

Australian prime minister bullies the Pacific Islands Forum

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In yet another public display of ignorance and arrogance, Australian Prime Minister John Howard intervened at last week's Pacific Islands Forum in New Zealand as part of a concerted push by Canberra for domination of the southwest Pacific. Having won the backing of the Bush White House by assisting in its subjugation of Iraq, Howard has visions of doing likewise in Australia's immediate region.

Last month Howard bullied the tiny states of the Pacific into legitimising an Australian-led military intervention in the Solomon Islands in the name of preventing the "failed state" from becoming a breeding ground for terrorism and crime. This month he stormed into Auckland with sweeping proposals to refashion the Pacific Islands Forum into a pliant instrument for Canberra's neo-colonial agenda.

Until recently, Howard treated the annual regional gatherings with contempt, not even bothering to attend. But with growing fears in Australian ruling circles about the consequences of regional political and economic instability, he began to change tack. At the 2000 meeting, Howard pushed through the Biketawa Declaration, which overturned the previous policy of non-interference in member states, establishing a mechanism for diplomatic, economic and military intervention.

At last week's meeting, the prime minister dropped his previous deference to "the Pacific way" of consultation and consensus to bulldoze through a series of measures designed to bring the organisation firmly under Canberra's sway. At the top of the list was the insertion of an Australian official—career diplomat Greg Urwin—as secretary general to the Forum's administrative secretariat in Fiji. The proposal constituted a complete break from the past, when Australia and New Zealand paid lip-service to the sensibilities of the small states by allowing a Pacific Islander to hold the post.

Howard not only wanted his proposals adopted, but the insertion of his man into the top job to ensure they were carried out. He was characteristically unsubtle in communicating his strategy. Just hours before the proceedings were due to get underway, he emerged from a meeting with New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark, to declare: "Our very clear message is that we want to help [Pacific Island countries] but a condition of that help has to be rooting out corruption." The assembled government heads were being duly warned: toe the line or face cuts to foreign aid.

Throughout the three-day proceedings, Howard and Clark collaborated in ramming their agenda through in a classic case of the "tough cop-soft cop" routine. Howard displayed disdain for the niceties of Forum procedure and the national sovereignty of its members. Clark tut-tutted on the side and networked privately with Pacific Island leaders to patch up relations, while at the same time making clear they had no choice but to comply.

There were plenty of ruffled feathers but none of the Pacific Island states—which are all heavily dependent on Australia and New Zealand for foreign aid, trade and investment—mounted any public challenge. Fijian Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase politely complained: "No country in the world is perfect in the adoption and practice of principles of good governance." Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Michael Somare bemoaned that the media always painted Pacific Island countries as corrupt and unable to manage their own affairs.

No one alluded to the fact that, while Howard was lecturing his Pacific brothers on "good governance", he was himself embroiled in a scandal at home over ethanol subsidies for his corporate friends. In the past, neither Australia nor New Zealand has exhibited concern over corrupt or anti-democratic practices on the part of any of the Pacific Islands ruling elites. Now "corruption" has become the catchcry for demanding the destruction of any impediments to Australian and New Zealand financial interests.

The only determined resistance was to Urwin's installation. According to early media reports, Howard was definitely set for defeat. He attempted to strong arm a subgroup of six of the smallest island states—the Cook Islands, the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Nauru and Niue—but to no avail. "The consensus has been reached that we would prefer somebody from the Pacific serving as the Secretary General of the Pacific Islands Forum," Cook Islands Prime Minister Robert Woonton boldly told the press.

While the Pacific Island leaders tried to thwart Howard's attack on tradition and insist that the question be resolved by "consensus," their pleas fell on deaf ears. The Australian prime minister refused to withdraw Urwin's nomination, pressed ahead with lobbying and insisted that, if necessary, he would force a vote.

In the end, Howard had to suffer the indignity of no less than five rounds of voting over two days in order to get his candidate up. On Friday, according to the *New Zealand Herald*, discussions were "hopelessly deadlocked". An unprecedented secret ballot had

resulted in six votes for the Tongan candidate Langi Kavaliku and five each for the Samoan Lands Minister Tuala Sala and Urwin. Nauru had already buckled and withdrawn its candidate, but the others remained firm. “They don’t know what to do so they are having a break,” one source told the newspaper.

