

In the aftermath of Iraq

# Australian government prepares intervention in Solomon Islands

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Just three months after the Howard government joined the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, a government think tank has produced a report calling for Canberra to take semi-colonial control over the small, impoverished Pacific nation of Solomon Islands. The plan will be the inaugural test of a far-reaching shift in foreign policy in the wake of the Iraq war, asserting Australia's right to intervene throughout the Asia-Pacific area.

Launched by Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer on June 10, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's *Our Failing Neighbour* report proposes that up to 200 Australian and New Zealand police be sent to establish "law and order" in the destitute former British colony, backed by troops on standby in northern Australia. The Solomons' finances will be placed in the hands of an Australian-dominated authority, with Australian and New Zealand officials also taking key posts in the judiciary and the prisons.

Only four months ago, in February, a Foreign Affairs White Paper ruled out such interventions. "Australia cannot presume to fix the problems of the South Pacific countries," it declared. "Australia is not a neo-colonial power. The island countries are independent sovereign states."

The reversal underscores how the invasion and occupation of Iraq have dramatically changed the geo-political landscape. By unilaterally overturning Iraq's sovereignty, in defiance of international law, Washington has set a precedent that Howard hopes to follow.

*Our Failing Neighbour* does not call for military action to overthrow the Solomon Islands government. Rather, it counts on the country's venal and corrupt elites to invite intervention. Current Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza has already indicated his willingness to do so.

Because it is based on obtaining a formal invitation from the Solomons, Downer has labelled the operation "cooperative intervention". But there is no mistaking the plan's colonial-style nature. It proposes the formation of a Solomon Islands Rehabilitation Authority (SIRA) to take over the two key levers of state power—the Treasury and the police force (Solomon Islands does not have a military force).

Australia will run the unelected authority with the backing of an ad hoc grouping, possibly including New Zealand, Britain, France, the European Union, Japan, Pacific Island Forum members and

South East Asian countries. As with the Iraq occupation, the operation will not be under any UN mandate, although a UN resolution might be sought to legitimise it.

The Solomons government will continue to exist, but as a virtual adjunct of SIRA, reduced to a sort of colonial administrative council with limited powers. In the words of the report: "Of course, the elected government of Solomon Islands would persist alongside the SIRA, and would continue to run everything that the SIRA was not taking over."

The report advocates a 10-year operation in the Solomons, and raises the question of an indefinite takeover. "Of course it is possible that Solomon Islands is simply not viable as an independent state. If this is the case, we have even bigger challenges and we need to start thinking about what we should do about them."

Over the past few years, the Australian political and media establishment has referred to an "arc of instability" encircling Australia's north and east. Mounting social and political turmoil—the 1997 Sandline mercenary crisis in Papua New Guinea (PNG), Indonesia's withdrawal from East Timor in 1999, the eruption of civil war in the Solomons in 1998-99, the racist coup in Fiji in March 2000—triggered calls for direct Australian intervention.

This report marks a new stage, describing Solomon Islands as an example of "state failure" throughout the region. "While Solomon Islands is the most acutely troubled of our neighbours, most countries in the Southwest Pacific face major problems of political and economic viability, and some of them could go the way of Solomon Islands." Later, the report refers to a "more or less universal pattern of post-independence state failure around the world".

*Our Failing Neighbour* reflects the conclusion being drawn increasingly by Western governments that the period in which colonised territories were granted formal independence in the 1960s and 1970s has ended. The "war on terrorism" declared after the September 11 terrorist attacks is being utilised to proclaim a new era of pre-emptive intervention. "State failure is now one of the key issues on the international security agenda," the report declares.

The Howard government is also drawing on the precedent established by its 1999 intervention in East Timor. After obtaining

US endorsement, thousands of troops were sent into Timor under a UN banner in order to protect Australian corporate and strategic interests in the oil and gas-rich Timor Sea. With the assistance of the Timorese leadership, the military operation was cynically presented as one to safeguard and liberate the Timorese people.

The Policy Institute report refers to the “doctrine of humanitarian intervention” developed in recent years to “deal with what had previously been regarded as the internal problems of sovereign states” in the Balkans, Somalia, Haiti, Rwanda, Sierra Leone “and of course East Timor”.

