

Oppose Australia's colonial-style intervention in the Solomons

The Socialist Equality Party [Australia]
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The Socialist Equality Party denounces the decision of the Howard government to dispatch troops and police to the Solomons as a colonial-style occupation that opens up a new period of imperialist aggression on the part of Australia, and its junior partner New Zealand, towards the small island states of the Pacific.

Prime Minister John Howard, his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and the Australian media have been at pains to deny any predatory intentions. “Australia is not a neo-colonial power and we are sensitive to regional concerns about our role,” Downer told the National Press Club on June 26.

But a neo-colonial regime is exactly what is being prepared. Under the latest plans, Australia will head a force of more than 2,000 troops and police backed by naval warships and air support to impose “law and order” on the Solomons. While formally the Solomons government will not be deposed, Australian advisers and experts will take over direction of the central functions of state—policing, finance and the legal system—for at least 10 years.

Downer has cynically described the operation as “cooperative intervention” and made much of the fact that Australia expects a formal invitation from the Solomon Island government. But this will be an offer of cooperation that the Solomon Islands cannot refuse. The country is in a state of economic collapse—in no small part due to the decision of the Howard government to cut off aid last year—and the Honiara government knows full well that international assistance will only be forthcoming on Canberra’s terms.

To provide a veneer of legitimacy, the Howard government summoned the leaders of the 16 Pacific Island Forum countries to a meeting in Sydney on Monday to extract their formal approval and pledges of military and other assistance. The New Zealand Labour government had already enthusiastically backed the move, viewing it as an opportunity to further its own interests in the region. Predictably, the small Pacific Island states fell into line. Like the Solomons, they all face serious economic difficulties and were not prepared to risk the serious repercussions involved in resisting Canberra’s demands.

Similarly, the opposition parties in Australia—Labor, the Democrats and Greens—have all fallen into line. In the lead up to the invasion of Iraq, their main objection was not principled opposition to the war but that the “national interest” would be better served by deploying Australian troops closer to home. Now that the Howard government is doing precisely that, the Democrats and Greens have rapidly indicated their support, declaring only that it should have been done sooner! None of them has even referred to the fact that the decision to commit troops to the Solomons was made completely undemocratically, without even the pretence of a parliamentary debate.

The Howard government’s announcement last week confirms that

the real reasons behind the dispatch of Australian troops to Iraq had nothing to do with the alleged threat posed by the Hussein regime or concern for the Iraqi people. Canberra was the most fervent supporter of the US invasion of Iraq in order to secure Washington’s backing to carve out an Australian sphere of influence in the Pacific. Having earned the goodwill of the White House, Howard, with a grossly inflated sense of importance, now believes his government can reorganise the Pacific as the Bush administration is reorganising the globe.

The decision to dispatch troops to the Solomons marks a turning point in Australian foreign policy—an end to what the media has termed the “hands off” approach that respected, formally at least, the national sovereignty of the Pacific Island states. Downer emphasised that Australia will intervene, militarily if necessary, whenever and wherever its national interests are at stake, declaring that “sovereignty in our view is not absolute”.

Already there have been calls for the government to extend its new approach to other Pacific nations—the former Australian colony of Papua New Guinea in particular, where Australia corporations have a major stake in the country’s mines and other commodities. The *Australian Financial Review* urged in an editorial on July 2: “The renewed regional involvement cannot stop at the Solomons. The much bigger challenge of helping steer PNG from disaster looms. It is time to review longer-term proposals shelved or discarded earlier, when the region felt its future was secure: a federation for the smaller Pacific states; dollarisation and liberalisation of migration.”

While the Howard government is drawing directly on the precedent of the Iraq invasion to justify armed intervention into the Solomons, the debate in ruling circles over Australian policy in the Pacific stretches back years. Sections of the ruling elite have expressed concerns that Australian interests were being compromised by political and economic instability in the Pacific Island states and by the involvement of other countries in what was regarded as Australia’s backyard. As far back as 1987, Labor backbencher Gordon Bilney mooted an end to independent Pacific states declaring: “Perhaps the best thing that countries like Australia really should be doing in the South Pacific is encouraging moves towards closer satrapy—towards closer association and, indeed even eventual incorporation...”

The turn began in practice in 1999, when the Howard government seized the opportunity to intervene into East Timor. Under the guise of “humanitarianism” and establishing the “independence” for the Timorese, it dispatched troops to secure Australian strategic and economic interests in East Timor and the Indonesian archipelago. Since the attempted military coup in Fiji in 2000 and the eruption of

ethnic-based militia violence in the Solomons, the Howard government has been under pressure to take more direct measures to counter the “arc of instability” stretching from Indonesia to the South West Pacific.

