime minister instructs UN: Legality of Iraq war no longer an issue

Richard Phillips
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Australian Prime Minister John Howard has declared that all debate in the United Nations on the legality of the US-led war against Iraq should end. Howard's remarks were made on Monday in New York, after a meeting with UN Secretary General Kofi Anan and follow the Australian leader's red carpet welcome to US President Bush's Texas ranch last weekend.

Howard, who was no doubt briefed by Bush administration officials about what to say, told the media that there was "nothing to be gained" from "rearguing the toss" over Iraq. The UN had to "recognise the reality of what is occurring on the ground" and that "the effective administering body in Iraq is the coalition."

Howard's remarks are nothing less than a demand for a permanent amnesty over the illegal and unprovoked US-led attack on Iraq on the grounds that the coalition forces have been victorious. The UN, and by implication the rest of the world, should simply fall into line behind White House demands and accept the occupation of Iraq by the United States and its seizure of Iraqi oil.

According to Howard's logic, the post-World War II system of international relations is now redundant and should be replaced with a "might is right" policy. Prosecutions for war crimes and breaches of international law no longer apply to the conquerors or those in control of "what is occurring on the ground". This is tantamount to exonerating mass murderers on the basis that they have wiped out their victims and the killing has stopped.

Howard went on to declare that the UN had been weakened by a "failure of the Security Council", which did not "match the aspirations and demands of its previous resolutions" on Iraq. Unsurprisingly none of the journalists present bothered to point out that the war on Iraq was launched in opposition to UN Security Council resolutions and in defiance of international law.

The UN, according to Howard, could restore its credibility by helping to provide aid and removing sanctions on Iraq. These demands echo exactly those of the Bush administration, which wants UN sanctions lifted so that it can begin selling Iraqi oil and plundering the country's resources.

Howard's extraordinary statements came after a weekend of

lavish praise from President Bush for the Australian leader's unconditional commitment to the military onslaught against Iraq and the US doctrine of "preemptive attack" against any perceived enemy.

Such were the eulogies heaped on the prime minister that various media reports described the visit as a "love-in" or "mutual pet-in". In fact, Howard, accompanied by his wife Janette, became just the fourth world leader—after Tony Blair, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar and Russia's Vladimir Putin—to spend a night at the 640-hectare ranch.

Bush described Howard as "a man of courage", a "clear thinker", "a man of steel", "a man of heart" and "kinda like a Texan".

"I can't tell you what a comfort it is to talk to him on the phone," Bush declared. "You know times get tough when you make tough decisions, but there was never any doubt in his mind. He was steady under fire."

Howard reciprocated a day later in New York, proclaiming Bush to be "a highly intelligent man who has knowledge of world affairs" and "very committed to the peace process".

An adequate response to this mutual lionisation would require the skills of a Jonathan Swift or Mark Twain.

Howard, the leader of a third rate imperialist country, became Australian prime minister following the defeat of the Keating Labor government in 1996. Like Bush, he is widely regarded as a philistine and intellectually limited man, whose pomposity and sense of self-importance are exceeded only by his provincialism.

In 1999, Howard told the *Bulletin* magazine that he wanted to see Australia functioning as a "deputy" for the US in the Asian region. Australia had a special "responsibility" he declared, because it occupied a "special place". It was "a European, Western civilisation with strong links with North America, but here we are in Asia."

Despite these obvious overtures, Howard was all but ignored under the Clinton administration and treated similarly by the Blair government in Britain. In 1997, British Prime Minister Tony Blair did not even bother to meet with him, forcing the Australian leader to hold a press conference by himself, in the rain, outside 10 Downing Street.

In September 2001, during his first official visit under the

Bush administration, Howard cut a somewhat forlorn political figure. He was given the usual treatment afforded foreign dignitaries but his vicious anti-refugee policies and notorious summary incarceration of asylum seekers were strongly criticised in several leading US newspapers. This included the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, the latter newspaper mistakenly referring to him as “John Hunt”.

But the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US afforded Howard a new opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty to Washington. He seized it with both hands—and this time was noticed. Within a short space of time he had become an unofficial political errand boy for the Bush administration and a co-partner in its crimes. He was the first government leader to pledge military support to the US “war against terrorism,” committing 1,500 Australian troops to the war in Afghanistan and more than 2,000 troops to the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Howard’s political elevation, however, is a by-product not of his masterful political skills, as sections of the Australia media would have it, but of the growing international isolation of the Bush administration. Where once US governments could command wide international support for their foreign policy endeavours, the Bush administration is reviled by millions of people around the world, not least within America itself.

One of the key issues discussed by Howard and Bush at the Texas ranch was the US-Australia free trade agreement. Bush said final negotiations on the deal would be completed by December, six months ahead of schedule, with congressional approval by next year.

The Howard government hopes this deal will demonstrate the benefits of its uncritical support of the Bush administration, boost Australian trade by approximately \$4 billion a year, and further strengthen political and military relations with the US.

But these estimates have been rejected by some sections of Australian big business, concerned that Howard’s embrace of the Bush administration will undermine local corporations and endanger their relations in the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere.

Among those opposing a free trade deal are agricultural exporters, some manufacturers and film and television production houses. They have warned that the US will demand too many concessions and fail to open its markets to Australian meat, sugar and dairy farmers.

The *Australian Financial Review* voiced some of these concerns in a May 5 comment, which posed the question: “Howard wants to press ever closer [to the US]. Short of incorporation as the 51st state, what more can Australia do?”

The article warned that the free trade deal would not guarantee any favourable treatment for Australian business. It cited the hostile attitude of the Bush administration towards Mexico and Canada. Although both countries are members of the North American Free Trade Agreement, they rejected military participation in the war on Iraq and are now being

penalised by the US government.

“No matter how dependent Australia becomes on the US, it will never be mutual. The superpower will always have other options. The junior alliance partner needs to work at perpetual ingratiation to hold the enduring indulgence of its great and powerful friend.”

The comment said Australian governments would be constantly trying to “improve its appeals to its great and powerful friend” and concluded by quoting George Washington: “There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate on real favours from nation to nation.”

Notwithstanding these warnings, Howard’s visit and the lavish praise from President Bush produced another compliant response from the Australian leader to US demands.

In the lead up to the military attack on Iraq and under conditions of mass domestic antiwar opposition, Howard assured the local media that there would be no participation of Australian troops “peacekeeping operations” in Iraq after the conflict. Australian troops would return home as soon as major combat ended, he pledged.

But a few days before Howard’s US trip, Australian Defence Minister Robert Hill indicated that some 1,000 troops could remain in Iraq and an additional 75 soldiers, 60 air traffic controllers and 16 weapons experts would be sent to perform “niche capabilities”. Questioned by reporters, Howard tried to play down Hill’s remarks, claiming that the number of troops remaining in Iraq would only be in the “hundreds” and there was no automatic commitment.

This response was denounced as a “tawdry gesture” on May 2 in the Murdoch-owned *Australian* newspaper, which called on Howard to “up the commitment”. Australian military forces, the newspaper editorialised, were involved “at the start of the war and [were] morally obliged to stay on”.

A day after meeting with Bush in Texas, Howard officially announced that up to 1,200 Australian troops would remain in Iraq. He refused to provide any exit date, only that the commitment would be reviewed “from time to time”.



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