

Australian prime minister an enthusiastic promoter of the WMD fraud

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While the spotlight has been focused on the Bush and Blair regimes for their role in weaving the web of lies over Iraq's "weapons of mass destruction", attention should also be directed to the Howard government in Australia. When it came to promoting bogus threats and circulating outright lies no one was more vociferous than the Australian prime minister.

The *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman recently remarked that "misrepresentation and deception are standard operating procedure" for the Bush administration. The same could equally be said of the Howard government. After a campaign of lies and deception targeting refugees during its re-election campaign in 2001—the Tampa crisis and the so-called "children overboard" affair—the government eagerly joined the Bush administration's war drive against Iraq, initiated in July-August 2002.

On July 16 last, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer proclaimed that the world should be worried about Iraq's ability to build a nuclear bomb, as well as its developing chemical and biological weapons capacity. Defence Minister Robert Hill said he was "not surprised" by claims that Iraq was less than three years away from developing a bomb.

"We believe that Saddam Hussein is continuing with his program of weapons of mass destruction and that his program included the desire for a nuclear capability."

Howard's first major intervention came on September 16 last year when he claimed that Australian intelligence agencies had identified attempts by the Iraqi regime to procure equipment, material and technology used to make chemical and biological weapons.

There was "no doubt", he told the parliament, that Iraq had pursued "weapons of mass destruction programs" since 1991 and that "evidence from human and technical sources points to Saddam Hussein having continued or increased his weapons of mass destruction program."

This involved not only chemical and biological weapons but nuclear weapons as well, with Australian intelligence agencies estimating that if Iraq obtained fissile material from overseas, its nuclear ambition could be achieved in

months—a considerable shortening of the three-year time frame mentioned just two months before.

By then, despite all the protestations to the contrary over the following months, Howard had given an undertaking to Bush that Australian forces would take part in the military onslaught against Iraq—with or without a United Nations resolution. As Hill told the Senate on the same day: "Actions are sometimes legitimate without an authority of the Security Council."

Howard's next major intervention came on the eve of US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the UN Security Council on February 5. In an address to the Australian parliament he set out to explain why Iraq's "possession of chemical and biological weapons and its pursuit of a nuclear capability poses a real and unacceptable threat to the stability and security of our world."

There was no equivocation or qualification. "The Australian government," he told the parliament, "knows that Iraq has chemical and biological weapons and that Iraq wants to develop nuclear weapons. We share the view of many that, unless checked, Iraq could, even without outside help, develop nuclear weapons in about five years."

There was, he insisted, "compelling evidence to support these beliefs within the published detailed dossiers of British and American intelligence." Interestingly the time frame for the supposed development of nuclear weapons was somewhat flexible—it varied from a matter of months, to less than three years to about five years.

Iraq, Howard insisted, continued to work on developing nuclear weapons with uranium being "sought from Africa that has no civil nuclear application in Iraq." This claim was based on a document that has now been exposed as a crude forgery.

According to Howard, material from the CIA showed that: "All key aspects—R&D, production, and weaponisation—of Iraq's offensive biological weapons program are active and most elements are larger and more advanced than they were before the Gulf War." Altogether the speech contained around 30 references to "weapons of mass destruction".

Some five weeks later, however, the “weapons of mass destruction” claims were starting to wear thin in the absence of any concrete evidence.

Consequently, in his address to the National Press Club on March 13 Howard decided that it was necessary to spice up the rhetoric and broaden the grounds for the US-led onslaught that was about to be launched.

Australian intelligence agencies, including the Office of National Assessments (ONA), he reported, had concluded that Al Qaeda had the intention to acquire chemical or biological weapons and an interest in radiological and nuclear weapons. But he was forced to acknowledge that his evidence would not pass muster if presented in a court of law and he could not produce any link between Iraq and Al Qaeda. Nevertheless, it was necessary to proceed because “final proof” would only be provided in a “Pearl Harbour” situation.

Howard’s assertions were exploded in an article published on March 16 by former ONA senior analyst Andrew Wilkie, who had resigned on March 11 over the government’s plan to join the invasion of Iraq.

According to Wilkie, the Iraqi military was “weak” and its “weapons of mass destruction program disjointed and contained.” Moreover, the government’s argument that Saddam Hussein had to be removed before he passed on “weapons of mass destruction” to terrorists was “flawed because there is no hard evidence of active co-operation between Baghdad and the extremist network linked to Al Qaeda.”

The real reason behind the plan to invade Iraq was US strategic interests and the Australian government’s support for the US at any cost, he wrote.

Wilkie’s comments are sure to take on added significance in the coming weeks. This is because, as the “weapons of mass destruction” lies further unravel, the perpetrators may well look for an escape route, with the claim that they were given “flawed” intelligence.

Judging by comments reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday, this seems to be Robert Hill’s approach. “On the basis of what we understood, the action was the right action to take,” he said. “If it turns out that there were flaws in what we understood, then I think we ought to say there were flaws. But it’s too early to say that.”

The attempt to put the blame on intelligence sources is undermined, however, by Wilkie’s comments in the lead-up to the war. The analyst was basing himself on intelligence information he had seen and which was being forwarded to the government.

According to a report published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 27, Wilkie maintains that Australian intelligence officials warned the Howard government that

US reports exaggerated Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction program and its links to terrorist organisations.

“For years, ONA has looked sceptically on some of the US information on Iraq and communicated this scepticism to [the] government. It was the Australian government that decided to make a big issue of the WMDs, not the analysts. They ignored advice that it [the WMD threat] was overstated.”

Doubts within the ONA over US intelligence were even more pronounced when it came to links with Al Qaeda. On this issue, Wilkie described some of the US claims as “mystifying.”

The collapse of the WMD fraud not only exposes the role of Howard and his ministers. It raises the question of how they were able to perpetrate the fraud so easily.

In the first place stands the mass media, which endlessly repeated the lies, fabrications and distortions. The second key prop was the “opposition” Labor Party, which endorsed the demands for the “disarming” of Iraq and dropped any pretence of opposition to the war virtually as soon as the first missiles were launched.

Howard will be hoping for continued support from both these quarters as the full extent of the deception becomes clear. He will no doubt receive it. The mass media will go along with the “flawed” intelligence line while the Labor Party leaders will keep their mouths shut for as long as they can.

But in the not-so-distant future the truth will out: Not only was the invasion of Iraq a war crime—a pre-emptive strike as defined by the Nuremberg Trials—but it was conducted on the basis of a Big Lie campaign comparable to anything undertaken by the Nazi regime.



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