Under a flimsy cover of humanitarian concern for the Solomons’ people, the intervention will be driven by definite strategic and commercial interests. With a population of about half a million, the Solomon Islands is a far-flung, strategically located and resource-rich island territory, which sits between Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. It lies astride key naval routes, which made it the scene of intensive fighting during World War II.

To justify intervention into the Solomons, Australian ruling circles are seeking to utilise an economic and social crisis for which they bear the primary responsibility, in both the long and short term. With a yearly GDP per head of \$US530, the Solomons’ people are among the poorest in the world as a direct result of a century and a half of colonial and semi-colonial domination.

Britain annexed Solomon Islands in the late nineteenth century, as well as Papua and Vanuatu, largely at the behest of the Australian authorities, who demanded colonisation in order to head off German and French acquisitions and to secure future Australian colonies. One of the key motives behind the 1901 federation of the British colonies in Australia was to establish Australian hegemony over the region, reflected in a specific clause in the Constitution empowering the federal government to manage relations with the Pacific islands.

After decades of plunder and neglect, interrupted only by World War II, Britain declared the territory formally independent in 1978. Poor and undeveloped, with a small, diverse and dispersed population, the islands remained financially dependent on the Western powers and vulnerable to foreign exploitation, particularly of its timber, fish, gold and palm oil resources. Australian companies were in the forefront, with more than 100 doing business in the islands.

By 1998, a deepening economic crisis, intensified by the 1997 Asian financial meltdown, Western aid cuts and demands for austerity measures, triggered communal warfare on the main island of Guadalcanal between local people and settlers from the neighbouring island of Malaita. The conflict led to a June 2000 coup by a Malaitan militia, joined by much of the police force, followed by a virtual collapse of the economy and government services.

As a result, Solomon Islands’ people have suffered massive unemployment, the breakdown of health, education and other essential services, and ongoing fighting between armed bands. The Howard government contributed to this human catastrophe by cutting off nearly all foreign aid, insisting that the militia-backed regime implement drastic cuts in the public service and social programs.

A small contingent of Australian police and security officers was dispatched to Solomons Islands in late 2000 in an attempt to enforce a ceasefire hammered out between warring factions in the northern Australian city of Townsville, but the Townsville agreement only served to entrench the position of militia-backed politicians.

Just as with Washington’s war on Iraq, Australian intervention in the Solomons will have nothing to do with lifting the living standards and defending the democratic rights of the population. Canberra is planning to ruthlessly impose its domination and financial dictates, for business, military and diplomatic reasons. In the words of the report:

“The collapse of Solomon Islands is depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities that, though not huge, are potentially valuable... Australia’s interests are also engaged in other ways. In a subtle but important sense, state failure in the Southwest Pacific reflects badly on Australia... Australia’s standing in the wider world—including with the United States—is therefore at stake.”

Police and, if necessary, military force will be used to establish Australian control, inevitably triggering resentment and resistance among the Solomons’ people. In a Voice of America interview, *Our Failing Neighbour’s* author, Dr. Ellie Wainwright, has already spoken of the need for “maximum force and potentially lethal force to disarm the militias” and end the “culture of lawlessness”.

This militarist policy will not stop in Solomon Islands. The Murdoch-owned *Australian*, which has pushed for Australian intervention in the Solomons for several years, hailed the report as a “paradigm shift” in foreign policy that will extend to Papua New Guinea—a former Australian colony. Editor-at-large Paul Kelly described it as “a post-Iraq declaration by Australia to the US of its strategic priorities—it will assume within its own region the responsibility of a metropolitan power”. Already, wrote Kelly, “The feeling within government is that cooperative intervention will apply to PNG: a view with vast implications.”

The people of Solomon Islands will have every right to resist this intervention and must have the support of working people in Australia, New Zealand and worldwide. The historical record of colonial and semi-colonial oppression shows that the social and economic crisis in the Solomons and across the South Pacific cannot be overcome outside of ending the system that has created it—Australian and global capitalism.



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