

Ex-general installed as Australian head of state

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Australian Prime Minister John Howard's appointment of a former military officer, Major-General Michael Jeffery, as the country's next Governor-General underscores the orientation of Australian foreign and domestic policy.

Selecting the Queen's official representative—effectively the head of state—is the prime minister's personal prerogative under Australia's constitutional arrangements. Howard has used this authority to elevate from relative obscurity a career military officer with specific credentials.

First, Jeffery's entire professional life has been bound up with the development of Australia's military security and intelligence apparatus, from the Special Air Services (SAS) to the "counter-terrorism" agencies.

Second, Jeffery has an extraordinary record of participation in colonial theatres of war, from Malaya to Papua New Guinea, and has long advocated neo-colonial interventions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Third, the new vice-regal representative has a track record, as state governor of Western Australia during the 1990s, of espousing the most conservative and reactionary social views.

Under conditions where the Howard government has effected a strategic shift in foreign policy, including participating in the illegal and aggressive war on Iraq and preparing neo-colonial interventions in the Pacific, Jeffery's appointment marks a corresponding shift at the apex of the state apparatus.

Howard made the announcement on June 22, after accepting the resignation of disgraced Archbishop Peter Hollingworth four weeks earlier. Whereas Hollingworth, a clergyman identified to some extent with anti-poverty and welfare causes, was appointed in June 2001 partly to appease mounting hostility to Howard's social agenda, Jeffery's appointment serves a very different purpose.

The mass media, which uniformly welcomed Howard's choice, has made a concerted effort to cover up the implications of his installation. Headlines and editorials have declared him to be "a man of the people," "traditional" and politically "super-safe".

But nothing could be further from the truth. As Howard himself emphasised, Jeffery is the first Australian-born ex-military officer to occupy the position of governor-general. In fact, Jeffery is the first military appointee since 1953, when Sir

Robert Menzies called upon former British armed forces chief, Field Marshall Sir William Slim, in the midst of the McCarthy-style anti-communist witchhunt.

And Jeffery is not simply an ex-general. He remains the patron and honorary colonel of the elite Special Air Services (SAS), which he commanded from 1975 to 1981. He spearheaded the formation by the SAS of domestic "counter-terrorist" strike forces during the late 1970s following the Hilton Hotel bombing and, as a brigadier, took charge of the Protective Services Coordinating Centre (PSCC), the federal government's emergency intelligence nerve centre, from 1981 to 1983.

Not since Gough Whitlam appointed Sir John Kerr in 1974 has a governor-general been so intimately connected to the secret security agencies. Kerr, who had a long association with the American, British and Australian spy networks, brushed aside the norms of parliamentary democracy in 1975 when he dismissed the elected Labor government, invoking the so-called "reserve powers" of the monarchy.

Like Kerr, Jeffery is highly conscious of the potentially dictatorial powers held by the vice-regal representative. Asked by reporters whether he would like to be Australia's last governor-general, making way for a president and a republican form of rule, he vehemently rejected the suggestion. Jeffery insisted that the governor-generalship had proven essential to preserving the nation's "stability". He specifically referred to the 1975 constitutional coup and to 1932, when a state governor dismissed the NSW Labor government of Jack Lang.

There is every reason to believe that Jeffery would not hesitate to use the constitutionally-entrenched "reserve powers"—which include the power to block laws, dismiss a government, dissolve parliament, assume executive power and take control of the armed forces as commander-in-chief—in the event that political disaffection and social unrest threaten the existing political order.

Jeffery represents a faction of the military and intelligence apparatus that has long railed against the downgrading of the armed forces in the aftermath of the defeat of the US and its allies, including Australia, in Vietnam. He is on record as calling for the expansion of the armed forces from 26,000 to 32,000, with a greater focus on suppressing supposed domestic

terrorist threats.