Eventually Howard wore them down. Precisely how, or even if, Urwin achieved a majority remains unclear. In announcing the outcome, Clark refused to reveal any details of the final round, or even who the candidates were. Pacific Island leaders were obviously furious but remained tight-lipped.

Urwin’s installation is part of Canberra’s plan for Australian subjugation of the Pacific. Howard hinted at this a few weeks ago, just before farewelling the Solomons intervention force, when he called for a system of “pooled regional governance” in areas such as police and airlines. Many of the Pacific countries were simply “too small to be viable,” he arrogantly declared. “It’s just not possible if you’ve got an island state of fewer than 100,000 people to expect it to have all the sophisticated arms of government.”

Days before the Forum opened, a Senate inquiry in Canberra released a detailed 300-page report on Australian policy in the Pacific advocating the formation of “a Pacific economic and political community” that would include a common labour market, free trade and a common currency—not surprisingly, the Australian dollar. It contained a long list of recommendations aimed at bringing every aspect of economic and political life in the Pacific within the Australian orbit—either directly, or indirectly through the appointment of Australian advisers to parliaments, the judiciary and the police.

The document proposed a trial project where Pacific Islanders would be allowed to work in Australia as seasonal fruit and vegetable pickers—jobs notorious for their exploitative conditions and low pay. Cynically dubbed “discriminatory immigration” by Labor Senator Peter Cook, who chaired the inquiry, the proposal would help Australian businesses fill existing employment “gaps”. In other words, the southwest Pacific would become a recruiting ground for cheap contract labour, recalling the “blackbirding” of the nineteenth century when Queensland sugar farmers kidnapped Pacific Islanders to slave as indentured labour, harvesting crops.

Pacific Island leaders objected to the Australian dollar becoming the shared regional currency, recognising it would usher in a raft of budgetary, fiscal and financial obligations. New Zealand business also took exception, pointing to the potential danger of interest rates being determined by the Australian Reserve Bank.

Howard was careful to distance himself from the report, in public at least, but made no secret of the fact that he supported its thrust. While declaring that a common currency was not “on the radar screen” and a common labour market was “well down the track,” he made clear it was simply a question of tactics. “Let’s crawl before we walk,” he told Sky TV. “The first thing is to try to get some joint efforts in relation to governance.

Howard’s immediate proposals included: reform of the Forum and its secretariat; a five-year regional police training scheme based in Fiji and funded by Australia to the tune of \$17 million; an inquiry into shared airline and shipping; formal support for the Solomons intervention. The most significant was a broad review of the role of the Forum and its secretariat, which will provide Urwin,

as the new secretary general, with the scope to push ahead with Canberra’s wider plans. All of the proposals were adopted in the final communiqué.

In private, Australian officials indicated everything was open for discussion. The Melbourne-based *Age* revealed that a confidential briefing paper was circulated urging Pacific nations to consider “the merits of a regional approach to monetary and exchange policy.” Such an approach could include a regional central bank and single currency, a currency board and “dollarisation.” The paper also advocated the formation of a regional police unit, financial intelligence unit and changes to legal and administrative structures to permit future interventions—along the lines of the Australian-led takeover of the Solomons.

Howard was clearly delighted with his efforts. Acceptance of his proposals, he enthused to the media, marked “a watershed” which would enable the Pacific Islands Forum to “pack a stronger wallop”. “This body is seen as having new authority, new clout, new relevance and everyone will go from this meeting feeling they are part of something that will punch even harder and more effectively in the region than before,” he said. No-one was in any doubt as to whose clout, authority and “wallop” had been enhanced.

True to form, Clark chimed in with a note of caution. “Where you have big states and little states, it is always possible for perceptions to arise that the big states are throwing their weight around. It is incumbent on big states to address perceptions and it is incumbent on smaller states to look at the merits of issues,” she piously intoned. In other words, anything goes as long as appearances are kept up.

Howard and Clark, with the media’s full complicity, have been at pains to dress their proposals in humanitarian garb. But their recent expressions of concern for the plight of ordinary Pacific Islanders ring particularly hollow. Throughout the past century, neither Canberra nor Auckland has baulked at implementing policies that have perpetuated the appalling poverty and intractable social problems afflicting the region’s populations. Their current agenda is aimed at further exploiting the region’s raw materials and cheap labour and, at the same time, bolstering the ability of the state apparatus to violently suppress the mounting hostility and resistance their policies will inevitably generate.



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