The Iraq blueprint

The Bush administration’s doctrine of “preemptive strikes” and the US-led war of aggression on Iraq have provided the blueprint for the Howard government in the Pacific. Moreover, without Washington’s imprimatur, it is inconceivable that Canberra would be embarking on its neo-colonial enterprise in the Solomons. In the case of East Timor, the Howard government made sure it was operating under the mantle of the United Nations. Last week, Downer openly disparaged “multilateralism” and “multilateral institutions” and declared the government’s intention to assemble its own “coalitions in the willing” to take unilateral action in the region, with or without UN approval.

If anything, the lies and half-truths being used to justify Australian military intervention in the Solomons are even balder than those used as the pretext for invading Iraq. Howard and Downer have both invoked the “war on terrorism” and the alleged security threats posed by the economic and social crisis in Pacific countries. Speaking at the Sydney Institute, a rightwing thinktank on July 1, Howard declared: “Too often we have seen rogue and failed states become the base from which terrorists and transnational criminals organise their operations.” The best thing that Australia could do, he said, was “to take remedial action and take it now.”

The argument is deliberately vague because Howard has absolutely no evidence to support it. There have been no incidents or even threats of terrorism, in the Solomons, or for that matter any of the Pacific Island countries. Howard cannot point to anything that indicates a connection in the Solomons either to Al Qaeda or any other group that has been branded as “terrorist”. Moreover, neither Howard nor Downer has yet had the temerity to suggest that the bankrupt state of half a million people is developing “weapons of mass destruction.”

In other words, Howard is stretching the doctrine of “preemptive strike” to absurd limits—to a potential threat in the distant future. Desperate to manufacture a pretext for Australia’s intervention, the government and the media have latched onto militia leader Harold Keke, who is rapidly being turned into the Solomons equivalent of the “butcher of Baghdad”. Murdoch’s *Australian* newspaper and its correspondent in the Solomons, Mary-Louise O’Callaghan, have been thumping the issue of lawlessness and Keke’s role in it for months.

However, the roots of the current violence lie in the country’s profound social and economic crisis which accelerated dramatically following the 1997-98 Asian economic crisis. The demands of the IMF and Canberra for open market restructuring exacerbated the country’s widespread unemployment and poverty and led to a sharp rise in social tensions. These tensions erupted in 1999 in fighting on the island of Guadalcanal between rival militias formed by locals and immigrants from neighbouring Malaita.

The Howard government is dispatching troops and police to impose “peace” in which none of these bitter rivalries have been resolved and both the government and the police force are factionally aligned to Malaitan militias. Keke’s real crime in Howard’s eyes is that his militia, as opposed to others, refused to accept the terms of a truce

agreement dictated to the warring parties in the Australian city of Townsville in late 2000.

Downer has attempted to portray the Australian intervention as an act of philanthropy—“helping out a mate”. But like the occupation of Iraq, the dispatch of Australian troops to the Solomons has nothing to do with lifting the living standards or defending the democratic rights of its 500,000 people. The estimated cost for the exercise is just \$150 million a year—most of which will be spent on the police and military operations. Canberra’s policies will only exacerbate the country’s chronic social crisis and tensions and the resulting resentment will inevitably be directed against the occupying forces who will find themselves bogged down in a war of attrition against the local population.

The Howard government’s contempt for the Solomon Islands people was on open display in January when a tropical cyclone devastated the country’s remote, outlying islands. Australia and New Zealand refused to dispatch naval vessels or aircraft to provide emergency food, water and medical aid to the stricken villagers. Downer, who is now preparing to send a large military task force to the Solomons, excused this callous indifference by declaring that there were “logistical problems”.

Then as now, the Howard government’s actions are determined not by concern for the welfare of the Solomon Islanders, but by the material interests of Australian capitalism. Immediately Canberra wants to ensure Australian predominance over the country’s timber, mineral and other resources and as a base to control the strategic naval routes through the region. The operation is also designed to send a message to neighbouring countries: you will be next if you fail to accommodate Australia’s demands.

The working class in Australia and throughout the region must oppose the Howard government’s reckless military intervention in the Solomons and its broader neo-colonial ambitions which are being carried out to meet the needs of the ruling elite, not working people. In fact, far from defending the Australian people against terrorism, Canberra’s support for Washington’s military adventures and its decision to embark on its own, will inevitably expose the Australian population to new and bloodier dangers.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the people of the Solomons have every right to resist the reimposition of colonial rule on their impoverished nation. Working people in Australia, New Zealand and throughout the Asian Pacific region must oppose the dispatch of foreign troops to the country and demand instead that billions of dollars of emergency humanitarian and economic aid be provided to the Solomons and other Pacific Island states to put an end to the dire poverty faced by the majority of their peoples.



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