At a recent war veterans' reunion, Jeffery declared "passionately" that the Vietnam War was "a just cause" in bolstering the "anti-communist governments of Malaysia and Indonesia". He insisted that the conflict could have been won if only the military had been free to fight without political restrictions. This brackets him with various American generals who agitated at the time for further US military escalation in Vietnam. Some of them went so far as to advocate the use of nuclear weapons.

Well before the Howard government unveiled its plans to send troops to the Solomon Islands, Jeffery was a proponent of military interventions to shore up Australian interests in the region. "The real issues for us are Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the southwest Pacific. In PNG and the Solomons, I fear we are breeding future terrorists," he told the *Australian* before his appointment.

Jeffery's early military CV reads like a list of colonial-style postings. He served in Malaya from 1962 to 1964, immediately following the 1958-60 anti-communist Emergency. During the 1963-65 confrontation between the Sukarno government in Indonesia and newly formed Malaysia—which was backed by Britain and Australia—he was seconded to the British SAS in Borneo. From 1966 to 1969, in the wake of the US and Australian-supported military coup in Indonesia, he headed a Pacific Islands Regiment battalion in the neighbouring Australian colony of PNG. In 1970, he did a tour of duty as a company commander in Vietnam, before returning to PNG, where he commanded Australian forces in the final phase of colonial rule, from 1970 to 1975.

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Jeffery returned to Australia in the year of the "Canberra Coup" and played a key role in the build-up of the SAS and intelligence apparatus under the Fraser government from 1975 to 1983. In 1987, Jeffery opposed the Hawke Labor government's Defence White Paper, criticising it for reducing the army's capacity to operate on home soil. Apparently for that reason, he was never promoted higher than Deputy Chief of the General Staff. In 1993, Richard Court, the right-wing Liberal premier of Western Australia, plucked Jeffery out of the military to become that state's governor.

As state governor, Jeffery's outspoken views acquired a certain notoriety in WA. When Court's government defied a public outcry to introduce unprecedented military-style boot camps for juvenile offenders, Jeffery voiced his public support for the project. In another speech, he incensed single parents, claiming that their families were statistically linked to "every major crime, including mugging, violence against strangers, car theft and burglary".

Jeffery also denounced homosexuals and urged the cutting off of welfare to Aborigines, declaring that they should "assimilate" into European society. His call sparked outrage,

particularly among those for whom assimilation meant forced removal from their families. He advocated the reintroduction of religious education in all schools and compulsory pre-marital counselling, insisting that de facto couples should not be recognised unless they undertook such courses.

After retiring as state governor in 2000, Jeffery made clear his intention to continue his political and military activism. Funded by the federal and state governments and BHP, one of Australia's largest companies, he established a right-wing thinktank and security consultancy—the Centre for International Strategic Analysis, later renamed Future Directions International. His public pronouncements included a speech last December calling for the reversal of no-fault divorce laws, in place since 1976, and proposing an Australian "arc of influence" from India to China.

The entire political and media establishment has closed ranks behind Jeffery's appointment in an attempt to overcome the political crisis caused by Hollingworth's forced resignation. Confronted by allegations that Hollingworth covered-up cases of child sex abuse in the Anglican Church, Howard initially clung to the Archbishop's defence, anxious to avoid the precedent of a head of state being removed as a result of mass public pressure. By early May, however, with organisations throughout the country repudiating his official patronage and shunning his public appearances, Hollingworth's position had become untenable.

The accommodating response of the parliamentary opposition parties—Labor, the Australian Democrats and Greens—to Jeffery's appointment is particularly noteworthy. They played the key role in fanning accusations against Hollingworth, demanding his dismissal for "unacceptable conduct," as a means of attacking Howard while having no real disagreements with his agenda. But they have had no objections to Jeffery, whose political, military and intelligence record has been unreservedly embraced.

"He is a man who has served his country in peace and war with distinction," crowed Labor leader Simon Crean. Likewise, Andrew Bartlett, leader of the Democrats and Bob Brown, his Greens counterpart, issued statements congratulating the new governor-general. Their only complaint was that Howard should have consulted more widely before making the appointment.



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